

Of Young/Old Queens and Giant Dwarfs: A Critical Reading of Age and Aging in *Snow White and the Huntsman* and *Mirror Mirror*

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This article¹ draws on the curious coincidence of several film releases of the “Snow White” tale in 2012. The Internet Movie Database lists five films with direct references to the fairy tale, among them *Snow White and the Huntsman* (directed by Rupert Sanders, starring Charlize Theron and Kristen Stewart) and *Mirror Mirror* (directed by Tarsem Singh, starring Julia Roberts and Lily Collins).² According to Jack Zipes, who collected thirty-five cinematographic representations of “Snow White” in *The Enchanted Screen* (2011), there is a “profound widespread public interest in a tale [i.e., “Snow White”] that provokes retelling and reflection because it touches upon deeply rooted problems in every culture of the world ranging from what constitutes our notions of beauty to what causes conflicts between women, especially mothers and daughters and stepmothers and daughters” (119). Which “deeply rooted problem” has inspired this recent revival of “Snow White”? Why do we keep retelling this particular fairy tale?³ Maria Tatar suggests that it is the topic of aging that preoccupies contemporary directors, screenwriters, and audiences: “It may be that there is something about the boomer anxiety about aging that is renewing our interest in Snow White” (Ulaby). In *The New Yorker*, she adds that *Snow White and the Huntsman* “captures a deepening anxiety about aging and generational sexual rivalry” (Tatar). The rivalry between mothers and daughters has been a central issue in Second Wave feminist criticism (see, e.g., Barzilai; Gilbert and Gubar). Similarly, Baba Copper has critiqued how closely the mother-daughter rivalry is related to ageism among women, arguing that the problem of women’s “generational division” should be called “Daughterism,” because being older involves

being stereotyped as a mother by younger women (23-25). A related “deeply rooted” topos that inspires the “Snow White” retellings is the search for the Fountain of Youth and thus the “queen’s quest for lasting youth [which] is part of the story’s larger exploration” (Tatar). Supporting Tatar’s explanation of the “Snow White” revival, Melisa Wallack, one of the screenwriters of *Mirror Mirror*, describes her wish to make the story more contemporary by catering to “baby-boomer grandparents’ concerns about aging” and by alluding to fantasies of remaining young with Botox and chemical peels (Ulaby).

Indeed, the characters in *Snow White and the Huntsman* (*SWH*) and *Mirror Mirror* (*MM*) show an explicit awareness of age and aging, which is quite ambivalent in its presentation. Julia Roberts’s queen is characterized as an eccentric, self-absorbed, and foolish woman who fusses over her (barely visible) wrinkles by saying: “They are not wrinkles, they are crinkles.” The ridiculousness of the queen’s age awareness is further emphasized by the fact that she desires the younger prince, who—being in his twenties⁴—is presented as an unsuitable match for the queen. The film regulates this age-inappropriate desire by “a policing of intergenerational sexuality” (Wearing 278). The queen’s marriage proposal is undercut from the outset:

QUEEN: Prince Alcott, I have a proposition for you. We are both single adults, roughly the same age.

PRINCE ALCOTT: I don’t think we are the same . . .

QUEEN: Well, I said roughly. The point is, the clock is ticking for both of us. We are people of means. Would you do me the honor and be my . . .

[she is interrupted by a bang on the door]. (*MM*)

Mirror Mirror bases much of its comedy on making fun of this ostensibly self-deluded queen and her exaggerated concerns about youthfulness.

In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, Queen Ravenna is presented as evil incarnate. Despite her youthful looks, the audience quickly learns that she is actually an old woman. Whenever her chronological age shows, it signifies a loss of power. When Ravenna is about to kill Snow White, she justifies her deed by cynically saying: “You don’t even realize how lucky you are never to know what it is to grow old.” Old age is a punishment

for Ravenna, a sign of her wretched and powerless self. This ageist association notwithstanding, *Snow White and the Huntsman* is not oblivious to the problematic relations between gender and old age. In the beginning of the movie, when Ravenna stabs Snow White's father during the wedding night, she displays an acute awareness of what it means to grow old as a woman: "I was ruined by a king like you [Snow White's father] once. I replaced his queen, an old woman. And, in time, I, too, would have been replaced. Men use women. They ruin us and when they are finished with us, they toss us to the dogs like scraps. . . . When a woman stays young and beautiful forever, the world is hers" (*SWH*).

Despite these obvious concerns with the meanings of age and aging for women, neither movie seems to suggest any alternatives to the inexorable and concomitant loss of youth and power that allegedly comes with aging. The films frustratingly adhere to the traditional ending of the tale, which involves the queen's dethronement and loss of power. Both queens are thus defeated in the end by a triumphant Snow White, whose youthfulness is set against the rapid aging and death of the two queens. Apparently, there is no beauty in aging nor a possibility for intergenerational solidarity. Tatar wonders, therefore, whether the recent adaptations are a backlash (Ulaby). And a disappointed Zipes accuses the movies of a "faux-feminism," wondering: "What the heck is going on in contemporary fairy tales? Women are not dominating the world; they are not evil. Why are we redoing the Grimm tales in a retroactive way that doesn't understand the complex problems women have today? These films have nothing to say to the world today" ("Grimm Review").

While I share Zipes's frustration, I find the movies' ambivalence intriguing: On the one hand, they repeat problematic and stereotypical representations of aging and femininity. On the other hand, they illustrate an awareness of these stereotypes and critical discourses on the double standard of aging. This paradoxical representation of age and aging encourages a more in-depth discussion of the movies. The point of departure for my analysis is the observation that the representation of old age or aging in both movies is remarkable for its exaggeration and

magnification. In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, the special effects department has Queen Ravenna grow very old and rejuvenate time and again, as if aging were a spectacular morphing experiment. In *Mirror Mirror*, we encounter a queen whose age awareness is an exaggerated and ironic play with stereotypes. Julia Roberts' performance of the queen as an extravagant diva parodies notions of the tale that are usually taken for granted (e.g., Snow White's beauty, the queen's vanity).

