

The Revisionist Tale that Reaffirms the Patriarchy: Gregory Maguire's Confession of an Ugly Stepsister

Over the last few years, Gregory Maguire's works has been rising in popularity. While Maguire may categorize his novels as adult fiction, their appeal to children cannot be denied, especially to the young adult audience. In 2000, *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister* was placed on the New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age List. In 2002 the novel was turned into a movie for television by ABC and aired on the Sunday night program "Wonderful World of Disney". The academic field of children's literature cannot help but take notice with this much activity, especially since *Confessions* is advertised as a revisionist retelling of the timeless Cinderella fairy tale.

Maguire does succeed in presenting a more in depth characterization of the women, especially the maternal figures, the narrative still does little to disrupt the previously established patriarchal ideologies found in the Grimm Brothers' and Perrault's versions. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have noted in their landmark study *The Madwoman in the Attic*, various classic literary fairy tales portray the female as either an "angel-woman" or a "monster-woman" (36). Maguire, in an attempt to tell the other side of the Cinderella story, does blur the lines between angel-woman and monster-woman in his text. Unfortunately, his revisionist work still relies heavily on the established Wicked Stepmother motif. His maternal figures are more rounded characterizations but he still concludes his fairy tale with the mother as mostly monster-woman. From Maguire's use of narrative structure to language to thematic images, his maternal figures are still part of the patriarchal motif of the Wicked Stepmother.

Patriarchal Structuring

Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister opens with the traditional structure of a framed narrative. The Prologue contains an unnamed elderly woman observing children playing a game which reminds her of her own personal family drama. The narrator says she has told her story to Caspar but states that she speaks too late to change the story. "Let him make of it what he will. Caspar knows how to coax the alphabet out of an inky quill. He can commit my tale to paper if he wants" (Maguire xi-xii). The female narrator does not know how to write nor has anyone ever bothered to teach her; therefore she relies on the male Caspar to write her wills if he wishes. When the interior story begins, the narrative mode changes from the first person narration of the elderly woman to third person narration focalized predominately through Iris Fisher and follows a chronological plot development.

The text concludes with an Epilogue that brings the elderly female narrator, now revealed to be Ruth Fisher, back to controlling the narration. She states that "Caspar has heard the tale and he has told it back to me" (Maguire 360). Per Ruth's implication the majority of the narrative text is being told by the male narrator Caspar. While the narration is focalized predominately through Iris, a female protagonist, the possessor of the narration is actually male. Ruth objects to some of Caspar's manipulation of events, but only to the presentation of her own character: how he portrayed her as a simpleton. She does not complain about the events of the story nor to the depiction of female relationships in the story and her objection is only in the Epilogue which, compared to the bulk of the text, is a short segment compared. The use of conventional framed linear plot structuring and a female exterior narrator illustrates one of the patriarchal strategies used in the text. Marina Warner has found this method of structure as "attributing to women testimony about women's wrongs and wrongdoing gives them added value: men might be expected to find women flighty, rapacious, self-seeking, cruel and lustful, but if women say such things about themselves, then the matter is settled" (209). The initial narrator of the text is Ruth, but her identity is not revealed until the Epilogue while the bulk of narration found in the interior narrative is omniscient but revealed to have been Caspar's creation. As Roberta Seelinger Trites has noted in her critical study *Disturbing the Universe*, "the source of the narrative authority in a text can reflect much about the text's ideology" (73). Maguire is aligning the story to Ruth but giving the power of writing and interior narration to Caspar. The structure of the text signifies that there is more than just a thematic connection to previous Cinderella tales in that a woman may initially tell it but it is a man who ultimately gets narrative control of the information being distributed.

