

RSBC Research Assignment: Representations of Old Women in Five Victorian Fairy Tales

Across my five chosen Victorian Era fairy tales, old women feature as prominent characters, often beyond the classic archetype of the evil witch or benevolent fairy godmother. While a certain expectation comes to mind when imagining a fairy tale with an old woman involved, I was pleased to find much variance between each tale, the old women themselves, as well as their illustrated representations of old women.

In *The Old Woman Who Lost Her Dumpling*, the main character is ‘a funny old woman’ who is almost child-like in her whimsy and nonchalance. Each page in *The Old Woman Who Lost Her Dumpling* is accompanied by an illustration, following the old woman on her journey into the realm of demons. The illustrations are printed in color by hand from Japanese wood blocks onto crepe paper, which no doubt adds to the detail, delicacy and bright

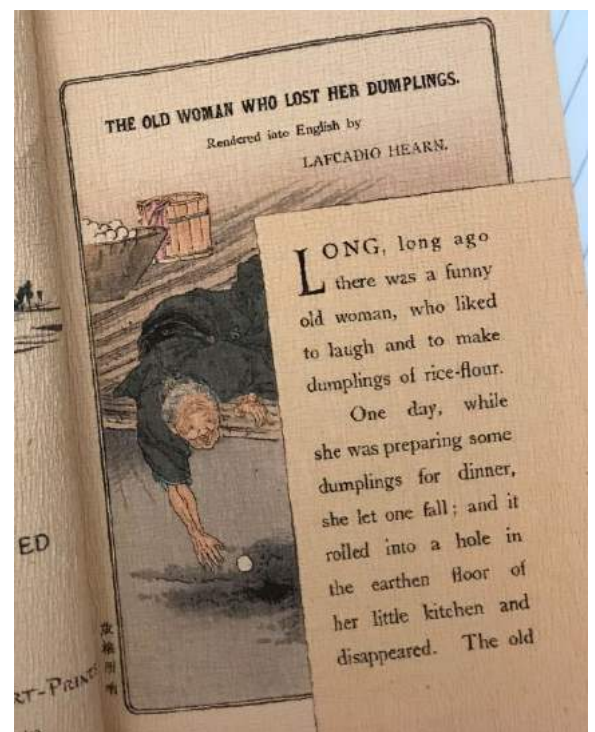


colors of each illustration.

The style is at once

minimalistic and detailed; while the backgrounds are simple, the characters are drawn in detail and precision, bringing immediate focus and attention to them. The old woman is smiling and laughing in each illustration, just as she is on the first page, pictured above. Her unwavering smile is matched by a carefree

and silly personality that is much like that of a child; indeed, when hiding from a demon, she



can't help but let out a giggle, giving away her hiding place. The illustrations continue to reflect her child-like personality through energetic and dynamic movements and poses. While her childish behavior could perhaps be read as a signifier that she is senile, her quick-wittedness which allows her to outsmart the demons says otherwise; the old funny woman is a singularly unique and awesome character.

*The Magic Fishbone* is a tale of a King and Queen's huge family of nineteen children, particularly the oldest daughter (who is seven years of age), Princess Alicia. Though they are royalty, they are quite poor, and thus Princess Alicia takes care of all eighteen children, as well as her sick mother. Already it can be seen that *The Magic*

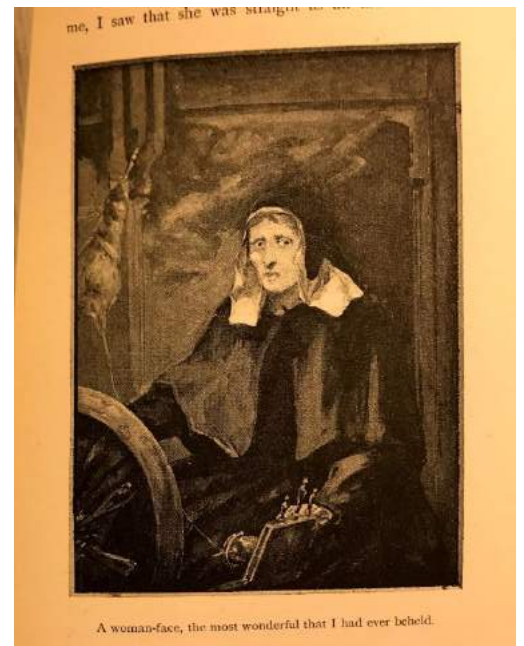
*Fishbone* is a comedic take on the classic fairy tale with a reversal of roles, and the fairy godmother character is no exception. She is a balance of good and mischievous; I love these two illustrations, because in one she appears nearly wicked before the King, and in the second she is a