With this idea of hyperbole in mind, I want to suggest a reading of the two movies that does not try to invalidate the problematic representation of old age, but rather shows that an alternative view of age and aging is laid out in these contemporary representations of the tale. I will start out with a short discussion of critical readings of the tale that focus on age, aging, and gender. This will provide the basis for an examination of the role of masquerade and performativity in the representation of the two queens and their attempts to pass as younger. I will then focus on the moments in which the movies use hyperbole and read these instances as potential counter-narratives or subtexts of parody and resistance. The concepts of masking and performing age facilitate intriguing avenues for an age-critical approach, but it will become clear that such a reading has its limits when applied to the two movies. Similar to Santiago Solis's queercrip reading, which he uses to "deconstruct hetero-corporo-normative presumptions, stereotypes, and social structures" by focusing on the dwarfs as "icons of deviance" (117, 120),⁵ I will shift my focus from the queens to the dwarfs and zoom in on how the representation of the dwarfs in the two movies contributes to a deconstruction of age norms. The dwarfs challenge normative standards of body size, ableness, and adulthood and (literally) turn them upside down. In applying concepts of liminality, I will show in the last section how the dwarfs challenge stereotypical notions associated with youthfulness and adulthood by revealing the artificial nature of age stages. This perspective from the "icons of deviance" enables a reading that may not break down "the youthful structure of the look" (Woodward, "Performing") and cannot shatter the discriminatory implications of the mirror/screen (as demanded by

Zipes in *The Enchanted Screen*), yet it allows for a different access to some of the ageist implications of the 2012 representations of the tale.

In my analysis, I will focus on *Snow White and the Huntsman* and *Mirror Mirror* because these two movies received considerably more public attention than the other three movies released in 2012. *Snow White and the Huntsman* and *Mirror Mirror* are both Hollywood blockbusters endowed with a considerable budget (\$85 million for *MM* and \$170 million for *SWH*). Both movies were internationally released and grossed between \$160 million (*MM*) and almost \$400 million (*SWH*) worldwide.⁶ Moreover, they feature two Oscar-winning actresses (Julia Roberts and Charlize Theron), which heightens public attention. Together, these two films invite a reconsideration of approaches to age and aging in contemporary mainstream cinema.

“SNOW WHITE” THROUGH THE LENS OF AGE

In 2006, during a conference in Barcelona, Lydia Giménez-Llort coined the term “Snow White Syndrome,”⁷ which she uses as a term to point to the fairy tale’s ageism (via the mirror), auto-ageism (the queen’s lack of self-esteem for her older self), and adultocracy (the adult queen’s power over the young and powerless Snow White). According to Giménez-Llort, “the [Snow] White syndrome describes the antagonism aging/beauty that is not true. The metaphor brings a sense of individual and social ageism. It symbolizes the dark dialogue between a mirror and a cruel middle-aged woman who does not accept her aging and forgets the important things that embellish the elderly.” In emphasizing the fantastical and fictive quality of the “Snow White Syndrome,” Giménez-Llort does not only critically scrutinize the ageist dimensions of the syndrome, she also stresses that the queen’s double enchantment—vis-à-vis Snow White’s death and the queen’s old age—can be broken by love, respect and the insight that “aging is an art and doing it well is a merit.” Although a meritocratic attitude towards aging potentially puts the blame of “unsuccessful aging” onto the individual and thus rather reinforces ageist notions than invalidates them (e.g., Hepworth; Hodgetts, Chamberlain, and Bassett), Giménez-Llort’s assessment is interesting in the

context of this paper because she highlights the different age groups that are affected by the tale's ageism.

In the numerous readings and interpretations of "Snow White," the topic of age or ageism is occasionally discussed. Yet, in most cases, it is rather a supplement to the main argument and not the central element of the analysis. For example, in his discussion of a "Snow White" representation from 1996, *Willa: An American Snow White*, Zipes considers the importance of the mirror in reflecting the queen's loss of power, which is a topic that he links with "the anxiety of aging women" (*Enchanted Screen* 125). Similarly, in her analysis of the spectacle of femininity in *The Brothers Grimm* (2005) and *Stardust* (2007)—both movies allude to "Snow White"—Susan Cahill argues that the films "point to an abiding anxiety in relation to regulating the spectacle of the aging female body" because they "echo a conservative impulse to erase and destroy the older, and often more powerful, women in favor of youth and beauty" (58-59). Even though the films display a self-reflexive and ironic humor and play with genre conventions, Cahill argues that their message about aging women suggests that those characters who artificially try to uphold their youthful beauty must be punished: "Both films maintain a tension between a critique of the beauty economy in which the older women must participate and an indictment of the women who seek control over their representation. The women are punished both for their vanity and their attempt to intervene in the spectacle" (65).

Shuli Barzilai also considers the topic of age and aging in her feminist reading of the "Snow White" tale. She interprets the fairy tale from the queen's perspective and understands her jealousy as separation anxiety, and thus as the queen's fear of losing her daughter, who is about to grow into an independent woman.⁸ For the queen, Snow White's coming-of-age entails "a passage from ascendancy to decline, from omnipotence or, at least, control to a dwindling of authority. This process is inseparable from aging" (527). In Barzilai's reading, the queen's brutal actions are signs of her desperation over losing her daughter, reflecting her wish "to set back the clock and then stop it. . . . The phantasy underlying

the mother's story is twofold: the desire, always unappeasable in reality, to remain one with the child of her body; and the painful and equally impossible desire to ward off age and aging, to remain forever 'fairest in the land'" (532). Barzilai also quotes Anne Sexton's poem "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," which puts the queen's fear of aging at the center of the conflict, referring to a queen whose beauty is "eaten, of course, by age" and who becomes aware of the "brown spots on her hand / and four whiskers over her lip" when the mirror ranks Snow White's beauty above her own (Sexton qtd. in Barzilai 528).

