

**From perfect housewife to rebellious princess:
Snow White as portrayed
by Disney and by Tarsem Singh**

Inês Botelho

Universidade do Porto – Faculdade de Letras

There was once a time when a mindful mother enquired Albert Einstein about the best books to read to her child. ‘Fairy tales,’ he answered promptly. But she insisted. What should she choose next? ‘More fairy tales,’ replied Einstein. ‘And after that?’ persisted the mother. ‘Even more fairy tales.’³

In fact, though neither folk tales nor fairy tales⁴ were originally intended for children and many still aim at other audiences (Zipes 2002: 28; Tatar 2003: xxvi, 191), these stories unlock the doors of fantasy and thus expand the children’s imagination, introducing them to worlds both marvellous and terrifying. However, cinema and television have been gaining a growing impact in the way fairy tales are perceived by youngsters, even by adults. And among such visual representations none prove more influential than those created by Disney (Warner 1995: 207; Zipes 2002: 26-27; Hurley

³ Though repeatedly quoted, this true story’s exact source remains uncertain. Its most frequent phrasing seems to be “If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales,” but it also appears in more elaborated telling. In fact, it assumed a mutability similar to those of folk tales told and changed by different populations. For a fairy tale-like telling, see Zipes (2002).

⁴ The terms folk tales and fairy tales arise both doubts and confusions, being involved in an ever lasting debate about their correct use. Nevertheless, Jack Zipes’ social-historical approach provides some enlightenment on the matter while also providing a way of systematization and therefore will be adopted in this article. Zipes (2002) argues that the term fairy tale derives from the French *conte de fées*, probably popularized by Madame d’Aulnoy’s book *Conte de Fées* (1697/98). The fairy tale thus means a literary text and has then a close relation to the German *Kunstmärchen*, whose literal translation can be “literary fairy tale”. Similarly, the folk tale corresponds to the *Volksmärchen*, the oral narratives freely circulating among different folks and told throughout the centuries.

2005: 222).⁵ It is therefore important to analyse them in comparison to other, more recent productions equally directed towards children.

Truly, the last few years have been strong on films and television series derived from fairy tales, some destined to younger audiences, some to older ones, some to both. Likewise, the old stories chosen as a basis comprise a diverse range but there was perhaps no other so much favoured as “Snow White”.

Throughout time, Snow White’s incarnations have been many and her guises rather different, resulting in a multiplicity of portrayals that while sharing common aspects sometimes also bluntly contradict each other. So great a variety, of course, ensues at least in part from the particular nature of folk tales because, as Maria Tatar claims, there are no original versions of these tales, only variants and often imperfect, fragmented ones (Tatar 2003: xvi). However, most Snow White adaptations establish at least a loose dialogical relation with the Grimms’ version, using or contradicting certain elements and narrative patterns. This tendency provides a common ground for analysis, a fixed text to which one can return and draw comparisons. Yet, one also needs to exercise caution in order to understand if the adaptation directly interacts with the Grimms’ fairy tale or if it is instead addressing Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937).⁶

The influence of the famous film studio has been vast and although it now faces some relevant competition in the animation field, namely from

⁵ In truth, the studio’s first films were not exclusively destined to children, targeting also an older public, not restricted to parents accompanying their kids (Koven 2003: 190-191), a trait that to some extent remains verifiable as many adults still endorse the rows of Disney viewers. Nonetheless, these films gained so marked a reputation as children entertainment that they can be considered primarily as such.

⁶ Assign a single director to the film would be incorrect as it lists six names under this category: David Hand (supervising director), Perce Pearce, Larry Morey, William Cottrel, Wilfred Jackson and Ben Sharpsteen (sequence directors). To prevent confusions and reading difficulties, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* will be simply ascribed to Disney, meaning not Walt Disney the individual, though it is his words preceding the film, but the Walt Disney Animation Studios as a whole.

