

The Original Wicked Witch: Empowering Wickedness, Motherhood, and Domesticity in Baba Yaga and Modern Witches

Sara Waldron

Introduction

The current fascination with witches as empowered, feminist, and liberated figures is not new in the discussion of witches and witchcraft. Late 20th and early 21st-century readers celebrate Hermione Granger (*Harry Potter* book series 1997-2007) as a feminist witch and there are entire feminist podcasts devoted to witches as models of resistance, such as *Witch, Please* (2020-2023), which takes a feminist approach to the *Harry Potter* book and film series. Recent film remakes further demonstrate the popularity of feminist sisterhoods of witches in works such as *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018), *The Craft* (1996), and *Hocus Pocus 2* (2022). I argue that these recent empowered witch characters are in keeping with depictions of witches that predate even the American and Western-European witch trials (~1450-1750) and can be traced back to stories of Baba Yaga which extend as far back as the 8th century. Though Baba Yaga originates in Slavic culture, which approached the witch trials differently than Western Europe and America, her representation as a witch character is

Redacted: Image removed for copyright reasons.

relevant today. Baba Yaga is directly mentioned or appears in Western literature and film, including *The Winternight Trilogy* (2019), *Hellboy* comics (1993), *John Wick* (2014), and *Masha and the Bear* (2009). Baba Yaga is an ambiguous

Figure 1: Baba Yaga floating in her mortar and pestle (Hellboy comics, Vol. 3: The Chained Coffin and Others 2004, 37.)

witch character who is at once good and evil; recent narratives and performances of feminist witches with a complex interiority (such as Elphaba in the musical *Wicked*) can also be better understood in conjunction with Baba Yaga

I use the term ‘ambiguity’ to describe a character who is open to interpretation, has more than one meaning, does not fit into a singular character category, and who represents two opposing categories (such as good and evil). Andreas Johns explains that Baba Yaga is a “ambiguous mother” and known to be an “archaic manifestation of the Great Mother Archetype who contains both good and bad” (Johns, 35). Not only is Baba Yaga a maternal figure, but she is also an *ambiguous* maternal figure because she has many different names, she is known in multiple Slavic cultures, and her name has different meanings across multiple different cultures and languages. Further, creative works such as “Baba Yaga, the Intersex Witch” by Kathleen Murphy reinforces Baba Yaga’s ambiguity by claiming that she is “a bundle of contradictions—associated with winter and spring, death and life, light and dark, male and female, the wild and the domestic, age and youth, human and animal, sky and earth” (Murphy, 210). In approaching Baba Yaga as ambiguous, I am examining (and accepting) her contradictions as a witch-character.

In addition to analyzing ambiguity, I also explore witches as figures of empowerment. I take the term ‘empowerment’ from Andrea O’Reilly’s study of empowered motherhood and feminist ambiguity. In O’Reilly’s terms, mothers who “[resisted] the dominant discourse [and]...stayed true to themselves, true to who they are” show female empowerment. Baba Yaga follows this definition in her maternal actions and roles, as she is willing to sacrifice her status as a “good mother” to stay true to her natural characteristics – however brutal they may be.

The positive and empowering characteristics that complicate Baba Yaga and prevent her from being entirely “evil” or “wicked” are prominent in older folk tales (even more so than figures in Western witch trials) and have begun to appear in the representation of modern witches. By analyzing Baba Yaga’s inability to completely adapt to the polarized viewpoint of women as “good” or “bad”—a witch stereotype that was exaggerated during the Western witch trials—this work configures Baba Yaga as the prototype for the modern ambiguous witch figure today. Some current ambiguous witches include Sabrina from *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, the sisters Gillian and Sally in *Practical Magic*, and characters like Hermione Granger from the *Harry Potter* franchise. Better understanding Baba Yaga’s ambiguity equips us with the critical tools to better understand our current representations of and fascination with complex feminist witch figures.

This thesis extends from and is inspired by academic scholarship on witches and witchcraft. I used the studies on witches and feminist theory by Silvia Federici to develop my understanding of the intersectionality of the two fields of study and to establish the basis of my arguments: Federici interconnects the histories of the development of witches and feminism. My work also benefits from the scholarship of Andreas Johns and Sibelan Forrester, both scholars who focus on Baba Yaga. Johns interprets the many versions and variants of Baba Yaga stories. Forrester gives a general overview of the recurrent themes and characteristics of Baba Yaga, such as Baba Yaga’s role as a figure of death. All of my Slavic case studies of Baba Yaga are from the collected Russian folk tales by Aleksandr Afanas’ev and Ivan Khudiakov because they have the most extensive documented collection of narratives of Baba Yaga (most of which have oral sources).

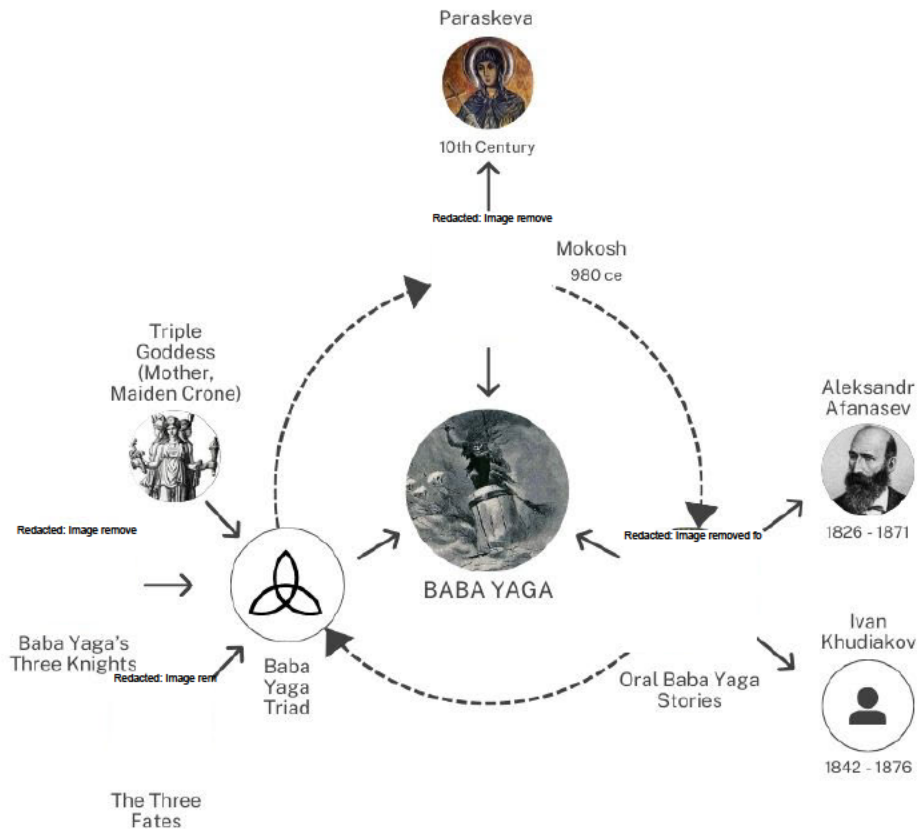


Figure 2. I created this graphic to depict the transmission and genealogy of Baba Yaga.