The Dialogic Maternal Image

Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister is a self-professed retelling of the Cinderella tale, and therefore it depends on part of its meaning from intertextuality. Mikhail Bakhtin would categorize the novel as a dialogic work since it carries on a dialogue with previous tale versions. "The result is a dialogic tension between the two texts, as one text comments on the other" (Trites Waking 32). One way the novel and the previous tales comment on each is to expose the similarities and tensions between the images of the maternal figure. Over the last few decades, feminist theory has exposed patriarchal ideology at work in the concept of motherhood. Many feminist critics, such as Bassin, Chodorow, Trites, Gilbert and Gubar, believe that motherhood is a socially constructed myth designed to restrict women. They have exposed patriarchal ideology at work in the concept of motherhood and have illustrated how maternal women in male authored texts have been created from male expectations and fears. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar believe that this is why many fairy tales portray a mother in paradoxical roles of the angel-woman and the monster-woman. This dual presentation of motherhood is especially true in the Cinderella tales. Perrault opens his tale with an immediate juxtaposition of mothers. The new step-mother is presented as one of the haughtiest women that ever existed and the deceased mother had a goodness and sweet temperament that is only paralleled by her daughter (Perrault 16). The Grimm Brothers portray Ash Girl's mother as sweet and protective even from beyond the grave. The stepmother shows cruelty to all the female children by excluding Ash Girl from being a loved member of the new family, giving her seemingly impossible chores and ordering her own daughters to mutilate themselves.

This dual presentation of motherhood exists in this revisionist retelling of the Cinderella tale but the women are not polar opposites. *Confessions* opens with a "strict-stemmed woman and two daughters. The woman is bad-tempered because she's terrified. The last of her coin has gone to pay the passage" (Maguire 3). The mother, Margarethe Fisher, is immediately presented as strict and cold but her actions are excused because she is afraid for her family welfare. The narrator of the interior narrative does not want the reader to sympathize with Margarethe too much and therefore he presents the mother displaying her own dismay over having two such daughters as Iris and Ruth. Throughout the text she calls Ruth a beast, an ox, and a burden, while Iris is called clever but her mother always points out how her ugliness is offensive. Margarethe demands pity for having two such daughters and nowhere in the text does she openly show affection to her girls.

The matriarch continually defends her actions by saying that everything she does is to provide for her children yet her tendency is to make each situation about herself instead of comforting her daughters. Margarethe's "maternal" defense is held in contrast to her traditionally masculine traits such as being unaffectionate, domineering, manipulative and aggressive towards people. Gilbert and Gubar state that masculine women fair worse in tales because the "assertiveness, aggressiveness – all characteristics of a male life of 'significant action' – are 'monstrous' in women precisely because 'unfeminine' and therefore unsuited to a gentle life of 'contemplative purity'" (28). Margarethe uses mothering as an excuse to exert dominance over her children because it is the only sphere in which she can demand authority. She complains to Iris that being the sole head of a family without a husband or son is a tremendous pressures for a mother and she make it her sole purpose to get a husband for herself and one for Iris.

A second mother, Henrika van den Meer, is presented to highlight Margarethe's unfeminine version of mothering. In classical Cinderella tales, such as the Grimm Brothers or Perrault's, Henrika would represent the angel-woman or the good but deceased mother. In Maguire's text, she remains alive for a relatively large portion of the text and she is not quite as angelic as her tale predecessors. Henrika is described as having a "scent flowery and bewitching" (Maguire 83). This use of descriptive language connects Henrika to the patriarchal negative side of femininity, the "bewitching" of men. Her mothering skills are perceived as repressive when her relationship with her daughter is examined. Clara is forced to dress in juvenile gowns and has childlike mannerisms such as thumb sucking. Margarethe expounds Henrika's mothering flaws to Iris: "That she coddles her daughter and swaddles her into an unusual infancy? That she does the girl no good....We're all in our own prisons, I suppose, but Clara's is made worse by the fears and strengths of her mother. And maybe by her father's weakness" (Maguire 114-5). Henrika refuses to allow her daughter to mature into a young woman. Even her husband finds fault with her methods of mothering and chastises her for not wanting her child to grow into an adult. She asserts her power within the confines of motherhood but even her version of mothering is perceived as negative in the eyes of others.