Dreamworks,⁷ its influence prevails, being particularly obvious on what concerns folk and fairy tales. In fact, Disney so completely influenced the way these tales are perceived by the world, and especially by Western civilization, that its films have vastly supplanted the hypotexts underlying them (Zipes 2002: 117-118; Smith 2007: 36). Stith Thompson may have rejoiced at the premier of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, confident that there would be a wide variety of such wonderful films, all identical in relevance, serving to introduce fairy tales to larger audiences and recapturing adult's attention towards these stories, but he underestimated both Disney's power and the average audience's ability to not assume those films as authoritative (Koven 2003: 177, 182). Nowadays, when considering "Snow White", "Cinderella" or "Beauty and the Beast" people generally think and talk about the stories as depicted by Disney, mingling the folk and fairy tales with the cinematic adaptations. And there is perhaps no better example than Snow White.

Her image has forever been altered by Disney's depiction.⁸ In our contemporary imaginary the red hair ribbon, balloon sleeves, blue bodice and yellow skirt have become so much a part of Snow White that someone dressed in such clothes will immediately be identified as representing her. The same holds true for her coffin, now so ubiquitously represented as made of glass. Truth be hold that in the Grimms' tale, in which the film is based (Zipes 2002: 125), glass was already the chosen material for the coffin, but the Disney product propagated it, binding us all to the beauty of a glass coffin and eclipsing other versions where it had once been made of lead, silver, gold, even encrusted jewels (Tatar 2003: 233). Another item that helps to

⁷ This studio has even presented a highly successful fairy tale series – *Shrek* (2001-2010) – that satirises not only the most known fairy tale stories but also the very adaptations Disney has made of them. On this film, see the seventh chapter – "The Radical Morality of Rats, Fairies, Wizards and Ogres: taking children's literature seriously" – in Jack Zipes' *Breaking the Magic Spell: radical theories of folk and fairy tales*, cf. Reference list.

⁸ Contributing to such predominance is the Disney merchandising – clothes, watches, handbags, cups, plates, toys, all depicting the cartoons and even books where the Disney interpretation is reaffirmed. Mikel J. Koven (2003), following the arguments of other critics, notes that the illustrated books helped fixing the studio's interpretation as being the definitive text.

understand the dominance of Disney's vision is the Evil Queen's high collar.⁹ Not to mean that every high collar cape or dress will be associated with this character¹⁰ but that in many film, television or ballet adaptations the queen displays at least one of such high collar clothes.

In recent times only, Jean Paul Gaultier designed for Angelin Preljocaj's ballet *Snow White* (2008) an Evil Queen costume that ostensibly displays the high collar as well as other elements associated with the Disney look, stylizing and twisting them until they fully resemble those of a dominatrix. And in ABC's *Once upon a time* (2011-), a growing patchwork of fairy tales and myths lead by Snow White and her family, the Evil Queen (Lana Parrila) displays several high collar dresses; she even wears one when offering the poison apple to Snow White. Likewise, the advertising posters for *Mirror Mirror* (Tarsem Singh) and *Snow White and the Huntsman* (Rupert Sanders), both premiered during 2012, show their queens in high collar attires.

Of all these new productions, *Once upon a time* is the closest one to Disney's imagery, imaginary and interpretation, probably because the network is a part of the Disney/ABC Television Group. Naturally, this allows for little contrast with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, rendering any comparative analysis almost pointless. On the other hand, despite also declaring to be based on the Grimms' version, Preljocaj's ballet establishes only occasional links with the Disney version and it exhales too great a sexuality to qualify as preferential children's entertainment. *Snow White and the Huntsman*, while manifestly interacting with the classical animation film and other cinematic productions of inconspicuous relation, such as *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Peter Jackson, 2001-2003) and the latest *Robin Hood*

⁹ Her garment as a whole appears to have been inspired in a specific wardrobe piece used by Helen Gahagan Douglas while portraying She Who Must Be Obeyed in the film *She* (1935).

¹⁰ Other characters frequently connected with high collars are vampires and devils, especially if the fabric used is in shades of red or black. Such a diabolic relation may have informed Disney's decision of incorporating this feature in the Evil Queen's image.

(Ridley Scott, 2010),¹¹ also seems inadequate for a very young audience, not only because of its pronounced darker, grimmer settings and ambience but due to a plot aimed at teenagers and occasional adult viewers.¹² On the contrary, *Mirror Mirror*, designed as a comedy with cartoonish inclinations, clearly aims at children or, as it is perhaps more accurate a term nowadays, at family entertainment, making it an ideal counterpart to Disney's film.