The graphic depicted above represents some of the most prominent influences which form the general understanding of Baba Yaga's character. The triad of Baba Yagas which are discussed in Chapter One are connected with the idea of the Triple Goddess (the Mother, the Maiden, and the Crone) as well as the Three Fates. Baba Yaga also has three riders that obey her will in some stories, which represent the morning, the afternoon, and the night. Further, scholars such as Sibelan Forrester believe there is a possibility that Baba Yaga stems from the mythos of the pagan goddess Mokosh, who is a Slavic representation of Mother Earth and fertility. Mokosh is

considered an equivalent of the Christian Saint Paraskeva. These influences to the general make-up of Baba Yaga are critical to understand when studying her as a character, as it provides understanding for the complexity of her representation.

Chapter One establishes my concept of the ambiguous witch figure. I analyze Baba Yaga through the lens of the feminist concepts of the “good” and “bad” woman by Adrienne Rich and the “good” and “bad” mother by Andrea O'Reilly. I argue ambiguity, or simultaneous “good” and “bad” qualities, is what defines Baba Yaga and distinguishes her from other witches (and witch stereotypes). Early perceptions of Baba Yaga offer a historical and literary starting point for examining what witches—and women—can be outside of patriarchal definitions of “good” and “bad” women. I examine the representation of good and wicked witches in two Baba Yaga fairy tales (“Baba Yaga and the Runt” and “Finist the Bright Falcon II” by Aleksandr Afanas’ev) as well as two modern witch stories (the film *The Wizard of Oz* and the later adaptation play *Wicked*). By beginning with the two Baba Yaga tales, I establish Baba Yaga as an ambiguous witch-mother character who breaks the boundaries of our understanding of wicked witches: Baba Yaga is not a fully wicked witch or a good witch—just as she is also not a good mother or a bad mother, a good or bad woman. Baba Yaga is sometimes good, bad, simultaneously good and bad, or neither good nor bad. I then extend my argument to modern witch stories to highlight the recent change in representations of woman from more polarized witches (such as the Wicked or Good witch in *the Wizard of Oz*) to a return to a more ambiguous representation of witch characters (such as Elphaba in the Broadway show *Wicked*). The Broadway musical *Wicked* (2003) adapts the Wizard of Oz from the perspective of the Wicked Witch to give her origin story as a young girl, named Elphaba, who stands up for the rights of the animals in Oz. As an iconic feminist, complex modern witch, Elphaba is in keeping with Baba Yaga’s characteristic

ambiguity. Both Baba Yaga and the contemporary, revisionist witch, then, challenge polarized understandings of good and bad women.

The second chapter builds on the concept of “good” and “bad” women that is discussed in Chapter One by examining the maternal role of witches and their relationship to the domestic sphere. In Chapter Two, I argue that Baba Yaga transforms the relationship between women and domestic labour: Baba Yaga teaches the maiden figure, and by extension the reader, how to change domestic labour from an act that oppresses women to an act of self-empowerment for women. To bolster this point, I focus on three different versions of the Cinderella tale: “Vasilisa the Beautiful” by Aleksandr Afanas’ev, “Cinderella: Or the Little Glass Slipper” by Charles Perrault, and the film *Cinderella* by Walt Disney Animation Studios. These three stories show a distinct difference in the approach to women and their relationship to domestic labour. The most fascinating difference that emerges in a comparison of these three stories is the role of Baba Yaga: although each story shares a similar plot pattern, the only time there is a disruption to this pattern is in “Vasilisa the Beautiful” where there is a witch character (Baba Yaga) present. In Perrault’s and Disney’s version, the tale concentrates on a woman escaping a life of servitude and the burden of domestic labour because of her external beauty, but in Afanas’ev’s version Vasilisa (the Cinderella character) masters domestic labour and it is her labour that helps her achieve her fate. All three tales tell similar versions of the Cinderella story as an ashes to riches narrative, but Baba Yaga changes the significance of labour and a woman’s relationship to prescribed domestic duties. Baba Yaga, in this way, radically transforms the burden of labour into an act of self-empowerment and agency.

Analyzing the many variants of the Baba Yaga narratives together with modern, Western witches reveals that Baba Yaga is the original feminist witch. Her wickedness is in fact what

makes her a modern icon of feminist resistance; and, in this way, she is the type of “bad” woman that Rich and O’Reilly call for in their feminist and motherhood studies.

Chapter One

“The Many Faces of ‘Good’ and ‘Wicked’:

Motherly Ambiguity in Baba Yaga Tales, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Wicked*”

Ideas of “good” and “bad” women leave no room for ambiguity. Andrea O’Reilly argues that women who don’t fit into the controlled mould of the “perfect woman”, a concept instilled by the patriarchy, are considered “bad” women. This same mindset goes for motherhood as well. As Adrienne Rich says, there is a patriarchal “institution” of motherhood “which aims to ensure that the potential—and all women—remain under male control” (Rich, 13). Yet, early and contemporary witches challenge this very polarization of good versus bad women. Early perceptions of witches, such as Baba Yaga, offer a historical and literary starting point for examining what witches—and women—could be outside of patriarchal definitions of “good” and “bad” women. Baba Yaga’s portrayal as a witch, a woman, and a mother is more ambiguous than would be expected from popular media representations of the wicked witch. In applying O’Reilly’s and Rich’s scholarship on mothers and women to witches, I argue that twentieth- and twenty-first century American representations of a good or wicked witch aligns with patriarchal propaganda made to control women; the patriarchal definition of witches as wicked was cemented by the early European witch trials as well as the later American witch trials. The strict moral confines women must fit themselves into to avoid the accusation of “wickedness” is related to the same expectations placed on women during the trials to avoid being accused of and killed for being a witch. By limiting women to these moral expectations, the complexity of ambiguous representations of women are lost. However, notions of the witch have begun to change in some modern, American depictions of witches: there is a shift towards the idea of

ambiguity. This change is most pronounced in the difference between *The Wizard of Oz* and *Wicked*, which are two performance-based media examples that differ greatly but are based on the same source text. While *The Wizard of Oz* uses witches to embody either goodness or wickedness, *Wicked* embraces the idea of ambiguity, and leaves space for the “Wicked Witch” to be a more complex woman.