The two blockbusters of 2012 echo some of the earlier feminist critiques of the "Snow White" tale. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, for example, used the tale's central female characters to establish their concept of female authorship, which is defined by a struggle between the angel and monster figures.⁹ According to Gilbert and Gubar, the monster woman is an artist, a plot-maker and "a woman of almost infinite creative energy, witty, wily, and self-absorbed" (38-39). *Mirror Mirror* takes up this feminist view and presents the story from the queen's perspective, a queen who is a witty and creative plot-maker and who insists on the fact that we are going to hear her story. In a similar way, *Mirror Mirror's* Snow White is presented as a self-assertive and emancipated young woman who fights against the queen and who is aware of the stereotypical female roles used in fairy tales. When she decides to fight the queen herself, without the help of the prince and the dwarfs, her choice is motivated by her wish to break with traditional plotlines: "I read so many stories where the prince saves the princess in the end. . . . I think it is time we change that ending." (*MM* parodies the prince's protest against this role reversal by having him argue that the traditional story "has been focus-grouped" and found to work fine.) Similarly, in *Snow White and the Huntsman*, Snow White counters the stereotypical notion of the angel woman, defined by purity, submissiveness, and passivity (Gilbert and Gubar 39). The movie presents a gritty version of Snow White, with dirty fingernails and oily hair, who leads an army to war and is torn between the sweet and kind-hearted childhood friend and the attractive

and virile but unpredictable huntsman. And yet, even though the movies resonate with feminist discourses, they simultaneously undermine them. This ambivalence becomes particularly evident in how these feminist discourses are set in relation to age and aging.

The movies present the queens' age in problematic ways by associating it with decline (Gullette, *Aged by Culture*). When the queen in *Mirror Mirror* loses her fight against Snow White and her magic wanes, she is punished by rapid aging, which she tries to hide, in shame, by covering her bony and spotted hands. At the end of the movie, for her last attack on Snow White, she has been extremely aged via digital effects, and the scene equates her sudden, very old age with her defeat. In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, old age also implies defeat and is applied with a similarly excessive use of digital effects. Here, the rejuvenation and aging occurs several times, underlining the spectacle of the digital effects. In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, we learn about the meaning of the magic spell through the storyteller, who explains that the spell had been cast over Ravenna when she was a child. A woman used a magic potion to save Ravenna from brutal invaders who destroyed her family's settlement. The child was told: "Your beauty is all that can save you, Ravenna. This spell will make your beauty your power and protection." The spell equates beauty with Ravenna's youthfulness. As Ravenna bitterly acknowledges in the beginning of the movie ("When a woman stays young and beautiful forever, the world is hers"); it is this association that makes it impossible for her to escape the patriarchal system in which women are used, ruined, and then replaced by younger women. Ravenna's spell also contains another element, namely revenge. When the woman who cast the spell over Ravenna is brutally taken away from Ravenna, she screams "Avenge us," and it remains open what exactly is to be avenged: is it the slaughtering of Ravenna's family by the intruding men, or the cruelty of a system that determines a woman's value in terms of beauty and youth?

Interestingly, in the first mainstream cinematographic, animated blockbuster *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, by Walt Disney (1937), the queen is granted much more power over the use of her magic: The spell,

which changes the radiant queen into an old and excessively ugly woman, is one that the queen mixes herself and uses strategically, as it is part of her cunning deception and an illustration of her power. Moreover, in Disney's version, the spell transforms the beautiful queen only temporarily, and she utilizes it of her own free will. In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, Ravenna is the passive carrier of a spell, which artificially perpetuates her youth. Since the spell is not her own, it seems that the queen is like a marionette to the magic's whims. Here, a youthful surface is the mask that covers old age, whereas, in Disney's version, old age is a mask that conceals an otherwise much younger woman. This reversal of the spell's function and meaning does not imply that Disney's version is more progressive in its depiction of age and gender.¹⁰ Rather, it points to the masking of age as a central concern of the recent movies, drawing as much attention to the mask itself as to what it tries to cover (Woodward, "Youthfulness" 122, 125).

AGE MASQUERADE IN SNOW WHITE AND THE HUNTSMAN

In her analysis of *The Brothers Grimm* and *Stardust*, Cahill discusses the meaning of age masks in the "Snow White" retellings, criticizing the films' depiction of "associations between femininity and artificiality" as dangerous and the implication that the "masquerade of youth must be exploded" (61). In a similar way, Sadie Wearing, who links passing-as-younger and masquerade to cosmetic surgery, speaks of a double bind in contemporary cultural media (such as celebrity magazines or reality-TV shows), which "finds the signs of age in female bodies grotesque, laughable, and fearful (and makes a spectacle out of them) but equally mistrusts the efforts to efface those signs" (290). Masks and cosmetic surgery are distinct, of course: while the latter tries to be invisible, the former can both conceal and draw attention to the very act of concealment (Woodward, "Youthfulness" 128-34). Vivian Sobchack sees a connection between cosmetic surgery and masks or digital effects used in movies: analyzing horror and science-fiction films of the 1950s and 1960s,¹¹ she argues that, in our "current 'image' culture" (of 1999), there is a "confusion and conflation of surgery and cinema, of technology

and ‘magic,’ of efforts and ease” (205). In the movies she analyzes, she finds a potentially subversive quality in the digital effects that are used to transform middle-aged women into young yet scary women: “The leech woman, wasp woman, and fifty-foot woman literalize, magnify, and enact hyperbolic displays of anger and desire, their youth and beauty now ‘lethal’ as well as ‘fatal,’ their ‘unnatural’ ascendance to power allowing them to avenge on a grand scale the wrongs done [to] them for merely getting older” (202-03).¹² Sobchack concedes that despite the age critique that is inherent in the movies she discusses, the ageist order is restored in the end, transforming what could have been “a grand masquerade of resistance” into a “retrograde striptease” (203).