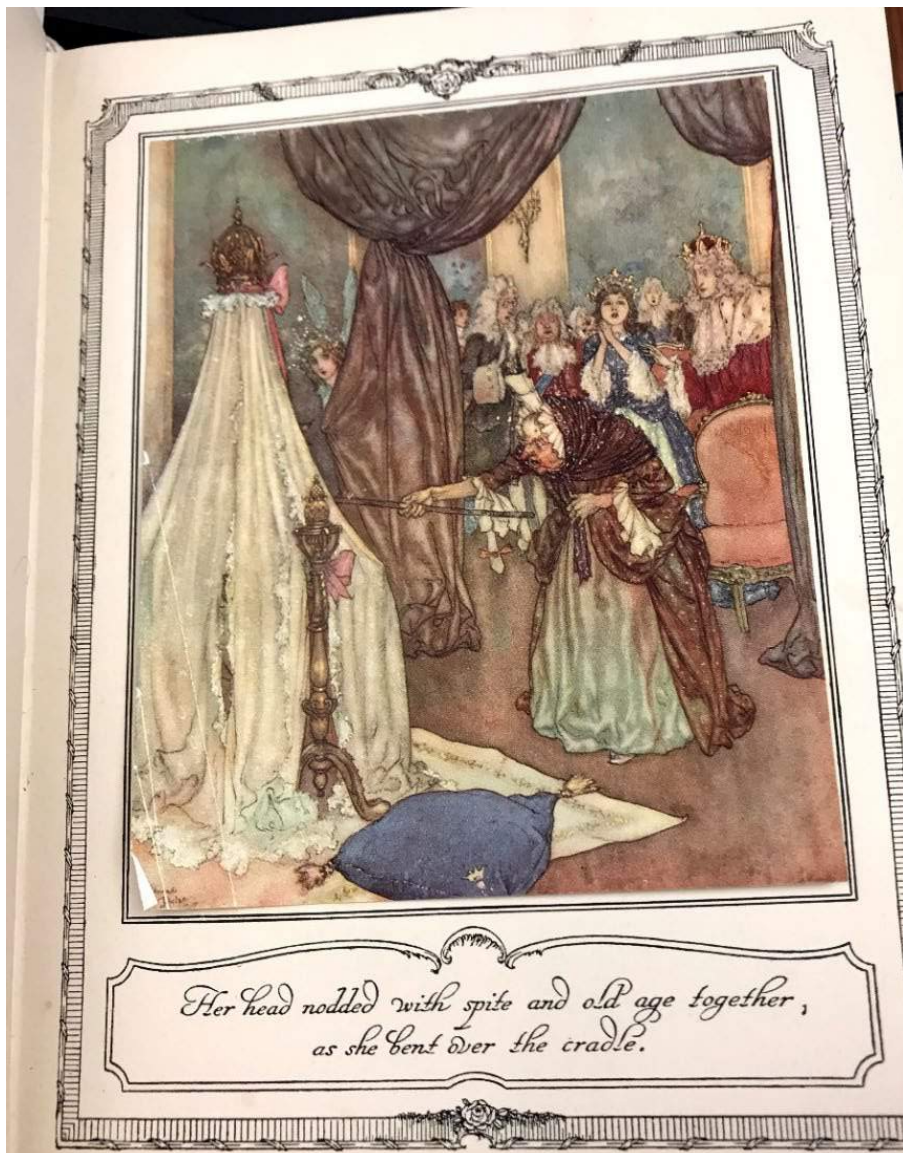
benevolent, kind and magical fairy godmother, thereby showing the two different sides of her character. The Good Fairy Grandmarina's consistent reprimanding and condoning of the King's adult tendencies, such as being impatient and disagreeing, is delightful and somewhat cheeky. As for Princess Alicia, Grandmarina is perfectly pleasant and grants her every wish, and beyond - with no prompting, Grandmarina takes Alicia off to be married and declares she shall have thirty-five children before destroying the magic fish-bone by sending it down the throat of the neighbor's dog, thereby killing it. Again, this odd character proves to subvert the stereotype of the fairy godmother with this twist, perhaps intending to comment on the classic fairy tale marriage ending which always comes to fruition through a fairy godmother's magic.