Indeed, the marked differences of these two cinematic materials, departed from the same basis and directed towards a common audience, turn them into an interesting material for confrontation and affirm the significance of investigating both how they relate to and manoeuvre "Snow White". Understanding the original tale, with its many guises and interpretations, proves therefore necessary.

The narrative details of "Snow White" change from country to country and from teller to teller. Nonetheless, Steven Swann Jones manages to identify nine episodes common to several versions of the tale and divided in two parts – four in the first and five in the second. The first part comprises the episodes Origin, Jealousy, Expulsion and Adoption, which trace the story from the heroine's birth and the persecutor's envy to the persecutor ordering the heroine's death, the heroine escaping and being rescued and hide by the adopting elements. On the second part, a replica of the previous one, the persecutor discovers the heroine to have survived, what triggers the Renewed jealousy episode, followed by the Death one in which the persecutor apparently kills the heroine whose body is then arranged for Exhibition by the adopting elements. Eventually, Resuscitation occurs and

¹¹ Sanders summons up a diversified range of influences and aesthetics. The aforementioned films may be the most obvious references, but there are equally traces of *The Chronicles of Narnia: the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Andrew Adamson, 2005), *The Brothers Grimm* (Terry Gilliam, 2005), the *Harry Potter* saga (2001-2011), even *Alice in Wonderland* (Tim Burton, 2010). More significant, however, are the narrative similarities with *Snow White: a tale of terror* (Michael Cohn, 1997).

¹² Actually, Dan Jolin, reviewing for *Empire Magazine*, argues that Sanders' film tries actively to cover a vast range of audience demographics and in so doing compromises the story. Another aspect, pointed not only by Jolin but by a wide variety of critics, is the distinct use of a logic inherent to the *Twilight* saga (2008-2012).

with the heroine awoken the story comes to the Resolution when usually she gets married and the persecutor punished. So this cycle of hostilities, directed towards the heroine and twice repeated, comprehends three steps – threat, concretization and rescue or escape (Jones 1983: 57-61, 64) – a structure that though present in the majority of traditional “Snow White” tales is absent from many artistic takes.

Notwithstanding, Jones does provide another relevant observation. By arguing that the tale’s most relevant moments coincide with puberty, sexual initiation, for which the apparent death functions as a signal, and marriage, the latter leading to childbirth and motherhood, the author connects the tale with the feminine cycle. Moreover, Jones proposes the last step of the cycle to bring about anxieties and fears depicted in the persecutor’s actions (Jones 1983: 70).

The Freudian theory, as voiced by Bruno Bettelheim,¹³ prescribes yet another way to accomplish maturation, one involving the resolution of an Oedipus conflict between mother and daughter.¹⁴ As argument goes, their rivalry arises due to a man – the husband/father – but is sustained by the mother’s possessive ways towards her daughter. This impedes Snow White’s maturation and consequent independence. Bettelheim further states that the mother’s behaviour results from her nefarious narcissism, an inclination Snow White also manifests when yielding to accept the lace and

¹³ Although Bettelheim (1991) acknowledges several different versions of “Snow White” he works mainly on the Grimms’ text. Interestingly enough, noticing the wide circulation of the title “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”, Bettelheim complains about it calling attention to the dwarfs, characters he considers as pre-Oedipal children and who serve merely to drive the narrative forward.

¹⁴ For other psychoanalytic readings see Duff, J. F. Grant (1934), “Schneewittchen: Versuch einer psychoanalytischen Deutung”, *Imago*, 20: 95-103; Foxe, A. N. (1940), “Terrorization of the Libido and Snow White”, *Psychoanalytic Review*, 27: 144-148; Macquisten, A. S. & R. W. Pickford (1942), “Psychological Aspects of the Fantasy of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”, *Psychoanalytic Review*, 29: 233-252; and Heuscher, Julius E. (1974), “Chapter XIV: The Latency Period in the Fairy Tale; Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”, *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales: their origin, meaning and usefulness*, Springfield: Charles C. Thomas. The latter might prove an interesting reading considering Bettelheim plagiarized many of Heuscher’s ideas (Zipes 2002:180).

the comb. But she does learn to resist such impulses and overpass her ordeals. In fact, trusting Bettelheim, her time with the dwarfs is especially helpful in teaching her the value of good, hard work, here embodied in the tasks of housekeeping. For the Freudian theory, then, the tale's different episodes allow the heroine to achieve a full psychological maturation and so grow into a happy adulthood, a bliss only complete after the eradication of the evil, destruction and untamed passions embodied by the Queen (Bettelheim 1991: 202-214). However, this older female presence is not always read in such negative terms.