Henrika's feminine mannerisms are a mask for the power she wields within her family and her pretense of passivity and femininity is a masquerade. Her portrait hangs in the reception room instead of her husband's which implies she is the dominant figure of the household. She brags about each piece of expensive furniture in the house since it was part of her dowry. It is her money that is the foundation of the marriage and therefore she holds the power in the household. Margarethe admires the power that Henrika possesses within the domestic sphere but she wants that power for herself. Maguire is continuing patriarchal traditions by having the two mothers of the text become competitors. One feminist complaint of fairy tale texts is the tendency to denigrate female bonds and make women compete for male attention. Gilbert and Gubar find that in many texts "female bonding is extraordinarily difficult in patriarchy: women almost inevitably turn against women because the voice of the looking glass sets them against each other" (38). Margarethe's masculine attributes are not found as favorable to the males of the novel as Henrika's feminine traits and therefore she begins to mimic Henrika's mannerisms in order to usurp her position as wife. "The fact that most fairy tales embody elements associated with the archetypal 'feminine' points to the possibility that they recapitulate a view of reality that is rooted in the determinism of sex roles" (Kolbenschlag 4). Margarethe's version of womanhood and motherhood is presented as a lesser ideal image because she herself is jealous of Henrika.

Margarethe tells Iris that "You are too young to know how women must collaborate or perish" (Maguire 65). This is a feminist concept yet the text uses it as a tool to manipulate Iris into doing her mother's bidding. Margarethe does not follow her own piece of advice in her relationship with Henrika. This image of female competition is reiterated by Caspar's portrait of Margarethe. Caspar has sketched Henrika in the portrait, peering down from a window and scowling at the working mother. He tells Iris that he has not painted a portrait of the two mothers, but the old adage "Two dogs and one bone will rarely agree" (Maguire 103). Caspar cannot see the women as mothers but reduces them to competitors for men. Margarethe manipulates the family into gaining more power when Henrika becomes pregnant with her second child. As Henrika goes into premature labor, Margarethe says that she cannot leave the struggling mother alone, and yet she is unresponsive to the moaning woman. Her footsteps are described as unrushed and calm, and she is blasé about the bloody sheets she holds in her arms. Henrika and her baby ultimately die and by the end of the narrative Margarethe admits her role in her death. "So Henrika returns to the scene of her murder, to accuse a poor housemistress of poisoning her" (Maguire 347). She admits to murdering her and says Henrika should be happy she was murdered because she was released from the turmoil Margarethe experiences now as van den Meer's wife. Maguire plays on the ultimate image of wicked women; he has the two mothers competing for a husband to the point of murder.

The maternal figure has murdered for the power associated with being van den Meer's wife. Van den Meer plays the familiar paternal role found in Perrault's tale; the hen-pecked husband. Henrika and Margarethe continually dominate him throughout the text. This follows the pattern that Marina Warner discovered in that "retellings of the fairy tale today, from pantomime and books, [the father] either features as dead, so the women are wreaking havoc in the absence of male authority; or he too is suffering, yet another of the wicked women's victims...much too nice to stand up to the horrid schemers he has taken under his roof" (347). Maguire perpetuates the image of wicked womanhood by having Margarethe compete with another mother for power, deceive, murder, and then control her husband. This power is not presented in a favorable manner since Margarethe's power leads to the mental and financial ruin of Van den Meer.

Maguire uses both Iris and the men of the text to comment on Margarethe's flaunting of power. She begins buying expensive gowns and Iris is depicted as uncomfortable with how her mother dresses now. "Iris has always thought that Margarethe is possessed of a sober good taste. Now she realizes, with a start, it is poverty that kept Margarethe in appealing browns, blacks, and whites" (Maguire 211). Iris believes her mother prefers to look like a strumpet than a modest lady. Her greed is blamed for the family's bankrupt situation by all the men in the narrative. Henrika's mothering is repressive and portrayed as unhealthy since she refuses to allow her daughter to mature into womanhood. Margarethe's presentation of motherhood is too selfish and dangerously aggressive.