Baba Yaga is defined by her ambiguity, which makes her stand out as a witch figure and defies the binary of “good” versus “wicked” witches. Unlike other monstrous characters in fairy tales and folklore, her role is in constant flux from text to text: she can just as easily play the role of villain, donor, trickster, or sage. In “Baba Yaga and the Kid”, she plays a wicked mother figure, whereas in “Finist the Bright Falcon II” she plays a benevolent maternal guide. Speaking to this multiplicity, she sometimes plays as many as three characters in one story. When there are multiple Baba Yagas in one story, they are usually distinguished by signalling “*a* Baba Yaga” and are related to each other. Most commonly, they function as benign or helpful characters instead of antagonistic villains despite their monstrous appearance. The multiplicity of Baba Yaga’s form (a single character and multiple characters) mirrors her shifting roles within tales (both threatening and helpful); in short, her character cannot be easily classed. While popular media adaptations such as the Hellboy comics depict her as a frightening villain, a closer look at her representation in Russian folklore reveals that her stigma is inconsistent with the source material. As scholar Andreas Johns states, “Baba Yaga’s particular combination of traits and functions makes her unique among witches and witch-like characters in world folklore” (Johns, 2). The negative classification of Baba Yaga as a wicked witch overlooks the defining quality of Baba Yaga in the Russian source material, which is the ambiguity of “good” and “wicked” witches. In most cases, as Sibelan Forrester says, “Baba Yaga is terrifying because of her relationship to

death” (xxxiv), but one can be “terrifying,” monstrous, helpful, and generous all at the same time. In twelve of the main Russian fairy tales about Baba Yaga from the nineteenth century, she represents a radical woman who is neither fully “good” or “bad” and fluctuates depending on the context. I argue that Baba Yaga’s ambiguity is not only her defining characteristic but also what makes her an empowered and radical figure.

Many scholars such as Andreas Johns and Sibelan Forrester discuss the ambiguity of Baba Yaga as well as the performativity of her mothering role. I aim to build on this scholarship on Baba Yaga by connecting these two aspects of Baba Yaga’s identity and discussing why they are supplements to each other. Scholars acknowledge that Baba Yaga is an “ambiguous mother,” but do not deeply connect the two aspects. She is “ambiguous” and she is a “mother,” but explanations for why she is an “ambiguous mother” in relation to motherhood studies and feminist approaches are few and far between. Scholars such as Johns and Forrester emphasize Baba Yaga’s role as a mother-like figure to characters who are not actually her children, but give short shrift to her role as a mother to her actual daughters. In overlooking her role as a mother, Johns does not see her radical role and instead describes Baba Yaga as “a more archaic mother representation” (38). Using motherhood studies as a lens, I argue that these two elements of her character (ambiguity and motherhood) are mutually constitutive and make her a radical mother figure who counters patriarchal definitions of motherhood.

First, I will turn to case studies to demonstrate Baba Yaga’s ambiguous roles, such as how she is a good witch in “Finist the Bright Falcon II” and a complex wicked witch in “Ivanushka.” I then will apply feminist motherhood studies to definitions of good and wicked witches. Using these theories, I will discuss the role of Baba Yaga as an ambiguous mother figure – in alignment with her ambiguous nature, she is simultaneously a “good” and a “bad” mother. After analyzing

the historical source material of Baba Yaga, I will turn to contemporary witches in order to show how the modern witch shares the same defining trait of Baba Yaga. Witches today are neither purely good or bad but instead fluctuate and are a mix. The 20th and 21st-century works *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Wicked* (2003) demonstrate this recent shift in the representation of modern, Western witches from a bifurcated character class (good versus wicked) to a complex, ambiguous role, more similar to Baba Yaga. The film version of *The Wizard of Oz* offers an ideal pop cultural example of the archetypal American witch; moreover, the film version of *The Wizard of Oz* is the source material for *Wicked*, thereby enabling a comparative analysis of the Wicked Witch in early twentieth century (1939) and the twenty-first century (2003). Later chapters further develop my analysis of performance-based sources – In Chapter Two I examine Disney’s animated *Cinderella* (1950) film in comparison to its Slavic sister text “Vasilisa the Beautiful,” which again features Baba Yaga in an important mothering role.

The Ambiguous Witch: Good and Wicked

In “Finist the Bright Falcon II” the three Baba Yaga characters are sisters who all play the “donor” tale role Andreas Johns outlines in his text *Baba Yaga: The Ambiguous Mother and Witch of the Russian Folktale*. Johns defines the donor as someone “who is helpful and gives the hero or heroine a magic agent” (Johns, 3). In this story, a young woman (or maiden) falls in love with a man named Finist who can shapeshift into a falcon. The young woman’s older sisters trick Finist into believing that she has betrayed and attempted to harm him (by leaving knives on his window sill) so he leaves to marry a princess instead of the maiden. The maiden searches for him in order to set things right and runs into the three different Baba Yagas along her journey. There is no threat at all to the fair maiden who enters their houses. Each Baba Yaga presents the fair

maiden with a piece of advice and an expensive gift to offer to the princess to allow the maiden to see Finist. The Baba Yaga figures give these gifts with no conditional expectation of reciprocity – the maiden is free to go with the instructions “There now—go with God to see my...sister!” (Afanas’ev, 23) after a night’s rest. Unlike the easily tricked Baba Yaga in other tales, these three Baba Yaga sisters are wise, omniscient beings. They know what is going on across the land where Finist lives even though they are miles away. Their advice gives insight on the vain interests of the princess, revealing a deep understanding of her greed which the maiden is able to then manipulate for her benefit.

Alternatively, “Ivanushka” presents Baba Yaga as a distinct threat to human and animal life. In this fable, there is a single Baba Yaga figure who is a cannibalistic villain, which follows her most common characterization in popular media. The story begins when Baba Yaga steals away the young boy Ivanushka from his mother to presumably eat (this is never directly confirmed in the text). The mother sends multiple maids after the boy and Baba Yaga, and the maids run into two women separately along their journey. The two women offer help on the condition that the maids assist them with either spinning or weaving wool. When the maids refuse, the women send the maids off with no help. The young maids continue on till they find Baba Yaga’s hut. When the maids attempt to rescue Ivanushka, the women refuse to provide any sanctuary; as a result, Baba Yaga hunts the maids down and “[tears them] up into pieces” (Khudiakov, 47). The only time that a maid is successful is when the last maid in the sequence agrees to help both of the women with their spinning and weaving. When this last maid flees Baba Yaga with Ivanushka in tow, the women offer her safety (instead of turning her away like they did to the previous two unhelpful maids), and the third maid and Ivanushka are able to escape Baba Yaga’s wrath. “Ivanushka” has the same structure of “Finist the Bright Falcon II”:

multiple women offer help to maidens in need. The difference in “Ivanushka” is that the two women are not Baba Yagas, and the first two maids reject the women’s help because they don’t want to be slowed down in their search by helping with chores. “Ivanushka,” then, features a punishing Baba Yaga who kills the first two maids who attempt to save Ivanushka. The lesson in this tale is about reciprocity. Where the women could have been helpful like the Baba Yaga characters in “Finist the Bright Falcon II”, the women’s choice to not help is what allows the maids to be killed by Baba Yaga.