According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, frequently connected with the feminine perspective, the story is dominated by patriarchal repression, staging the difficulties women face to attain a psychic balance in a patriarchal dominated society. With the masculine voice inhabiting the mirror and its concepts completely internalized by the women, an actual male presence becomes obsolete. The King therefore haunts the tale and directs it onto a conflict between two arche(ster)otypes: the angle-woman and the monster-woman. In this way, Snow White embodies the angelical patriarchal daughter that the Queen rejects and actively tries to eliminate. Gilbert and Gubar further argue that the two women represent two conflicting aspects of the same psyche, each attempting to overthrow the other in order to survive. On one side is the docile, childish and submissive Snow White while on the other stands the subversive creativity of the Queen, she who orchestrates plots and propels the narrative. Their duel leads to an unhappy end: the Queen dies and Snow White becomes imprisoned in domesticity, an end that only a patriarchal view of female happiness would consider satisfactory (Bacchilega 1988: 2-3; Barzilai 1990: 519-521). Following a similar reasoning, Tatar suggests the catatonic Snow White to represent the folklore's ideal woman, further warning that the father's passivity and negligence only appear benevolent when compared to the Queen's plain aggressiveness. Actually, if in a version he eventually rescues Snow White in another he helps the Queen (Tatar 2003: 146, 148-149, 151, 154). Such

diversity of actions prevents a fixed interpretation and helps understand why folk and fairy tales render themselves to a variety of uses and revisions.

Another variable aspect is the Queen's identity, now commonly remembered as a stepmother but once known as Snow White's own mother. Indeed, in the first edition of the Grimms' collection she was presented as a biological mother, only becoming a stepmother in the second edition when the Grimms were already actively trying to adapt their work for children (Warner 1995: 210-211; Tatar 2003: 36-37). Disney later helped perpetuating the stepmother's malice (Warner 1995: 207, 222), conjuring up two stepmothers both wicked and terrifying: the Evil Queen, in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and Lady Tremaine, in *Cinderella* (1950).¹⁵ This tendency to propagate and vilify stepmothers, apart from attributing too great a demonization to adoptive and step-parents thus turning them into fearful antagonists, weakens the importance and complexity of such a marvellous and potentially problematic relationship as that of mothers and daughters.

Shuli Barzilai intends to recover precisely this feminine duo and hence reads "Snow White" as their story. By arguing that the two queens, the good one in the beginning and the evil one who dominates the tale, are in fact two aspects of the same person, Barzilai envisions a mother in conflict with her daughter's growth, desperately trying to regain control over the child while refusing to accept her own aging, reason why the Queen so values beauty, a trait commonly connected with youth. The mirror then represents the Queen's voice, constantly remembering the lost maternal power and the separation from her daughter. Simultaneously, "Snow White" becomes also the daughter's story for all is told from her perspective. According to Barzilai, the tale belongs to its women and requires no king, rendering his absence a very fittingly one (Barzilai 1990: 522-528).

¹⁵ While these two cases make for the most bluntly evil stepmothers, there are other instances of Disney characters that, even if not strictly qualifying as step-parents, act as highly malicious parental figures, namely Judge Claude Frollo (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, 1996) and Mother Gothel (*Tangled*, 2010).

Indeed, the strength of female images in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is undeniable but its women never slightly approach a mother-daughter relation, functioning instead as patriarchal dichotomies of good and evil. Even with the King conspicuously absent and the Prince looking as much dull as he is unmemorable (Warner 1995: 207), the masculine influence underlies the whole film.