Kathleen Woodward also observes this ambivalence in masquerade, namely, of carrying a potential but not necessarily mandatory destabilizing effect, and distinguishes between two functions of masquerade: a “pathetic defense of denial” of old age and thus a “submission to dominant social codes,” or “an act of defiance” and resistance (“Youthfulness” 125). Woodward explores this relativity of age masquerade in “Youthfulness as Masquerade,” where she links the masking of age to passing (as younger or older), and thus to the performative quality of age. In “Performing Age, Performing Gender,” Woodward describes how age can be a form of drag and thus “a hyperbolic putting on of age” with the potential “to expose, critique, subvert, and exceed the conventions of aging for older women” (165, 167). This potential, however, can also result in performances of age that have “no critical edge or theatrical pleasure in view” (165).¹³ Concepts of age performance draw on Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity as constituted through repetitive acts (Butler). Against this theoretical background, Miriam Haller adapts Butler’s notion of gender trouble to what she calls “ageing trouble,” which she defines as a resignification of cultural meanings of age and aging (187). By repeating and exaggerating age norms (and thus drawing attention to the staged character of a particular performance), authors who use age mockery (“Altersspott”) disrupt and displace normative notions about age and aging (“‘Ageing Trouble’: Literarische Stereotype” 188).¹⁴

In a similar way, Aagje Swinnen analyzes transgressions of expected age roles, which she calls “age bending” (8). She examines a Belgian television show in which old actors and actresses mimic urban youth culture by using slang and committing vandalism or shoplifting (8). In order to carve out the subversive potential of age bending, Swinnen distinguishes between two kinds of laughter: “comic laughter,” which implies laughing at the old characters and thus implicitly restoring the age script, and “parodic laughter,” which implies laughing with the older characters at the artificiality of age scripts and thereby undermining them (9-10). Hence, age bending can potentially render age norms hypervisible by “parodic displacement” (9-10). Similarly, age masquerade can be a sign of resistance or parody. In *Mirror Mirror*, the queen also transgresses age scripts. But is the laughter that the film invokes comic or parodic? And how far does *Snow White and the Huntsman* voice a self-reflexive critique of ageist stereotypes when it uses spectacular (digital) masks to create an artificial back-and-forth between age stages? Do the movies undermine and expose the tale’s implicit ageism? Or is the occasional awareness of the ageist and patriarchal order little more than inconsequential lip service?

To answer these questions, I first turn to a discussion of *Snow White and the Huntsman* and its use of masks. As I mentioned above, *within* the fictional narrative, the function of Queen Ravenna’s mask is to cover her old age with a youthful appearance. The audience, however, knows that Charlize Theron, the actress who plays Queen Ravenna, is in her late thirties and that her character’s old age is a special effect, a digital mask. Hence, *within* the narrative, the mask covers old age; *outside* of the narrative, the mask of old age covers Theron’s youthful looks. This contrast between the two functions of age masks in *Snow White and the Huntsman* not only magnifies the effect of age masquerade, but also reveals its duplicitous nature. That Ravenna’s mask of youth fades from time to time, revealing an old woman behind a youthful surface, is a dramaturgical and visual gimmick that is both sensational and spectacular. It foregrounds the splendor of the special effects in the movie and draws

attention to the very existence of the mask.

There are other remarkable instances in *Snow White and the Huntsman* that heighten the audience's awareness of masquerade and suggest a hyperbolic display of age and aging. First, the casting of Charlize Theron for the lead role is a notable decision that adds to the significance of the special effects and reinforces the sensationalist impression: Ravenna's uglification is reminiscent of Theron's Oscar-awarded performance as Aileen Wuornos in *Monster* (2003), a role that brought fame and credit to a physically altered Theron, who gained much weight and underwent time-consuming makeup to uglify her physical appearance. *Snow White and the Huntsman*, I want to suggest, draws on Theron's reputation for such stunning transformations. Moreover, the fact that Theron used to be a ballet dancer and model magnifies the effects of the transformation and thus increases the spectacle. Second, and in a similarly spectacular way, *Snow White and the Huntsman* attracts attention to the effect of masking when Queen Ravenna takes a milk bath as part of a beauty treatment. The milk bath dramatizes the importance of exterior layers and makeup: Ravenna does not only take a bath, she also immerses herself completely in the white liquid, which is reminiscent of milk due to



“RAVENNA’S MILK BATH.” SCREENSHOT FROM *SNOW WHITE AND THE HUNTSMAN*. DIR. RUPERT SANDERS. UNIVERSAL, 2012.

its color, but which is actually a thick, sticky, and opaque substance that entirely covers Ravenna's body and face when she reemerges to the surface. Like an extra layer, the milky substance sticks to her skin, rendering her post-bath appearance into an iconic image of whiteness, which is an ironic twist on Snow White's famous white skin and alleged purity. Like a second skin, the milky layer on her body appears as an impregnable and highly visible mask.¹⁵

Third, the masking of Ravenna's old age is associated with consumption and thus ties in with a critical discourse in age studies that links consumer culture with cosmetic surgery. Ravenna needs to devour young, beautiful women and suck the youth out of their bodies in order to stay young. Again, these scenes are spectacular instances of CGI. The mirror warns Ravenna, "[Snow White's] innocence and purity is all that can destroy you. But she is also your salvation, Queen. Take her heart in your hand, and you shall never again need to consume youth. You shall never again weaken or age." To this, the queen responds, "Immortality. Immortality forever." Beyond the Fountain of Youth topos, the age-old search for immortality and eternal youth that is evoked here, youth is also identified as a commodity that can be purchased. As Stephen Katz and others have argued, consumer economies are closely interwoven with youth culture and the commodification of anti-aging products and lifestyle choices, such as fashion, diets, beauty products, exercise, or cosmetic surgery (12; also see Gullette, "Other End"). The latter, which promises youthfulness in exchange for money, has been considered one of the many proliferating "techniques for disciplining the aging body" (Woodward, "Youthfulness" 132). In contrast to instances of masquerade that foreground exaggerated ornamentation, this "version of the aging-body-in-masquerade is characterized by the aesthetics of smoothness, tact, and good taste. . . . [T]he objective of the surgically youthful body is to speak nothing" (133-34). The art of CGI shares a similarly paradoxical attitude towards the (in)visibility of its craft: On the one hand, it aims at rendering itself invisible and as "natural" and "realistic" as possible. On the other hand, its success and public reputation hinges

on being recognized. In both cosmetic surgery and digital effects, the fascination with body modification is dependent on the extent of the person's/actor's fame: the more glamorous or well-known the person whose appearance has been "altered," the more alluring the game of discovering revealing signs of surgery. Similar to the "pleasure" induced by television shows that uncover the use of cosmetic surgery by actresses or socialites in before-and-after comparisons (Wearing 291), I assume that viewers of the "digital surgery" performed in *Snow White and the Huntsman* enjoy seeing Charlize Theron altered drastically via digital effects. There is an important difference though: in the film, it is not only the result but above all the process of the digital morphing that is fascinating. Woodward calls the pleasure in exposing cosmetic surgery "surgical voyeurism" ("Youthfulness" 134), and I suggest that a similar voyeurism is encouraged in *Snow White and the Huntsman*—a pleasure that is predominantly geared towards the spectacle of digital aging and rejuvenating.