These two stories seem to be responding to each other and perform an interesting role reversal: in “Finist the Bright Falcon II”, a typical threat (Baba Yaga) becomes a saviour, and in “Ivanushka,” the expected saviours (the two women) become unhelpful bystanders. The Baba Yagas’ help in the first tale is unconditional, while the two women in the second tale offer help only with a set of conditions. The Baba Yagas’ role in “Finist the Bright Falcon II” is the most important one to note. Based on the typical role Baba Yaga is known for, one would expect the Baba Yagas who appear in “Finist” to act more like the two women in “Ivanushka”. These women are far fickle and more brutal than the Baba Yagas, which is surprising when comparing the two tales. While “Ivanushka” shows the brutality of its particular Baba Yaga, all of the characters are more brutal than the Baba Yagas in “Finist the Bright Falcon II”: The mother who sends her servants away one by one to die at the hands of Baba Yaga, the two women who stand by and let Baba Yaga kill the maids, and Baba Yaga herself. The two women only become parallels to the Baba Yagas in “Finist” when the final maid helps them with their spinning and weaving. They then gift the maid with items to help her in her rescue mission (such as butter to bribe Baba Yaga’s cat), tell her where to find Ivanushka, and provide shelter to her when she is fleeing the witch. When comparing the two texts, one sees that Baba Yaga is not always the

worst, or the only, villain in Russian folklore. Her role is more than a villain: she can be helpful and hurting (and sometimes simultaneously both good and bad).

Theoretical Contexts: Feminist and Motherhood Studies

Feminist motherhood studies challenges the binary of good and bad women. I use Adrienne Rich's concept of "bad" mothers (who are also good feminists) and Andrea O'Reilly's concept of empowered motherhood (which challenges patriarchal structures) as a lens for understanding Baba Yaga's ambiguity as a source of her empowerment. I use the terms "women" and "woman" in an inclusive way that acknowledges anyone who self-identifies as a woman. Baba Yaga herself is an intersexed figure: she can reproduce on her own without a man (which I discuss in more detail below). Motherhood studies analyzes the relationship between women and the role of the "mother." It takes a critical stance on what motherhood means as a societal institution and considers what mothering means to women specifically outside the influence of men.

Empowered motherhood is defined not by being a "good" mother, but by mothering in a way that suits one's specific lifestyles and beliefs – regardless of patriarchal ideals. Adrienne Rich argues that the role of "mothering" should not be an all-encompassing feature of women's personalities once they become a mother. Rich believes that "the devaluation of women in other spheres and the pressures on women to validate themselves in maternity deserve[s] exploration" (Rich, ix). Her focus specifically is on the patriarchal structures that define modern motherhood, and she explores the possibilities of motherhood outside the patriarchy. A woman's importance should not be based on their ability to ascribe to patriarchal ideals, and "the living, politicised woman

claims to be a person whether she is attached to a family or not, whether she is attached to a man or not, whether she is a mother or not” (Rich, xvi).

Though her children often come to bad ends, Baba Yaga’s role shows an empowered woman who is not confined by the role of “mother”. She is as ambiguous in her role as a mother as she is in all other aspects: she both is a mother and is not a mother. She does not look after her children with the same care as a mother would be expected to give, so she does not “mother” her daughters, and she loses the role of being a “mother” when all of her daughters perish from her actions. Unlike most mothers, Baba Yaga is completely separate from the institution of patriarchy because of her hermitic lifestyle as well as her ability to reproduce alone. Her experience outside of the patriarchy as a mother is then different. As Rich states,

“If we were not simply bound ‘by nature’ to the ‘passive,’ ‘docile,’ ‘irrational’ aspects of human personality, if it was in fact institutions and culture that determined our ‘nature,’ the victimisation and abnegation demanded of ‘motherhood’ could be seen as an inversion of mother-power – of matriarchy” (Rich, 85)

Baba Yaga is not bound by an institution or culture in her structure of motherhood, which enables her to embody her “mother power” and parent from a matriarchal stance. Baba Yaga’s role as a mother does not impact her actions in texts: put another way, her treatment of children does not change if she is a mother herself. For example, her interests in eating children in both “Baba Yaga and the Kid” and “Ivanushka” are similarly motivated though she is a mother in one and is not mentioned as being a mother in the other. Her feelings towards children are not softened or changed when she is a mother; she is motivated to eat children regardless of her motherhood status.

The representations of Baba Yaga as either a “good” or “wicked” witch is rooted in the same ideological categories as “good” and “bad” mothers – good mothers follow the general grain of society while bad mothers make their own path outside of societal norms. Andrea O’Reilly’s concept of empowered motherhood is that mothers should raise their children outside the patriarchal structures of “motherhood” and work to be “bad” mothers – her belief is that mothers who don’t follow the societal ideas of mothering become a better, more empowered parent. This perspective stems from the belief that “in patriarchal culture, women who mother in the institution of motherhood are regarded as ‘good’ mothers, while women who mother outside or against the institution of motherhood are viewed as ‘bad’ mothers” (O’Reilly, 2). She characterizes the choice to be a “bad” mother as an act of resistance to the patriarchal institution of motherhood. O’Reilly defines this resistance as “the effort of opposed groups to challenge and act against aspects of the dominant discourse” (O’Reilly, 46).

In theorizing the definitions of good and bad mothers, O’Reilly and Rich are also distinguishing the institution of “motherhood” from the act of “mothering.” Motherhood, as an *institution*, encapsulates the patriarchal ideals and control of the role of mothers and what a mother should look like, while “mothering” refers to *acts* of child rearing that are empowering and defined by women instead of men (O’Reilly, 2). Where Rich argues that there should be a separation between “women” and “mothers”, O’Reilly’s argument flips the meaning of the word “bad” on its head. She explains the distinctions of the two general myths surrounding motherhood: the “Good Mother Myth” and the “Bad Mother Myth”. The Good Mother Myth is the traditional and patriarchal “set [of] standards that no human being could ever match, such as that mothers are always, naturally, one hundred percent nurturant” (O’Reilly, 277). On the other hand, “The Bad Mother Myths allow us to take mothers’ neutral or bad behavior—because

mothers are human, so [they] do some bad things—or even mothers’ good behavior and transform it into further proof that mothers are bad” (O’Reilly, 277). Ultimately, O’Reilly’s belief is that these myths need to be re-evaluated, and that by being a bad mother in the context of the patriarchal, male perspective, women become good feminist mothers and rear their children in a mother-driven, aware perspective. Rich’s argument that women should be allowed to identify themselves outside their experience of motherhood is enriched by this idea. When women are able to characterize themselves as a person separate from their children – and thus becoming “bad” mothers in the patriarchal framework – they become better, more fulfilled women as a whole, which then empowers them to raise their children in a self-actualizing way for both mother and child. By being intentional in their approach to raising their children, women dismantle the institution of motherhood and reclaim control and the experience of motherhood. I argue that we can apply motherhood studies and its theory of good versus bad mothers to the study of witches. A wicked witch, in this feminist context, challenges larger societal rules and power structures. A “wicked” witch, as a result, emerges as a “good” empowered witch or “good” empowered mother figure in O’Reilly’s model of empowered motherhood. With the inversion of good and bad, both terms “good mother/witch” and “bad mother/witch” become ambiguous signifiers. While this ambiguity of good and bad mothers is a relatively recent feminist argument (circa Rich in 1975), I argue that the original folkloric tales of Baba Yaga (from the 8th to 19th centuries) gives an early example of an original ambiguous, empowered witch and mother figure. Using motherhood studies and feminist criticism as a lens offers a renewed understanding of the significance of Baba Yaga and gives us a language for examining her complications of good and wicked witches. Baba Yaga is at times a good witch (by societal

definitions), but even when she is a wicked witch she is empowered and stands up to patriarchal power figures.