Right at the overture, the mother figure is altogether eliminated from the text introducing the story, where only Snow White and her “vain and wicked Stepmother” are mentioned. Furthermore, by declaring that the Queen dressed her stepdaughter in rags and forced her to work as a servant in order to obscure her beauty, the film hints at another fairy tale character:¹⁶ Cinderella, who also ultimately escapes her ordeals by marrying a prince.

Snow White sings out this happiness strategy in her first appearance, asking from the wishing well for the one she loves to find her. Immediately he comes along, finishing her tune while also declaring his love. And from this moment on, the film fully follows the structure presented by Jones while also stressing some selected aspects.

The Queen, slender and fascinating though she may appear, is ultimately a figure of absolute, unredeemable evil, as powerful and authoritative as she is wicked (Warner 1995: 207). Nothing in her actions suggests the slightest remorse or concern for her stepdaughter. She always acts for the sake of remaining the fairest of them all. Absorbed with her own self she seems to mirror Bettelheim’s narcissist. Besides, this vanity appears entirely a character flaw. She is a monster-woman, a Dark Lady in opposition to the White Maiden incarnated by Snow White.

Arguably, this dichotomization is foreseeable in the scheme colour of the characters’ garments, since both display shades of blue, red and yellow

¹⁶ This is not the only instance of Disney mingling elements from other stories in a given film. The “Rapunzel” inspired production *Tangled* (2010) features a villain – Mother Gothel – with motivations similar to those of the Queen: she wants to remain young forever.

but the Queen's is overall darker. Embellished with a gold medallion and crown, her dress stands out as mainly of a bluish purple, girded with a dark-red belt and covered by a black cape lined in red. Through her clothes, the Queen stands out as Snow White's negative, an aspect also discernable in the elements surrounding them. As Dorothy L. Hurley demonstrates, Disney's productions equate white with goodness and black with evil or danger.¹⁷ Accordingly, Snow White frequently interacts with doves, the Prince rides a white horse, the forest is all depicted in dark colours as Snow White stumbles through it in terror – one of the film's most memorable sequences –, the poisonous apple is black before turning red, the Queen has a black crow-like bird (Hurley 2005: 224-225) and wears a wide, profoundly black robe when transformed in a crone. The frontiers are clearly demarked – good on one side, evil on the other. But, despite its final destruction, evil remains the most powerful and engaging side (Warner 1995: 207; Tatar 2003: 234). Fully active, unsettling and order disruptive, in its face good offers only passivity, physical work and sentimentalism.

As the Queen plots against Snow White and casts spells, the Dwarfs perform pantomimes, delight in Snow White's cooking and singing abilities, entertain her and labour vigorously in the mines. They are agents of order, amiable and compassionate, thriving through their hard work, never deviating from their established paths. Exactly like Snow White, with whom they are protagonists (Zipes 2002: 128). She too unquestionably accepts her role and ensures that order is maintained. Jack Zipes summarizes it rather well:

Snow White is the virginal housewife who sings a song about "some day my prince will come," for she needs a dashing male savior to order herself and

¹⁷ Hurley's article (2005) argues that in so doing the Disney's Princess films emphasize a colour significance not present in their source text versions and one that can be detrimental for children of colour awareness of themselves. She therefore recommends reading the source texts and other versions that present transcultural approaches. Some years after Hurley's analysis, Disney premiered its first, and until date, only film featuring a black princess: *The Princess and the Frog* (2009).

become whole, and the boys are the breadwinners who need a straight mom to keep them happy. (Zipes 2002: 128)

A daydreaming housewife indeed. Unlike Bettelheim's, this Snow White requires no teachings about hard work. Accustomed to serve as a maid, her instinct at arriving to the unkempt Dwarfs' house is to clean it, washing dishes and clothes, dusting and tidying up everything. In the Grimms' text the dwarfs offer her shelter under the condition that she takes care of the house (Tatar 2003: 227),¹⁸ but Disney's Snow White volunteers to do so before anyone asks. For the remaining time, she screams whenever in danger, indulges in a variety of girlish mannerisms and longs for her Prince, imagining a life of bliss where he will protect her from all and any harm. Her innocence and saccharine romanticism are so pronounced that she believes the poisonous apple to be a "wishing apple" capable of making all her wishes come true. Thus eats it believing it will summon the Prince so that they can "live happily ever after." And, of course, she does get her wish.