This spectacle of digital effects is also carried out on other bodies—the dwarfs' bodies. In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, digital masquerade draws attention to body size. Again, part of the masquerade is exposed through casting decisions: the dwarf characters are not played by dwarf actors, but by average-size actors who are digitally shrunk into dwarfs. When the dwarfs are introduced, masks conceal their faces as well as their identities as bandits who raid the woods. When they take off their masks, we recognize that the dwarfs are played by well-known actors, such as Eddie Marsan, Ian McShane, Bob Hoskins, and Nick Frost, who are known to British and North American audiences as average-size actors. In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, they are shrunk into little persons through the use of camera angles and image composition. In addition, body doubles (played by actual little people) were used and their heads were digitally removed and replaced with the heads of the average-size actors (cf. Failes). Representatives of Little People of America, a non-profit support group for persons with dwarfism, criticized *Snow White and the Huntsman* for this casting decision (Rosenfeld). They argued that casting average-size people as dwarfs is akin to blackface and minstrel

shows (Li). A spokesperson for *Snow White and the Huntsman* justified the casting decision with the argument that the filmmakers were looking for actors with “pedigrees and recognisability” (Child). Without wanting to downplay the problematic nature of this casting decision, I find this explanation remarkable: it suggests that the producers of the movie wanted their viewers to identify the actors as average-size people and thus wanted them to become aware of the digital illusion and the artificiality of the computer-generated images. This decision emphasizes the ambiguity of the dwarf characters: their digitally altered body size is but a deception. Calling attention to the artificiality of the digital effects here interweaves the dwarfs’ ambiguity regarding “normal” body size with Charlize Theron’s artificial oscillation between age stages and the uglification she undergoes when she is digitally aged.

Evidently, *Snow White and the Huntsman* foregrounds the act of masking on several levels. I have suggested so far that drawing attention to the use of spectacular digital effects can be read as a potentially subversive element that the movie uses to emphasize the artificiality involved in representing age and aging. This argument rests on the assumption that digital effects can be understood as signs of excess and exaggeration that point to a self-reflexive, hyperbolic representation of norms. From this perspective, when Snow White kills Ravenna, the repeated spectacle of “digital surgery” comes to an end with one last drastic transformation from youthful appearance into old age and death. This ending is ambivalent: on the one hand, it repeats stereotypical assumptions about age-as-decline and youth-as-desirable, while on the other hand, it draws attention to the means through which this norm is constructed, exposing it as artificial. *Snow White and the Huntsman* excels at presenting age stages as fluid categories that are externally imposed on bodies. In repeatedly using excessive special effects, the film exposes age-as-masquerade and enables a critique of age norms. One could question, of course, how far the digital masking in *Snow White and the Huntsman* is a resistant move or how far it is actually a submission to the rules of the blockbuster market, which favors the spectacular to attract audiences and make money. *Mirror*

Mirror, as I will demonstrate in the next section, seems more explicit in its attempts at subversion.

AGE BENDING IN *MIRROR MIRROR*

Mirror Mirror also uses digital effects for age masquerade when it rapidly transforms the queen into a very old woman. However, the use of special effects for this kind of “digital surgery” occurs only once, at the end of the movie, when the queen’s magic is used up. Age masquerade in *Mirror Mirror* is far from its excessive and repetitive presence in *Snow White and the Huntsman*. Yet the meaning of the mask of old age on Julia Robert’s middle-aged face and body is similar: it visualizes the queen’s defeat. She has rapidly turned into a very old woman and has to admit contritely that, despite her initial wish to tell *her* story, it is Snow White’s story after all. In addition to dismissing the old queen as the storyteller and power holder, the film ends with Snow White marrying the prince, even though the queen proposed to him first. When a digitally aged Julia Roberts offers Snow White the poisoned apple, as a last resort to turn her fate around, Snow White refuses to eat it and returns the apple to the queen, saying in a triumphant and condescending tone: “Age before beauty. It’s important to know when you’ve been beaten, yes?” (With these lines, Snow White turns an earlier statement by the queen against her opponent. It was the queen who, in the beginning of the movie, had degraded Snow White with the words: “It’s important to know when you’ve been beaten, yes?”). The old queen lifts the apple to her mouth and, even though the camera turns away from the queen and we do not know if she actually eats the apple and dies from it, the message is clear: The old queen is defeated. She is not only old, but also powerless. The camera position supports this new hierarchy: while Snow White stands on a pedestal and is filmed from a low angle shot, in the reverse shot, the camera, mimicking Snow White’s point of view, looks down on the old queen.

While *Mirror Mirror* does not use age masquerade to subvert normative notions about old age, the movie tries to render visible ageist assumptions via an exaggerated staging of its characters, particularly

Julia Roberts's performance of the queen as an extravagant diva. Aagje Swinnen's notion of "age bending" is helpful here because it conceptualizes transgressions of age scripts via hyperbole and because it adds the dimension of humor. I want to analyze two occasions that seem remarkable in this respect because of the way in which the scenes use humor to expose age norms. The first scene is a hyperbolic display of beauty treatments.¹⁶ Julia Roberts' performance of female vanity ridicules the beauty applications and, as the treatments are used by a queen who tries to pass as younger, it is also a critique of rejuvenation practices. The context of this hyperbolic display is the queen's preparation for a ball, which she organizes to lure the prince into marrying her. When Brighton, the queen's assistant, wonders about the expression "treatment," asking, "Isn't that a trifle excessive?," the queen replies "There is no such thing," and surrenders herself to the truly excessive procedures. Instead of "digital surgery," *Mirror Mirror* presents "natural" beauty enhancers such as bee stings for fuller lips, maggots and snails for skin peeling, and bird feces as a face mask. The short scene makes fun of beauty treatments as such, ridiculing the methods and products that are being used. It is a parody of the whole procedure, in which both the queen giggles (because some treatments tickle) and the baker woman (who applies the treatment) is smirking (because she clearly enjoys the absurdity of the process). This scene, I want to suggest, offers a case of parodic laughter, where the audience laughs *with* the queen and the other characters at the hyperbolic *mise-en-scène* and the implicit critical commentary on the beauty industry.