Baba Yaga: The Ambiguous Maternal Figure

Baba Yaga's relationship with all children, including her own, is life threatening. Many stories revolve around Baba Yaga threatening to eat children. For example, the maidens in "Ivanushka" all attempt to save Ivanushka from being killed and eaten. However, as explained by folklorist Jack Zipes, Baba Yaga "is her own woman, a parthenogenetic [sic] mother, and she decides on a case-by-case basis whether she will help or kill the people who come to her hut that rotates on chicken legs" (Zipes, VIII). Baba Yaga is ambiguous in this way. Baba Yaga's status as a parthenogenetic mother solidifies her role as an empowered, ambiguous mother figure: Zipes asserts that Baba Yaga does not need a man to conceive, and I argue that this demonstrates how she does not need to conform with the patriarchy to achieve any benefit. Baba Yaga is at once a "good" mother (she protects her daughters from men and is a donor figure to other young girls) and a "bad" mother (when she unintentionally leads her own children to their death). Baba Yaga does not only invert the concepts of good and bad women, as Rich theorizes, she is also already simultaneously a good and bad mother figure. Her life, in all ways, can be fulfilled without a man present.

There is always the looming prospect that she could decide to kill and eat any of the protagonists who come across her. In most cases, "Baba Yaga is essentially a villain for boy protagonists, which is not true for tales with girl heroines" (Johns, 110). In this sense, Baba Yaga is only a mothering figure to women characters. Her villainy is attached to her relationship with men: she attempts (and often fails in regards to her own daughters) to be a protective figure for women characters and she is in opposition to male characters who often attempt to enforce a

patriarchal superiority in their interactions with the witch. When Baba Yaga is a direct mother – when she has a direct line of progeny – she plays the role of a “wicked” mother. In “Baba Yaga and the Runt,” Baba Yaga promises her daughters in marriage to a group of brothers who are uninvited guests at her castle. On the night of her daughters’ weddings, Baba Yaga instructs her servants to “cut the wild heads off these uninvited guests!” (Afanas’ev, 18). The brothers had been warned about her intentions and switched clothing with their new wives, causing the heads of her daughters to accidentally be cut off instead. Baba Yaga’s relationship with her daughters in “Baba Yaga and the Runt” shows the threat that she not only causes to other children, but her own. This tale shows Baba Yaga sacrificing her role as a mother to maintain selfhood. The death of her children represents Baba Yaga’s unwillingness to disregard her innate characteristics to protect her role as a mother. Though Baba Yaga does not kill her daughters intentionally or with her own hands, her risky actions put them in harm’s way. One can tell that though she put them at risk, Baba Yaga cares for her daughters, as she is “horribly angry” when she realizes that her plan went wrong and “all around the wall her daughters’ heads were stuck on the spikes” (Afanas’ev, 18). Her actions, though they lead to an unfortunate fate, place Baba Yaga in opposition to Rich’s concept of institutionalized motherhood – “Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal ‘instinct’ rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self” (Rich, 42). Baba Yaga subverts patriarchal, institutionalized motherhood by being a bad mother and a wicked witch – her willingness to put her daughters at risk in “Baba Yaga and the Runt” by marrying them off to strangers and then attempting to have their husbands murdered shows that she is willing to threaten her role as a “mother” to further her own means. Motherhood is not her defining role or sacred to her but is instead an aspect in a wide array of characteristics. Though she does have an

adverse reaction to her daughters' accidental deaths, she was willing to put them in a threatening situation in the first place. Baba Yaga's refusal to prioritize her role as mother (by not protecting her daughters) preserves her own selfhood – she cannot be the person, or witch, that she is, while also being the selfless mother that the patriarchy demands.

Not only is Baba Yaga able to reproduce and thrive without a man, but whenever a man is present, she suffers severe losses and the man is a source of her maternal disempowerment. In many cases, such as in “Baba Yaga and the Kid”, male characters directly take away positive aspects of her life. In the tale, Baba Yaga attempts to kidnap and eat a young boy, but is continuously thwarted in her attempts to do so. When she is finally able to apprehend and bring him to her house, she leaves him with one of her daughters to cook and make for dinner. The young boy tricks Baba Yaga's daughter into getting into the pan and cooks her instead, and Baba Yaga returns home to find her daughter dead and the young boy alive. This series of events repeats again as she re-attempts to eat him, and another daughter dies in the same way. In asking her daughter to cook the boy a second time, Baba Yaga is aware of the possible threat to her second daughter but repeats the same mistake again. Though her intent is malicious towards the boy, his retribution is equally malicious and destroys her entire family. In both cases where Baba Yaga is in conflict with a male character, like in “Baba Yaga and the Kid” and “Baba Yaga and the Runt,” her daughters are the collateral damage of each incident.

Polarizing “Good” and “Bad” Witches/Mothers in *The Wizard of Oz* and *Wicked*

Redacted: Image removed for copyright reasons.

Redacted: Image removed for copyright reasons.

Figure 3: The Wicked Witch of the West in a black robe and hat with a green face, elongated chin, and large nose (The Wizard of Oz). Courtesy of "Who killed my sister?", the Wicked Witch appears in Munchkin Land" Flickr, Dec 6, 2008.

Figure 4: Glinda the Good Witch in a pink, sparkly ballgown with a large crown (The Wizard of Oz). Courtesy of "Glinda the Good Witch played by Billie Burke (1884-1970)" Flickr, Dec 6, 2006.