In a *deus ex machina* final (Warner 1995: 207), a lightning bolt cracks the cliff where the crone Queen is standing, causing her to fall and die. Meanwhile, the catatonic princess is mourned by the Dwarfs who, enchanted by her beauty and therefore incapable to bury her, display her apparent dead body in a glass coffin. Eventually, the Prince comes along and awakens her with "love's first kiss", an ending rather more romantic and crowd-pleasing than the Grimms' jolt that "freed the poisonous piece of apple lodged in Snow White's throat" (Tatar 2003: 232).

Cinematically inventive and impressive, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* features a demoniacal Queen and a Snow White so passive that her single actions are helpless screams and dutiful housekeeping, frequently

¹⁸ In the Grimms' first sketch of the "Snow White" tale, the Dwarfs simply request her to cook but the published version already has them wanting her to wash, clean, knit and do the beds. According to Tatar (2003), this editing corresponds to what the Grimms understood as the female obligations in society.

accompanied by singings. A film in accordance with Walt Disney's own personality: an artistically visionary modernist in conflict with a Victorian sentimental (Watts 1995: 87),¹⁹ who seems to conceive women as either autonomous, destructive monsters or dependent, mellifluous angels.

Tarsem Singh, an experienced commercial and music video director, may lack Disney's consistence and innovation but has an ability for visual prowess. His films are at times somehow feeble in narrative yet always stunning and imaginative, an aspect that favours their persistence in people's memory. *Mirror Mirror* is no exception.

With Tom Foden as production designer and costumes by the late Eiko Ishioka, this "Snow White" adaptation makes for one beautiful experience. Even if the scenarios occasionally appear too unintentionally static, resembling more the confined spaces of a theatre stage than the necessarily limited vision of a camera eye, the film still accomplishes to evoke a fairy tale environment. In fact, its imagery successfully blends different aesthetics and influences from several cultures – French, Indian, Russian, Chinese, possibly others.²⁰ And, although the Bollywood-like final scene seems both excessive and misplaced, such diversity mimics the universal nature of folk and fairy tales, a most important notion for children and adults alike.

However, the film does establish a subtle dialogue with Disney's version. The grown-up Snow White (Lily Collins) interacts in her first scene with a partially blue bird, cutting for it a slice of red apple. She later escapes death running through a supposedly frightening forest, a sequence not nearly as imaginative or memorable as Disney's but nevertheless aiming at a similar effect. And her wedding gown provides a strange reflection to the

¹⁹ For a consideration of how Walt Disney related to his time and particularly to American life, see Steven Watts (1995) and Zipes (2002). More detailed analysis are found in both Schickel, Richard (1969), *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney*, New York: Avon. and Watts, Steven (1997), *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

²⁰ A not western-dominated approach provides a refreshing alternative, but unfortunately *Mirror Mirror's* cast remains mainly Caucasian, the most obvious exceptions being some of the dwarfs.

Disney creation. Balloon sleeved, blue and adorned with a gigantic orange ribbon, it plays with the main aspects of Disney's costume: the principal colours – blue and yellow – and the chief design elements – the ribbon and balloon sleeves. Moreover, Snow White's lips are more reddish here than in any other scene. Similarly, the seven dwarfs (Martin Klebba, Jordan Prentice, Sebastian Saraceno, Joey Gnofo, Ronald Lee Clark, Danny Woodburn, Mark Povinelli), named in accordance to their more obvious characteristics, become important characters who help drive the narrative forth and teach Snow White some very relevant, albeit unexpected, lessons. Truly, the whole film is imbued with unusual choices.

During the animated introduction, when the Queen (Julia Roberts) narrates the princess' birth and the events leading to the King's disappearance, she affirms this to be her story, not Snow White's. A very interesting assertion, resulting in two effects: validate the Queen's relevance and capture the public's attention by contradicting its expectations. In addition, it echoes Barzilai's analysis. As does the existence of a Mirror Queen, an almost exact reflection of the Queen, all-knowing, magically empowered and wise. In Tarsem's version, no patriarchal masculinity inhabits the mirror, only the Queen's voice and interests.