In a different scene, *Mirror Mirror* uses humor during an instance of age bending. As I have noted earlier, the queen transgresses the norm of age-appropriate conduct for a middle-aged woman by feeling attracted to the prince and by acting upon her desire. Rejecting a marriage proposal by a much older man, who offers to provide for her and restore her financially stricken empire, the queen asks the younger prince to marry her. The scene of the marriage proposal, which I quoted in the introduction, emphasizes the queen's self-delusion in relation to her age and

her proper place in the story. As an eccentric diva, she is presented as a woman who takes what she wants. In not acting her age, the queen counteracts the “normative systemization of time” and risks what Mary Russo has called “the scandal of anachronism” (21). While Russo argues that this scandal exposes “the female subject . . . to ridicule, contempt, pity, and scorn” (21), *Mirror Mirror* seems to exploit this scandal for parodic purposes, using the queen’s transgressive behavior in such a way that viewers become accomplices in the queen’s desirous gaze at the prince’s half-naked body. In addition, *Mirror Mirror* ridicules the prince’s inability to conform to the dictates of heteronormative masculinity.

In two separate scenes, a bare-chested prince reports to the queen that he was robbed by giants in the woods. The queen clearly takes pleasure in looking at the half-naked prince, whose appearance makes it difficult for her to concentrate. Julia Roberts’s performance of a lewd diva is amplified by visual and verbal cues. Through the camera angle and the image composition, *Mirror Mirror* establishes complicity between the viewers’ and the queen’s gaze: the audience thus participates in the queen’s delight in looking at the bare-chested man. Woodward’s “youthful male structure of the look” turns into a female gaze directed towards a youthful male. This gaze is condescending (the camera literally looks down on the prince) and supplemented by commentaries that make the prince appear unmasculine (he is called bashful, and it becomes clear that he has been robbed by dwarfs) and childish (he is called a “kid” who will be swept off his feet by the queen’s ball). Similarly, on the verbal level, *Mirror Mirror* draws our attention to the fragility of established boundaries. When the queen discovers that she has been deceived by her valet Brighton (simultaneously, the prince insists that he is the one who feels deceived about Snow White’s death and the dwarfs’ body size), she remarks sarcastically that a new definition of “confusing” is about to enter the dictionaries: “In years to come when people look upon the word confusing, they will point to this very afternoon when the world learned that a dead girl was alive, leading a band of giant dwarfs.” The queen’s new definition of “confusing” is characterized by a reversal of

what is considered to be normal in terms of the meanings of life/death and body size.

Confusion and deception are also underlying themes in the scenes in which the dwarfs appear. Like the queen, the dwarfs bend the norms associated with body size and age stages. And, similar to the adult prince, the adult dwarfs are presented as ambiguous in relation to age stages: the dwarfs are called children even though they are clearly adults. Evidently, the movie keeps reminding us that physical appearance—especially height—is not a reliable age indicator. *Mirror Mirror* reinforces this aspect when it presents the seven dwarfs as mock giants. When they raid Prince Alcott and his valet, the dwarfs fight on stilts—a type of masquerade that conceals their true body size. Only when they have beaten the prince and his valet do they let their masks down and become identifiable as little people. When the prince realizes the deception, he begins to laugh at the dwarfs, saying condescendingly, “I will not fight a bunch of dwarfs. Dwarfs are minuscule. Diminutive. Runts. . . . It doesn’t matter. You’re short. And it’s funny.” And, he adds: “Someone has to teach a lesson to these children.” The dwarfs are appalled and, as a consequence, they punish the prince and his valet to illustrate that dwarfs are neither to be underestimated nor to be mistaken for children. The type of punishment they impose is very interesting on a metaphorical level, and I will come back to it in the next section.

In *Mirror Mirror*, the seven dwarfs on stilts constantly bring the other characters in the movie, particularly the prince and the queen’s assistant, Brighton, into problematic situations: When the prince is ambushed by the dwarfs a second time and has to confess this painful affair to the queen, he first describes the attackers as giants who were impossible to fight. Then, accidentally, he calls them dwarfs, which gravely undermines his capacities as a warrior and as a rational, mature adult. The prince explains cryptically: “They are giant dwarfs. They are big. But sometimes small.” In being unable to explain the situation, the prince appears silly and pathetic. Thus, indirectly, the dwarfs destabilize the prince’s authority and maturity. With their modifiable body size, the dwarfs relativize what

is typically considered to be “normal” or average. *Mirror Mirror* presents the dwarf characters in a playful way, associating their non-average body size with clever deception strategies. Deception, after all, is one of the lessons the dwarfs teach Snow White in order to prepare her for her fight against the queen. During what resembles a makeover scene (the innocent princess becomes a “warrior”), the dwarfs impart their wisdom in the voice-over:

People think you can't be tall if you're short.

You can't be strong if you're not.

But weakness is only a weakness if you think of it that way. [. . .]

Deception on the battlefield isn't just an option.

Oftentimes it is the difference between victory and defeat. (*MM*)

The dwarfs' lesson is thus one of deception, of creating an illusion and playing with other people's stereotypes and expectations in order to use those preconceptions to their own advantage. Through this playfulness, the dwarfs take advantage of being continuously misjudged and mislabeled and hold a mirror to the other, seemingly “normal” characters, revealing their immaturity and their paradoxical behavior. As a result, almost all of the adult characters—such as the prince, the queen, and her assistant Brighton—are uncovered as silly, irresponsible, delusional, and somehow childish in their behavior. The queen, for instance, sometimes considers the prince a suitable husband yet simultaneously calls him a child. The situational quality of age attributions thus pervades the adult stage and transforms the adult characters into childish figures.