The Mother/Daughter Tension

The dialogic tension appears not only between the novel and the previous tale versions but also within the text itself. A typical device of young adult literature appears within the interior narrative: the dialogic tension between parent and child. This tension works to construct the meaning of the narrative and these discourses reveal the ideologies that are at work within the text. Many young adult novels depict adolescents who struggle against socially constructed institutions. These ideological institutions use language to empower, repress and construct an individual's identity (Adams, Trites). Parents are part of these dynamics because they are the first possessors of ideological discourse that children encounter in life. The mother/daughter conflict is present in many fairy tales and young adult novels because of the theory that the child must rebel against and metaphorically kill the mother in order to become a successful and autonomous adult. This belief reinforces conflict between the parent and child and minimizes the need for healthy nurturing bonds between them. Trites believes that the "weakest of the Freudian rebellious-daughter novels, however, portray mothers as evil beings whose stifling presence must be escaped in order for the misunderstood daughter to develop fully. Maternal figures in these books are often one-dimensional: they are controlling, manipulative, and little more" (Waking 103). The Confessions narrative presents patriarchal ideologies that perpetuate the need for mother/daughter conflict and competition.

In the beginning of the novel, Iris believes her mother loves her and that all her mother does is in the best interest of her daughters but as the novel progresses she questions her mother's motives and begins to view her mother as a cold and selfish woman. Maguire uses stock fairy tale language at key moments to remind the reader of the connection between the novel's mother and the classical monster-women. As Iris and Ruth are in the meadow collecting flowers, she sees her mother in the distance. Iris decides to tell her a story and begins with "I see a wicked witch" (Maguire 32). By having Margarethe's own daughter view her as a witch perpetuates that this mother is indeed a wicked stepmother. Later in the text, Iris's anger is expressed as she desires her mother to be whipped in public. "How agreeable to see Margarethe pilloried in the stocks and whipped by virtuous citizens. Of whom Iris would be the first to volunteer" (Maguire 66). While she only imagines inflicting pain on her mother as part of her rebellion, her sister physically injures Margarethe. Ruth puts red pepper on a cloth that their mother uses to wipe her eyes but no one suspects her guilt. Maguire seems to be utilizing the Freudian concept that children must rebel against their parents to develop. The text is following the pattern that Trites describes as "the crippling Freudian masterplot that requires mothers and daughters to destroy each other at least psychically, if not literally" (Waking 120). Ruth rebels by physically mutilating her mother's eyes and while the characters believe it is unintentional, she admits to doing it on purpose.

Margarethe does not suspect Ruth's destructive rebellion but she does recognize Iris's passive rebellions. She reminds her daughter that she holds the power in the family institution. "You will thwart me at every step, but when it comes to a struggle between mother and daughter, my little one, remember...mothers have the advantage of knowing not only how and why they behave, but how and why daughters behave as they do. For mothers were all daughters once, but daughter take their time to learn to be mothers" (Maguire 295). The author is using Margarethe's speech to expose a mother's position of superior power over a child. In this moment, the matriarch is teaching her daughter that as a child she lacks the power of experience and knowledge (Trites Disturbing 79). This maternal power is linguistically linked to the image of the wicked witch by Iris's thoughts. "She is a witch. One might as well say, She is a mother, thinks Iris; that about covers the same terrain, doesn't it?" (Maguire 296). Later she remembers that as they fled England, the villagers were calling Margarethe a witch (Maguire 346). Margarethe's power stems out of her position as mother but Maguire places a negative nuance to that authority by having Iris continually connect her mother with witches.