The illustration taken from *Phantastes* is particularly compelling, especially with the caption: “A woman-face, the most wonderful that I had ever beheld”. Anodos, the main character, is given refuge and nursed back to health by this old woman, who is described as having a beautiful voice and young, bright eyes; “Wrinkles had beset them all about; the eyelids themselves were old, and heavy, and worn; but the eyes were very incarnations of soft light” (196). The old woman comforts Anodos, taking on a very motherly role; he weeps in her arms and she even feeds him food “like a baby”. The illustrations for *Phantastes* are overall incredibly beautiful and intricate, and so I found it interesting how stoic the old woman appears in this illustration. While the old woman is not featured in the story beyond a chapter, she is described at great length. She is either weeping or smiling, it seems, the former from fear of the path that Anodos must take and the



later for the motherly love she immediately feels for him. However, this complexity of emotions, along with the contrast between her heavily wrinkled face and bright, youthful eyes, must have been difficult for the illustrator to decide how to best portray; certainly, it is compelling to see how she was ultimately portrayed. The illustrator seemed to have drawn from the descriptions of her sadness and consistently weeping state, for there seems to be a great pain in her expression.



Of course, no collection of representations of old women would be complete without the classic evil witch. Such is the old Fairy Uglyane, the spiteful, ugly ‘hag’ and wicked witch who, upon seeing Rapunzel in all her beauty and innocence, casts an evil curse. This particular rendition of Rapunzel is heavily concentrated on Uglyane’s spite being associated with her old age.

The other fairies are all described as being younger, and the Uglyane grows angry when she sees “the pretty babe, who slept on sweetly, too young and too innocent as yet to dream of any such thing as mischief in this

world” (5). The illustration is done with almost alarming realism, further highlighting the witch’s described ugliness; the witch looks more like a bitter old woman, rather than a magical witch capable of curses. While Uglyane is a rather one-dimensional character, I greatly enjoy both her descriptions and her illustrated representation, which are in perfect harmony with one another, and create such a focus on her old age being the source of her evil.

Despite her somewhat wicked looks (certainly the crooked nose is a common trait for witches to have), Dame Wiggins of Lee is neither evil nor a witch. She is simply a loving owner of seven wonderful cats, who are all quite clever and well-behaved. Dame Wiggins originally gets the cats to rid her home of mice, but it is soon clear, once the cats go to school, that Wiggins is more of a mother figure to the cats; she dearly misses them, frets for their well-being, buys them treats and proudly celebrates their

successes. The stories and the illustrations are equally whimsical,

light-hearted and simple; however, I continue to wonder at

Wiggins’ appearance. Wiggins’ appearance is perhaps an exaggeration of an old woman’s features, intended to highlight her

age? If this is the case, then the story becomes all-the-more heart-warming, for in her old age,



Dame Wiggins has the company of seven caring and capable children, essentially, and there is much love between the eight of them.

RSBC Collection

Dame Wiggins of Lee and her seven wonderful cats : a humorous tale written principally by a lady of ninety. Edited, with additional verses by John Ruskin.

London : G. Allen, 1897.

[PZ6 1897 .D344](#)

<http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=2186373>

Japanese Fairy Tales, by Lafcadio Hearn

Tokyo : T. Hasegawa, 1898-1922.

[PZ6 1898 H427](#)

<http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=940351>

Phantastes : a faerie romance / by George Macdonald ; with twenty-five illustrations by John Bell.

London : Chatto & Windus, 1894.

[PZ6 1894 .M322](#)

<http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=810432>

The magic fishbone, by Charles Dickens, illustrated by F.D. Bedford.

London, New York, F. Warne & Co. [1922]

[PZ6 1922 D524](#)

<http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=602518>

The sleeping beauty and other fairy tales from the old French, retold by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, illus. by Edmund Dulac.

New York, Hodder and Stoughton [1910]

[PZ6 1910 Q954](#)

<http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=121848>