The film *The Wizard of Oz* demonstrates the stereotypes of “good” and “bad” women that Rich and O’Reilly resist. Glinda is the “good witch”: she is amicable, maternal, accepted by society, and her pink dress is in line with patriarchal feminine standards. The film implies that she is powerful by being one of the four witches of Oz, but her role is limited to patriarchal images of the maternal figure. Though she is not literally a mother, she presents as the motherly protector of both Dorothy and the residents of Oz; both Dorothy and the citizens of Oz embody the symbolic child figure. The innocence Dorothy and the citizens of Oz have, as well as the dependence they place on Glinda for protection, guidance, and support positions them into a role similar to a child who depends on their mother. Unlike Baba Yaga, however, Glinda is reminiscent of the patriarchal ideal of what a “Mother” should be; as O’Reilly phrases it, “the mainstream image of a mother became...the ‘True Woman’ who was virtuous, gentle, all loving, devoted, and whose *interests were expected to focus on creating the best refuge for her family*” (emphasis mine, O’Reilly, 43). Glinda perfectly fits into this description. Glinda’s only role in

the film is to provide guidance and help to Dorothy when she is in need. The main motivator for all of Glinda's actions are not based on her personal wants or interests, but for the overall good of Oz and the safety of the people who live there. She wants Dorothy to succeed because it will protect Oz from the Wicked Witch and – similar to O'Reilly's quote – will make Oz a safe place for the people she plays a maternal role for (the citizens of Oz).

The “Wicked Witch of the West” is opposite to Glinda – she wears dark, unappealing clothing and her features are stereotypically witch-like (green, large nose¹). She is solitary and antisocial. Under the patriarchal authority and control of the Wizard, Glinda fits into the Wizard's societal schematic; the Wicked Witch of the West, however, does not conform to the patriarchal figurehead (the Wizard) and is, as a result, rejected by society. The Wicked Witch's role as Glinda's opposite serves to emphasize and glorify Glinda's goodness in comparison to the Wicked Witch's wickedness. In the same sense, the Wicked Witch's disinterest in playing a motherly role to the citizens of Oz makes her the “Bad Mother” to Glinda's “Good Mother.” We can see this by comparing the Wicked Witch to O'Reilly's description of the tradition of the patriarchal motherhood: “the idealized mother selflessly adopts [her family's] wants, needs, and happiness as her own...The perfect mother always has a connection with her children, never has an ill feeling towards them, and is completely responsible for caring for and nurturing all of her family members” (O'Reilly, 33). The Wicked Witch has none of these traits. In fact, her actions towards the citizens of Oz, who in this context play the role of “children”, are the opposite of this set of parameters: the Wicked Witch is completely disconnected from Oz's society, as she lives

¹ See “The Saturnine History of Jews and Witches” by Yvonne Owens for an analysis of the connection between antisemitism and witches
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/preternature.3.1.0056>

away in a castle with only her guards and flying monkeys for company, fosters a deep antagonistic feeling towards all others, and does not care about the quality of life for anyone but herself. She plays a role similar to the typical villain portrayal of Baba Yaga – an ugly, evil, solitary woman who is powerful and destructive to all who come across her.

Winnie Holzman's *Wicked*—a prequel to *The Wizard of Oz* from the perspective of the Wicked Witch of the West (Elphaba) and Glinda – emphasizes the young Wicked Witch of the West's role as a radical figure who refutes patriarchal demands. This version of the Wicked Witch is closer to the more empowered portrayals of Baba Yaga. We see the high stakes of Elphaba's (the Wicked Witch's) radical stance more clearly near the end of *Wicked* when the Wizard (who is also her father) and Madame Morrible (the Head Mistress) villainize Elphaba because she is not willing to go against her moral beliefs to work with the Wizard. Elphaba realizes that the prejudicial subjugation of talking animals is both akin to racism and led by the Wizard. Instead of choosing to sacrifice her morals for power, she chooses to prioritize her belief that all citizens of Oz deserve rights and leaves to aid the resistance. Her alienation from society is not because of her "wickedness," but is because of her resistance to conform to patriarchal power figures. Like Baba Yaga, Elphaba rejects patriarchal conditioning in favour of her own personal beliefs because she chooses to sacrifice the possibility of becoming a matriarchal figure in Oz (like Glinda is) and instead follows her own empowered path. Elphaba and Baba Yaga both, in this way, prioritize their selfhood over being a "mother" figure.

Emphasizing the ambiguity of witches helps to wear down the patriarchal polarized view of "good" and "bad" women. In this way, the ambiguous witch takes a controversial characterization of women and revolutionizes it to make space for more complex representation of women figures. To emphasise this point, my analysis of not only ambiguous witches, but

ambiguous *mother*-witches in both Eastern Europe (Baba Yaga) and America (Glinda the Good Witch and The Wicked Witch of the West) highlights how even the most structured patriarchal aspects of womanhood – such as the role of the mother – can be complicated and made empowering. The following chapter extends my analysis of the ambiguity of “good” and “wicked” witches by considering how mother-witch figures challenge the polarization of good versus bad mothers.

Chapter Two

Re-Envisioning Domestic Labour as Agency in “Vasilisa the Beautiful” and *Cinderella*

Fairy Tales

We are all familiar with the popular image of a witch standing beside her eerie house with a broom or other domestic objects, such as a cauldron. Building on my first chapter’s argument that Baba Yaga (and by extension an archetypal witch) is at once a bad and good woman, this chapter focuses on Baba Yaga’s relationship to the domestic space and argues that Baba Yaga transforms domestic labour from an act that must be endured by women to an act that can be mastered by women.

In Afanas’ev’s fairy tale “Vasilisa the Beautiful”, Vasilisa is a young, Cinderella-like character who has been blessed by her dying mother with a protective, magical doll. Her father remarries to an evil woman with two daughters who are jealous of Vasilisa’s beauty. For years they conspire against Vasilisa and try to dampen her beauty by giving her many chores but are thwarted by Vasilisa’s use of her magic doll to help her complete the tasks without strain. When her father leaves on a work trip, Vasilisa’s stepmother and stepsisters move the family to a hut near the woods and attempt to get rid of Vasilisa by sending her to Baba Yaga’s hut for fire to warm and light their house. Instead of eating Vasilisa as anticipated, Baba Yaga challenges her to complete many domestic duties in

Redacted: Image removed for copyright reasons.

Figure 5 "Geese and Swans" by Dobrin Evgeny, sourced from "Baba Yaga: The Wild Witch of the East" by Forrester et al. Image depicts Baba Yaga outside of her chicken-footed hut, staring menacingly down at a fearful child on the ground surrounded by domestic items

exchange for her life and the fire Vasilisa seeks. Vasilisa uses her magical doll to complete these tasks and is sent home and granted the fire by Baba Yaga when she discovers that Vasilisa is blessed. Vasilisa returns home with a flaming skull to find that her family has not been able to light a fire since she had been sent to Baba Yaga. The skull magically burns her family to death and Vasilisa goes to live with an Old Woman until her father returns. While there, she spins, weaves, and sews a cloth into clothing for the Tsar, he falls in love with her, and they marry. I argue that Baba Yaga's "bad" domestic acts and outsourcing of domestic labour teaches Vasilisa (and by extension readers) how to be good at domestic labour and manage her stepmother's unrealistic expectations of domestic work. Put another way, Baba Yaga is again simultaneously performing "bad" and "good" acts: her bad domestic labour teaches Vasilisa how to be good at domestic chores; both women survive by outsourcing labour: Baba Yaga gets Vasilisa to do her work, and Vasilisa gets help from the magical doll.