Margarethe and Iris struggle against each other not only in the stereotypical mother/daughter plot, but also as part of a *Kunstlerroman* novel. *Kunstlerroman* are a specific type of *Bildungsroman* novels in which the adolescent struggles as a developing artist. Throughout the text, Iris shows a gift for sketching and painting but her mother is unsupportive of this talent. Caspar argues with Margarethe about her lack of understanding for her daughter's talents. Margarethe states that such aspirations will only disappoint Iris. She has to train her daughter for her position in life that revolves around finding a husband, "help her

be happy at her chores at the hearth and table, well and garden, in the bed" (Maguire 53). Margarethe supports the archaic patriarchal belief that a woman's place is in marriage and doing domestic work, and not learning to paint in an art studio.

This image of a mother thwarting a daughter's development is found in Perrault's and in the Grimm Brothers' text. Maguire's novel continues the image of the maternal figure supporting the patriarchal values. Henrika attempted to restrain Clara's physical development and Margarethe attempts to reinforce female domestic responsibilities over individual development and she attempts to prevent Clara's social advancement. In this text, the ideologies at work still support the patriarch since the ultimate goal is a husband for advancement. This follows traditional fairy tale paradigms which subordinate the female desires to that of the marriage institution (Rowe 325).

The Mother Magic Negated

One fairy tale tradition that is not continued in the novel is that of maternal magic. In the Grimm Brothers' Ash Girl, she is assisted in her journey by a connection with her deceased mother. She plants a twig of a hazel bush on her mother's grave and tends to it. Through this nurturing of the tree over the mother's grave, Ash Girl remains in contact with her mother. As Marie-Louise Von Franz notes in her study *Problems of the Feminine in Fairytales* the "general motif is that after the death of the positive mother figure, something unnatural and numinous survives, i.e., the ghost of the mother, a fetish in which the mother's positive ghost is incorporated. In primitive countries ancestral ghosts are often incorporated in such fetishes and so carry on with their helpful function" (148). Perrault also refigures the positive maternal figure into the fairy godmother that assists Cinderella in changing her position in life. In both texts the positive mothering remains in tact despite death to help the daughter achieve her goals of marriage.

Maguire removes all magic and the implication of maternal assistance from beyond the grave in his narrative. Clara's transformation is very un-magical: the gown is purchased; the "glass slippers" are discarded white leather slippers; and her identity is hidden behind a veil and a name change. After the ball Margarethe questions where the young girl got her fine attire. Maguire uses stock Cinderella fairy tales answers as Clara responds, "I prayed to the spirit of my dead mother...and she came out of the linden tree in the form of a green finch, and dropped the parcel down... spirit of my dead mother told me collect a pumpkin from the garden, and with the magic that comes from beyond the grave, she changed it into a coach" (Maguire 349). This moment plays on dialogic discourse between the novel and the fairy tale texts. He is hinting that it is this tale that the daughters concoct that becomes the devices used in the classic fairy tales of Perrault and the Grimm Brothers. Most notable in this exchange is the removal from Maguire's narrative of the positive maternal magic that the deceased mother possessed in the previous versions. The author has exchanged maternal magic for logical explanations because the reader knows where Clara and Iris obtained the items.

The Patriarchal Ending

Perrault's fairy tale has an emphasis on the midnight curfew which is not focused on in the Grimm Brothers' version. Perrault's tale expresses a patriarchal ideology that mandates obedience accompanied with a threat: "if the heroine does not return to domesticity and docility at regular intervals she may lose her 'virtue' and no longer merit her expected one. Like the old conduct manuals for ladies, the moral of the tale warns against feminine excursions as well as ambition" (Kolbenschlag 74). This warning about sexual virtue is still conveyed today in many young adult novels. The "ideological message that sex is more to be feared than celebrated. As a result, adolescent literature is as often an ideological tool used to curb teenagers' libido" (Trites *Disturbing* 85). While many young adult novels convey the message that sexual feelings are normal they also tend to associate the act with guilt and/or devastating consequences such as pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and abortion.