Truly this cinematic adaptation proves a women's story. The men, though amiable and generally likeable, always are second to the female protagonists. Yet, there are still no hints at a maternal relationship. After her father's apparent death, Snow White is left under the Queen's care but for ten years they seem to have had little contact. The Queen restricted her to the palace, forbidding the princess' attendance to all kinds of celebrations and balls, making everyone believe her unfitted to ever rule the kingdom. Snow White's only mother-like figure is Baker Margaret (Mare Winningham), a royal servant that urges her to claim her birthright.

So the Queen is once again restricted to playing the wicked opponent, the evil and selfish stepmother, the narcissist caring exclusively for her own

needs. She clings to her monarch status mainly because it allows her to live luxuriantly, indulging in unconventional beauty treatments where worms, bees and scorpions are involved, dressing in an assortment of dashing and exuberant garments, throwing opulent parties and overall enjoying herself. To ensure her lifestyle she marries rich men, provided of course that they are attractive enough. And she generally gets rid of them as soon as possible. Moreover, when she eventually enters a competition with Snow White for the Prince's (Armie Hammer) attentions, the Queen soon realizes that in order to conquer him she will need to indulge in a little cheating and use magic. She does champion her beauty, refusing to acknowledge she has wrinkles – instead calling them crinkles – and asserting that Snow White's hair "is not black, it's raven and she's eighteen years old and her skin has never seen the sun, so of course it's good," but all in all this witty and ironic Queen has more pressing worries than a beauty contest. On the other hand, such a light, silly comedy approach, complete with digital added teeth sparkles to the Prince's wooing smile and some woozy lights and dots dancing around his head when he is being enchanted, means that no danger is ever really menacing and that the Queen, elegant and feline smiled yet also always too restricted by the necessity of promoting laughing opportunities, ends up partly deprived of her strength. So much so that her actions are not the trigger to the development of the story. Apart from her wedding schemes, whatever she may do or plot comes as a response to Snow White's previous actions.

The Expulsion episode is motivated not by jealousy but because Snow White threatens the Queen's authority, questioning her excessive taxes and claiming to be the "rightful leader." Political survival, not envy, drives the Queen to order the princess' death. Naturally, Brighton (Nathan Lane), the servant entrusted with the task, allows her to escape and Snow White runs right towards the dwarfs' cottage, a septet of lovable, noisy thieves.

Here too the film tries a faint political vein by turning the dwarfs into renegades, men the Queen expelled from town for being undesirable. More

important, however, they offer Snow White shelter in exchange for nothing. In truth, she does cook for them once or twice but the lessons she learns from them bear no relation to housekeeping. They teach her how to fight, how to move and act in order to produce a determined impression, and more important they give her the necessary confidence to believe in herself. Admittedly, Snow White's abilities with a sword are rather poor, especially when compared to the Prince's, yet she refuses to give up and always finds a way of overcoming her limitations.

When the Queen learns the princess still lives, the information infuriates her and she complains to her mirror reflection, demanding the use of magic to get the deed done. This also fails. Snow White quickly comprehends how the magic functions and stops it. Furthermore, aided by the dwarfs, she decides to steal the Prince from the wedding ceremony. The Queen, faced with the bridegroom's absence and the gentry's decision to depose her, finally decides to take matters into her own hands. But not in the usual poisonous apple way.

While Snow White inverts the traditional roles and becomes the saviour breaking the spell, therefore freeing the Prince from the literal "puppy love" he had been devoting to the ruling monarch, the Queen summons her creature, a beast that haunts the forest, and commands it to devour Snow White. Once again the princess rebels against conventions and runs to battle alone, locking the Prince and the dwarfs in their cottage. To the Prince's pleas she replies "all that time locked up in the castle I did a lot of reading. I read so many stories where the prince saves the princess in the end. I think it's time we changed that ending." Shortly after, as the Queen considers her an easy prey, Snow White assures "I'm made of more than you think." Nonetheless, she cannot defeat the beast on her own, requiring the help of both the Prince and the dwarfs.