Again, one must ask how subversive the humor in *Mirror Mirror* is—that is, whether we are dealing with comic or parodic laughter. While there are some instances, such as the beauty treatments, which I would classify as parodic laughter, the other scenes discussed here are more ambiguous. The two scenes with the bare-chested prince are humorous indeed and are reminiscent of slapstick comedies in the pacing and wit-tiness of the dialogue. Instead of laughing *with* the queen, however, we might just as well laugh *at* her and the prince because both behave so inappropriately. In addition, the general plotline of the movie sends a message that complicates the notion of subversion: *Mirror Mirror* rules

out, for example, that the queen's defiance of social norms (regarding her interest in a younger man) could ever be successful (or taken seriously, at least). In this sense, the film polices "intergenerational sexuality" by branding the queen's interest (and sexual desire) in the younger prince as a "generational impropriety," thereby restoring "chronologically appropriate sexual coupling" (Wearing 278, 300). Nevertheless, *Mirror Mirror* does show a great sense of playfulness and parody in some instances, particularly through the dwarf characters. It seems that, as in *Snow White and the Huntsman*, the concepts of masquerade and age bending do not fully substantiate an argument in favor of the movies' subversive impact. Taking the perspective of the dwarfs, however, whom Solis calls "icons of deviance," I want to suggest a third approach to a destabilization of age norms (120).

THROUGH THE LENS OF THE DWARFS: SUBVERSION VIA INVERSION

Cultural representations of dwarfs have been diverse and often degrading. Robert Bogdan, for example, has studied the problematic presentation of dwarfs and other people of "human variation" in the freak shows of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries ("Social Construction" 23). Dwarfs were flagrantly misrepresented in order to emphasize their difference and "produce a more appealing freak" (25). Bogdan defines "freaks" as "a frame of mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people" (35). Referring to the artwork of Diane Arbus, Bogdan suggests that "freak has become a metaphor for estrangement, alienation, marginality, the dark side of the human experience" (*Freak Show* 2). Contrary to other people of non-average body size (such as obese people), Laura Backstrom argues, dwarfs were presented in ways that "emphasized talent, success, domesticity, and cuteness" (687). According to Lori Merish, there is an aesthetic of cuteness in nineteenth-century popular culture with a "productive exchange between the cute child's performance and the midget's commercial display [in freak shows, popular theatre, and vaudeville]: part of the pleasure of watching precocious child and 'little person' perform derived from how they unsettled, in a contained but dramatic fashion, the boundary between

child and adult” (190). This association of little people with “adult children” is, of course, problematic. Merish gives several examples in which the treatment of dwarfs as adult children awkwardly “conflates person and domestic animal” and culturally positions the little person “as an object, not a subject” (190). On such grounds, Little People of America criticizes many representations of dwarfs as derogatory or exploitative (cf. Li 2012). Moreover, in fictional representations, such as in fairy tales, as Uta Störmer-Caysa argues, dwarfs are often featured as relational characters: they are small only in relation to the average-size heroes (157).

The attribution “adult children” suggests that little people are neither one thing nor the other, which is a characteristic of liminality. According to Victor Turner, liminal people are “ambiguous,” they are “threshold people” who are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (95). The concept of liminality has been applied to the “Snow White” tale by N. J. Girardot, who uses Arnold van Gennep’s analysis of rites of passage to examine how Snow White develops from a child into a young woman. He links her coming-of-age to an “initiatory pattern” in terms of the three phases of ritualized initiation—separation, liminality, and reincorporation (Girardot 285). Snow White is thus pushed away from her childhood environment and lives as an outsider in a state of liminality with the dwarfs, where she has to endure several ordeals (household duties, the queen’s attacks) before she can be reintegrated into society through a symbolic rebirth (281-83). The same applies to the dwarfs: they are banished from their former communities and live in a transitional stage before they are eventually reintegrated as honorable citizens.¹⁷ The fact that Snow White spends her phase of liminality with the dwarfs, who are presented as outcasts in *Snow White and the Huntsman* and *Mirror Mirror*, is revealing. In Turner’s words, one might say that Snow White and the seven dwarfs become a “communitas” of equals, being outsiders and thus not part of the “structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of ‘more’ or

‘less’” (96). Following Kathleen Ashley’s interpretation of liminality, Snow White’s and the dwarfs’ positions as liminal people constitutes “a ‘realm of possibility’ where new combinations of cultural givens [can] be playfully tested” (xviii). Liminal situations are thus “‘seedbeds of cultural creativity,’ giving rise to new ideas and new paradigms” (xviii). While it has been argued that the male dwarfs represent the patriarchal order and that, during her time with the dwarfs, Snow White learns the tasks of domestic, submissive femininity (e.g. Zipes, *Fairy Tales* 204),¹⁸ I suggest understanding the movies’ representation of the dwarfs as a “seedbed of cultural creativity,” in which the fairy-tale dwarfs are ambiguous fictional characters with subversive potential.

The subversion I am suggesting occurs in both a literal and a symbolic way: In *Mirror Mirror* and *Snow White and the Huntsman*, the dwarfs invert the main characters in the very moment of their first encounter by turning them upside down. In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, it is the huntsman and Snow White, the two protagonists and potential love couple, who are hung by their feet during their escape through the woods when they are overwhelmed by a group of bandits, the masked dwarfs, and robbed. While the protagonists hang from the tree and try to convince the dwarfs to cut them loose, the dwarfs are in a position of power, mocking and teasing the huntsman and enjoying their superiority. It is also at this moment that the dwarfs take off their masks and reveal their “pedigrees and recognisability” as known actors (Child). The symbolic power of this inversion is intriguing: as Snow White—the incarnation of youth and beauty—dangles helplessly from a tree, the film holds in suspense her status as the youthful rival of the older queen. The ideals of youth and desirability are symbolically turned upside down for a short moment, and Snow White’s position seems as liminal and vulnerable as that of the young/old Queen Ravenna. In *Mirror Mirror*, it is the prince and his valet who are hung upside down. The prince, who has called the dwarfs children, disqualifying them from his own world of average-size adult warriors, is now punished by the dwarfs and pushed into an in-between position, both spatially and symbolically. His reversal suggests an

inversion of the supposed adult stability he stands for. After hanging from the tree, Prince Alcott behaves in ways that are silly, irrational, and inappropriate for an adult.

Barbara Babcock defines symbolic inversion as “any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political” (14). Indeed, the dwarf characters play with expectations; they draw attention to the artificiality and performative quality of age and body size and turn norms and values upside down. They symbolically reverse power structures, reminding us of the arbitrariness and relativity of cultural values and norms (Babcock 14, 29).