Maguire conveys a similar ideology in his Cinderella text. Clara goes to the ball and by breaking social codes, such as being alone with a man, loses her virginity. The event is portrayed silently and behind closed doors; if there is any pleasure in the act for Clara it is not reported to the reader. She returns to

the house with obvious signs that she has been crying. She refers to her excursion out into the world as another instance of punishment. When Margarethe discovers that Clara has lost her virginity her disappointment is evident. "There are some walls that, once broken, can never be rebuilt...A glass slipper, once shattered, can't be restored. A mother once poisoned can't be revived. The chalice of virginity, once emptied, can't be refilled" (Maguire 350). Her sexual awakening is presented as something to be ashamed of and as the moment her childlike innocence has been lost. Maguire uses Ruth in the Epilogue to reiterate the warning of lost childhood. "What no one tells the young is to be careful of their childhoods" (Maguire 360). Clara's night at the ball frees her from her stepmother's grip but it also causes her to become pregnant and automatically the Prince's wife by default. Clara has exchanged the family institution for the marriage institution.

Maguire continues patriarchal ideologies with Iris's painting career. "In a number of traditional female *Kunstlerromane*[*Künstlerromane*], the heroine's self-identification as an artist is either balanced or negated by a love relationship" (Trites Waking 64). Iris marries Caspar and paints but does so at times under his name and not her own. Iris does become a painter's apprentice but it is for a male painter, and not the female painter she desired to learn from. Maguire has the female painter unavailable to teach because she herself has married and moved to Amsterdam. Maguire has Ruth claim that she cannot remember any of Iris's paintings since Iris's talent was not really about painting. Ruth says she just admired that she did them. It was the act of painting that is significant to Ruth yet by making Iris paint under her husband's identity and negating her talent, the signified act is diminished.

Unlike his predecessors, Maguire does not literally kill the stepmother in his narrative but he does silence her. The once dominant voice of Margarethe is silenced in the Epilogue by stating that after the ball she has a quiet marriage with her husband. Now that there are no children within the house her role of mother is unnecessary and her voice no longer required. Warner notes that the Grimm Brothers "literally could not bear a maternal presence to be equivocal, or dangerous, and preferred to banish her altogether. For them, the bad mother had to disappear in order for the ideal to survive and allow Mother to flourish as symbol of the eternal feminine, the motherland, and the family itself as the highest social desideratum" (212). Maguire will not banish the wicked mother but he will silence her in the end.

Perrault and the Grimm Brothers end their tales with Cinderella's marriage. Maguire alters this structure slightly by providing life after the marriage but it is brief and highly summarized. Clara's happiness is neither affirmed nor denied within the marriage confines and her version of motherhood is not provided. She is simply said to have had two children and the Prince dies; she fulfills her marriage obligation of providing the realm with heirs. "Clara outlived her magnificent beauty, as women must, and in another one of her fits of sudden anguish she took herself off to New Amsterdam, on the other side of the gray Atlantic" (Maguire 366). Her actions of travel seem to derive from unhappiness and result in her death. The woman who strives for too much, such as a new life in a foreign land, is rewarded with death. This seems reminiscent to Perrault and the Grimm Brothers who destroy the assertive female.

Maguire uses the novel to revise the classic Cinderella tale but in his attempts to recast the women and portray the other side of the tale, he inadvertently reaffirms many of the patriarchal ideologies found in the previous fairy tale versions. His portrayal of the maternal figures as ugly, wicked, selfish, using motherhood as an excuse to further their own desires, deceptive and murderous shows that the patriarchal ideologies are still at work in the modern era. Maguire's text retells the fairy tale in a dynamic way but fails to overturn many of the previous issues found in the Perrault and the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales. From the patriarchal structuring of the text to the ideologies exhibited within it, the author seems to reside in the long standing tradition of giving his audience a powerful but ultimately wicked and unacceptable maternal figure.

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