With Baba Yaga's help, Vasilisa has a very different relationship to domestic labour than other Cinderella figures in the French and American versions. All three Cinderella-type characters have a sustained relationship to domestic labour, but domestic labour is a source of oppression for Perrault and Disney's Cinderellas, whereas domestic labour is a tool of agency for Afanas'ev's Vasilisa. Baba Yaga enables Vasilisa to use domestic labour to liberate herself from her circumstances; the fairy godmothers in the other two versions, by contrast, use magic to help Cinderella and domestic labour has no correlation to Cinderella's improvement but is quite the opposite: domestic labour is a sign of Cinderella's oppression (Perrault, Disney). One major difference is that Vasilisa does not do the work at first but is still rewarded for it; then when she finally does the work she has avoided, Vasilisa becomes a tsarina. Perrault and Disney's Cinderellas do the work their whole lives and it doesn't impact their rise to royalty. In Perrault

and Disney's versions, domestic labour is a constant source of oppression, whereas Baba Yaga finds ways to change and liberate herself and Vasilisa from the work.

In this chapter, I begin by examining the historical contexts for the relationship between witches and domestic settings; I will then discuss the correlation between shirking domestic duties and bad maternal figures. Afanas'ev's "Vasilisa the Beautiful" invites an analysis of how domestic labour impacts the roles of "bad" or "good" women because it features an evil stepmother and Baba Yaga taking on the roles of teachers, mentors, and replacement maternal figures. In demonstrating how Baba Yaga guides Vasilisa to not only survive but master domestic labour, I will also analyze Baba Yaga's multiplicity and ambiguous role in relationship to Vasilisa's stepmother, Vasilisa herself, and the Old Woman who appears at the end of the text. Finally, I turn to other Cinderella stories—Disney's motion picture *Cinderella* (American) and Perrault's fairy tale "Cinderella: Or the Little Glass Slipper" (French)—and will discuss how the lack of an ambiguous witch figure in these two versions of the fairy tale results in a strict delineation between good and evil.

For this chapter, I develop my argument using Sylvia Federici's work *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* as a foundation for understanding the correlation between domestic labour and witches from a historical viewpoint. Much scholarship has been written on Western European and American witches; I aim to contribute to this rich field by expanding it to also include and consider the Eastern European witch Baba Yaga. While Federici focuses on England and Western Europe, I apply her scholarship on witches and labour to Baba Yaga. I will further this understanding through a feminist lens by using texts by both Barbara Becker-Cantarino and Stephanie Spoto to further clarify the feministic aspect of witches and their relationship to the domestic sphere. Finally, most scholarship on Baba Yaga is from a historical perspective about

the narrative variants, from prominent scholars in this field of study such as Andreas Johns.

Rhiannon Thorne stands out by closely examining Baba Yaga as a radical outsider figure. I will add to Thorne's scholarship as well as the historicization of Baba Yaga by examining Baba Yaga as a feminist witch figure than enables Vasilisa to thrive within patriarchal standards of the good woman while simultaneously transforming a woman's relationship to domestic labour.

The Relationship Between Witches and the Household

Witches subvert the common everyday uses of domestic items for power and to exert agency.

Though in many cases morally at odds, witches and domesticity are connected in many distinct ways. Symbolically, most objects that are representative of witches and witchcraft are associated with the household: because "women were considered more often within the household, and often...domestic items of the household could be transformed into malicious tools for demonic magic" (Spoto, 57). Items like the broom, the cauldron, herbs, and pets often come to mind when thinking of witches—all distinctly domestic. Though the inclusion of pets in this list of features might come as a surprise, a woman having an animal companion during the Western European witch trials (1450-1750) was seen as suspicious, due "to the theory that the Devil provided his acolytes with daily helpers in the form of domestic pets, serving to carry out the witches' crimes" (Federici, 19). The domestic settings and labour are key components of witchcraft because these are loci of female power: domestic settings and labour are the two areas where women were socially allowed to have power. It is no coincidence that witches are located in the domestic realm as a figure of female power unfettered. Domestic labour and houses are where women had the most control, and since "witches practice their art within the realm of the domestic household," they represent the societal fear and threat of "feminine power and authority" (Spoto,

62). In short, the archetype of a “witch” is deeply correlated with the household. The witch, then, teaches young women how to survive and manage domestic labour. Baba Yaga offers important lessons on female survival within a domestic sphere.

The interconnection of the domestic sphere to the witch became cemented during the changing economic conditions in Europe around the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In 1580-1620, as Federici notes, women who were widowed, unmarried, or older (the same categories of women who were often labeled as witches) experienced escalated insecurity around maintaining a household. She mentions that the upsurge in land enclosures – changes in land agreements which resulted in denying these women their previous customary rights to family-run land – as well as rising prices due to an increase of Spanish silver entering England were largely at fault for this economic insecurity. These women “were most affected by [economic] developments, for the combination of rising prices and the loss of customary rights left them with nothing to live on, especially if they were widows or had no children capable of or willing to help them” (Federici, 16). Their freedoms to look after themselves and have financial control over their lives dwindled, forcing them to become overdependent on neighbours and community members. These economic circumstances resulted in intense pressure on women in difficult positions to resort to more unpleasant characteristics that connected them to the characterization of witches:

They threatened, cast reproachful looks, and cursed those who refused them help; some made nuisances of themselves by sudden, uninvited appearances on their better-off neighbors’ doorsteps or made uncalled for attempts to have themselves accepted by giving small gifts to children. (Federici, 17)

Impositions upon their neighbours and communities resulted in these women becoming a social burden and created skepticism around their character as a whole. The trope of witches shirking domestic expectations, such as Baba Yaga's use of Vasilisa to do chores, seems to stem from the economic context of women's early experiences in the household. By asking for assistance in tasks that were seen as their sole responsibility, these women cemented the stereotype of witches as characters that do not fit into societal standards. As Federici contends, studies and stereotypes of witches often overlook the economic conditions that produced the stereotypes of the crafty witch who gets someone else to do their domestic labour. Instead of being associated with difficult economic circumstances, women's actions (asking for help, borrowing from neighbours) were attributed to their difficult character instead. Thus, "a witch was identified through her visible rejection of a society's moral code and her actions against commonly held standards for women" (Spoto, 58). Baba Yaga, I argue, complicates this role of the witch who rejects societal standards by enabling a young woman (Vasilisa) to succeed within the dominant domestic expectations for women.