CONCLUSION

Considering the two movies with regard to age performance and masquerade and from the dwarfs’ perspective does not erase the ageism and sexism that Tatar and Zipes rightly critique in the movies. After all, the traditional story line is upheld: the queen is chased away from the throne, Snow White becomes queen, and the kingdom prospers and flourishes under the new reign of this young and beautiful queen. What changes if we foreground the role of the dwarfs in a reading of these films? Does a focus on masquerade and performance help us see beyond the social ageism, the auto-ageism, and the marginalization of those who are non-average? Yes and no. The movies require age-critical viewers who can decipher the ageist messages as cultural constructs and who can link their artificiality to other digital or cinematographic exaggerations. *Mirror Mirror* exhibits a playful spirit as it implicitly invites the audience to use deception strategies, to subvert expectations, and to laugh at the adult characters and their excessive behavior in the movie. Even though the laughter might not always be parodic, *Mirror Mirror* seems, overall, more critical and self-reflexive than *Snow White and the Huntsman*. The strengths of the latter film, however, lie in making its viewers aware of the artificiality of static age norms and, through its usage of age-as-masquerade, in critiquing the vicious consumption cycle of (digital) rejuvenation surgery.

Both movies fail, however, to break the ageist and sexist implications of the mirror and its warnings. Even though the queen's magic mirror actually breaks in *Mirror Mirror*, the queen and Snow White are still pitted against each other. In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, after killing her adversary Ravenna, Snow White gazes so intensely into the mirror that she seems totally mesmerized and captivated by its power. The mirror that has tormented Ravenna is not destroyed, nor does Snow White make an attempt to actively turn away from it. The once so active and powerful warrior Snow White is strangely frozen into immobility. During the coronation ceremony, the last scene of the film, Snow White is presented as eerily motionless and passive, gazing insecurely into the room until she detects the huntsman. Only then does the screen turn black as the movie ends. The huntsman, whose narrating voice we hear in the first scenes of the movie, now visually closes the story. The vicious cycle of the dictate of youth and beauty will continue, *Snow White and the Huntsman* seems to suggest. And indeed, the producers are planning a sequel.¹⁹ It remains to be seen which deeply rooted cultural problems will inspire the next retelling.

NOTES

¹ I am very grateful to the unknown reviewers, the editors of *Age, Culture, Humanities*, Vanessa Joosen, and Helma van Lierop whose generous comments and suggestions have helped me greatly in clarifying and sharpening the argument in this paper.

² The other movies are Grimm's *Snow White* (dir. Rachel Goldenberg; a low-budget fantasy film and mockbuster), *Snow White – A Deadly Summer* (dir. David DeCoteau; a low-budget horror film) and *Blancanieves* (dir. Pablo Berger; a Spanish adaptation set in the 1920s, in which Snow White is a bullfighter).

³ I will not draw on adaptation theory in this paper; on this point I follow Jack Zipes, who is very careful with the term adaptation and, instead, uses the term “representation” (*Enchanted Screen* 7-15). Therefore, I will speak of “representations” or “retellings” when I refer to the contemporary versions of the “Snow White” tale.

⁴ Prince Alcott is played by Armie Hammer, who was 26 in 2012. Julia Roberts was 45, and Lily Collings was 23.

⁵ For a critique of Solis's approach, see Vanessa Joosen's *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales* (2011).

⁶ The information on the films' budgets and revenue is from *IMDb.com* (accessed 25 Feb. 2014).

⁷ *Wikipedia's* article on “Ageism” is the only Anglophone reference to the “Snow White Syndrome” I could find. A summary (in Catalan) of Lydia Giménez-Llort's talk during

the ‘Congrés de la Gent Gran de Cerdanyola del Vallès’ (Congress of the Elderly of Cerdanyola del Vallès, Barcelona, Spain) can be found here: www.saberenvejecer.es/saberhacer_30.html. I am grateful to Lydia Giménez-Llort’s translation of the summary into English, which she sent to me during an email exchange in September 2013 and which I have edited for readability.

⁸ For Barzilai, the queen is not Snow White’s stepmother but her biological mother (526).

⁹ Female authors, as Gilbert and Gubar argue, incorporate both an angelic side, which stands for internalized patriarchal values, and a monstrous side, which represents the writer’s wish to break free from patriarchal restrictions (36-44).

¹⁰ Quite the contrary, Disney’s old queen is a caricature of an old woman: The magic potion makes her nose grow and her fingers become long and bony. She is hunched, her voice changes, and her formerly even face has warts. Old age here equals ugliness.

¹¹ Sobchack refers to *Attack of the 50-Foot Woman* (1958), *The Wasp Woman* (1959) and *The Leech Woman* (1960).

¹² Similar to *MM* and *SWH*, these horror movies use digital effects and makeup to make the actresses look older.

¹³ *About Schmidt* (dir. Alexander Payne, 2002) is, according to Woodward, an example of a performance of old age that has no “critical edge” because it shows the actors Jack Nicholson and June Squibb playing age “66 as far too old,” delivering “sitcom performances replete with banalities and bromides” (165).

¹⁴ Haller mentions authors such as Gabriel García Márquez and Noelle Châtelet (184-85). In “Unwürdige Greisinnen,” she also discusses Berthold Brecht and Thomas Mann.

¹⁵ This scene can be viewed at the following link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKBpU-JbQSeca.

¹⁶ A link to this scene may be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJmGfyYfzAk.

¹⁷ In *MM*, the dwarfs were expelled by the townspeople as “undesirables” due to an ordinance from the queen to banish “the uglies.” As a result, the dwarfs gave up their regular, honorable jobs, retreated to the woods, and became thieves. Since their social exclusion, the dwarfs take revenge by raiding the townspeople or the queen’s representatives whenever they pass through the woods. In *SWH*, the dwarfs used to be “noble gold miners” before Queen Ravenna killed their families and friends. As in *MM*, they retreated to the woods and to the land of the fairies, to which they know the secret gateway.

¹⁸ The dwarfs have also been interpreted as allies of Snow White. Gilbert and Gubar, for example, understand the dwarfs as representatives of Snow White’s “own dwarfed powers, her stunted selfhood” (40).

¹⁹ *The Huntsman: Winter’s War* (Universal) is scheduled for release in 2016.

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