The scene itself evolves rather clumsy. A semi-menacing, semi-funny sequence, ending with another disenchanting as the beast is revealed to be

the long missing King (Sean Bean). Snow White reunites with her father, gets married with the Prince and the dwarfs are reintroduced in society. There is even the suggestion of a blossom romance between Baker Margaret and Brighton. So extremely joyful a finale lacks only the complete eradication of evil.

Turned decrepit by both defeat and excessive use of magic, the Queen makes her last appearance, offering Snow White a red apple “for good fortune to the fairest of them all.” Upon such phrase, the princess restrains from biting the apple and instead offers it to the crone. Now irreversibly beaten, the Queen melts with the floor, the Mirror Queen proclaims “it was Snow White’s story after all,” getting broken into a million pieces, and one and the other disappear forever. Evil is conquered, good prevails. The film ends with Snow White singing and dancing.

A visual feast, *Mirror Mirror* avoids polarizing its protagonists into absolute monstrous or angelic extremes and allows them to escape patriarchal conventions. Regrettably, it also excludes any generational struggle. What is more, in a conflicted effort to present a children appropriate version of the “Snow White” tale functioning simultaneously as a comedy and a revision for the 21st century, it ends up committing to none, being narratively too complex for young children and appearing half-hearted, an enjoyable albeit mainly innocuous rendering that both presents some uncommon choices and constricts its characters to one-dimensionality: the handsome, heroic, occasionally laughable Prince, the wicked, vain, possibly crazy Queen, and the kind, sweet, secretly rebellious Snow White.

Two cinematic adaptations intended for the younger audience, one common tale as a starting point and practically seventy five years between their two premiers.²¹ A time long enough for society to transform itself and

²¹ *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* premiered in 21 December 1937 while *Mirror Mirror* was released in the United States of America in 30 March 2012.

envision female protagonists in new ways, even if they belong to old stories generally considered by the public as unchangeable.

The common structure of “Snow White” as identified by Jones is verifiable to a certain extent in these two films. Though *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* deviates from the Grimms’ fairy tale in excluding two of the Queen’s three attempts to kill Snow White and by introducing other apparently small differences, it still presents the customary episodes. So does the first part of *Mirror Mirror*. Until its Snow White starts living with the dwarfs, the story may introduce a few novelties and somehow alter the character’s motivations but is nevertheless following the usual narrative. The significant modifications come only towards the end of the second part as the episodes Death, Exhibition and Resuscitation are eliminated. Considering that a spell occurs and, in a Disney manner, is broken with a kiss, a case could be made for the existence of events resembling those of Death and Resuscitation, but then one would have to remark the traditional roles’ inversion as the Prince becomes the victim and Snow White the saviour. In fact, if the cycle of hostilities happens twice in both films its three steps diverge slightly.

Defying her stepmother, waving swords and trying to solve her problems without helplessly waiting for someone to rescue her, Tarsem’s Snow White experiences her due coming of age, generally going from puberty to almost adulthood. A growth indiscernible in Disney’s princess who walks through the narrative as an impressionable White Maiden, forever crystallized in adolescence and happy to completely restrict to what she believes to be her place: the wife of the man she loves.

Such changes in tone owe greatly to the distinct sensibilities of the early 20th and 21st centuries since patriarchal notions have been denounced and battled by an ever growing feminist awareness. Unfortunately, the Queen appears to remain exiled in the realms of wickedness, always a stepmother, an evil stepmother incapable of a mother-daughter relationship.

In the transit between Disney's and Tarsem's versions the cinematic innovation and brilliance was lost, the latter resulting in an unbalanced, even if beautiful, film both pleasurable and somewhat bland. Perhaps in seventy five years time none will remember or discuss *Mirror Mirror*. However, for the children growing up nowadays it offers at least one important and refreshing feature: the heroine's main characteristic. No longer the perfect housewife portrayed in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Snow White has now become a rebellious princess.

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Filmography

Mirror Mirror (2012). dir. Tarsem Singh, with Julia Roberts, Lily Collins, Armie Hammer, Jordan Prentice, Mark Porvinelli, Joey Gnofo, Danny Woodbunr, Sebastian Saraceno, Martin Klebba, Ronald Lee Clark and others, Relativity Media: 106 min.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937). Animated, Walt Disney Animation Studios: 83 min.