Baba Yaga's relationship with her household is prominent throughout all folkloric depictions of her character – her exceptional relationship with chores and domestic spheres is not limited to just "Vasilisa the Beautiful". Baba Yaga transforms every day domestic items into more useful tools and equipment for her usage. As scholar Maya Lozinsky notes,

"[Baba Yaga]...rejects some aspects of femininity placed upon her...in the majority of her portrayals, she reinterprets traditionally feminine objects in a new way. Her stove, or perch', becomes a resting place where it is traditionally a location of female labor." (51)

Baba Yaga's non-traditional use of domestic objects liberates her from domestic duties which usually tie a woman to one location. Instead, Baba Yaga converts many of these entrapping domestic duties such as sweeping and food preparation into methods of transportation. Her use of the mortar and pestle is a key example of this. While traditionally "the mortar and pestle were crucial parts of a woman's tool set, used to prepare herbs for cooking or medicine, or break grain for porridge or baking" (Forrester, xxix), Baba Yaga sits in the mortar and uses the pestle to jump or push herself from place to place. She uses a broom – another domestic item – to sweep away her tracks behind her, concealing her path. Not only are domestic tools liberated from their traditional uses, but her house itself is also in a constant state of transformation: it is a threatening entity and domain of Baba Yaga that immediately announces how it has been transformed by its ability to move on the chicken feet that extend from its foundation. The hut also changes in size to fit Baba Yaga – in this way, Baba Yaga does not have to conform to the domestic household, the domestic household has to conform to her.

Vasilisa and Baba Yaga: Mother Mentors and Protectors

In Afanas'ev's "Vasilisa the Beautiful," domesticity and witchcraft intermingle. Baba Yaga plays the role of the donor character (or gift-giver) within this fairy tale, though she is implied to be the villain early in the story. As Thorne suggests, "Baba Yaga may be more of an intentional helper, perhaps with poor people skills or a sadistic side, than an adversary in the tale" (Thorne, 54). At first, Baba Yaga seems to be just like Vasilisa's evil stepmother and stepsisters: she demands that Vasilisa "clean up the yard, sweep out the house, make dinner, get the laundry ready, and go into the granary, take a quarter measure of wheat and clean the wild peas out of it. And be sure to do everything" with the threat that "if you don't, I'll eat you!" (Afanas'ev, 177).

However, the most striking difference between Vasilisa's evil stepmother and Baba Yaga is how they treat Vasilisa after she has completed the chores. While there is no reward for Vasilisa completing tasks for her family, except more chores and resentment, Baba Yaga gives Vasilisa many obvious and not-so-obvious rewards for her labour. While Vasilisa's stepmother assigns her chores as a punishment, Baba Yaga does not. Baba Yaga's act of assigning chores can be read as "ceremonial—the witch has disembodied hands to do her labor for her, exactly as she commands them. Vasilisa...is a potential companion for conversation, instruction, and protection" (Thorne, 56). Vasilisa's work in Baba Yaga's hut is not out of need for help, but as a challenge for the girl to surmount. It also could be read as a protective act: since Baba Yaga makes Vasilisa stay with her as a servant, Vasilisa cannot return to her abusive home. When Vasilisa first encounters the witch and explains that her family sent her to Baba Yaga's hut for fire, Baba Yaga states "I know them" (Afanas'ev, 176). This statement, though brief, is significant to the events of the rest of the story. It implies that Baba Yaga is aware of the abuse Vasilisa endures while at her family home, which impacts the intent behind Baba Yaga's gift to Vasilisa. In light of this knowledge, Baba Yaga's act of giving Vasilisa the magic skull that burns her abusive family to death becomes a protective act. Why would Baba Yaga incite vengeance upon Vasilisa's stepmother and stepsisters unless it was protective? Vasilisa's magical doll said that Baba Yaga will not hurt Vasilisa when it is with her, but that doesn't mean that Baba Yaga must be inclined to protect her. Thus, I argue that though Vasilisa has some form of protection from the doll, Vasilisa also receives protection from Baba Yaga.

In this case, Baba Yaga becomes the second replacement mother figure for Vasilisa. As Thorne implies, though Baba Yaga's actions mirror those of her stepmother—both demand unfeasible domestic chores—Baba Yaga distinguishes herself from the wicked stepmother by

protecting and rewarding Vasilisa for her work. While the stepmother has “evil” (171) intent behind her domestic demands, Baba Yaga has protective intent. In this way Baba Yaga usurps the stepmother as a maternal figure (though still a harsh one). Not only does Baba Yaga punish Vasilisa’s abusive family at the end of the story, but she also curses them while Vasilisa is staying in her hut. Baba Yaga’s curse is implied when Vasilisa returns home to her family to find that “ever since she had left there’d been no flame in the house” (Afanas’ev, 180). Thus, Baba Yaga is enacting her punishment upon the family behind the scenes for almost the entire story, not just at its conclusion.

Baba Yaga as Mirror for Vasilisa the Good Woman

Baba Yaga also mirrors Vasilisa herself, which demonstrates her ambiguity as she simultaneously mirrors a wicked stepmother and a sweet damsel in distress in the same story. The story almost immediately emphasizes Baba Yaga’s impact on Vasilisa’s character and domestic strategies. Though Vasilisa is defined by her goodness and innocent beauty, her similarities to Baba Yaga and witches in general is brought to light while she is staying in the witch’s hut. Vasilisa’s relationship to the magical, protective doll her mother gives her is the source of this witchiness. Before Vasilisa even arrives at Baba Yaga’s home, she is depicted as using the powers of the doll to subvert the impossible amount of domestic work she is given by her family. The doll is a protective, godly measure at this early point in the text, as Vasilisa’s mother explained to her that the doll is a mother’s blessing. However, the action of using this magical doll changes in significance once Vasilisa arrives at the witch’s hut. Her use of the doll as a domestic servant calls back to the previously mentioned correlation between witches, the Devil, and “daily helpers” used to aid said witches. Though it is established that the doll is a

helper blessed by God, her use of the doll is still distinctly similar to witches' use of daily helpers granted by the Devil. The section of the story depicting Vasilisa using the doll to pass Baba Yaga's challenges highlights how similar Vasilisa and Baba Yaga are in the story. Prior to this moment, readers have only seen Vasilisa shirk her domestic labour duties – and it is with the doll. Here, Baba Yaga mirrors Vasilisa's actions thus far. Instead of doing the labour that is expected of her, Baba Yaga delegates the work to another. Baba Yaga feeds Vasilisa and assigns her chores, just like Vasilisa feeds the doll and the doll takes on Vasilisa's chores. This idea is reinforced by the repetitive story structure common in Russian folklore: right after Baba Yaga feeds Vasilisa and assigns her the challenge of completing various types of housework, Vasilisa turns to her doll and says “Here, dolly, have a bite to eat and listen to my grief! Baba Yaga has given me hard work, and she says she'll eat me if I don't finish everything. Help me!” (Afanas'ev, 177). Based on mindsets around women's duties mentioned earlier in this chapter, the avoidance of “basic” domestic tasks that would be a woman's responsibility is deeply witch-like. Vasilisa does not conform to patriarchal standards of a proper heroine at the time, which Federici defines as “sexless, obedient, submissive, [and] resigned to subordination to the male world” (Federici, 25). Though Vasilisa avoids doing domestic work herself for most of her life (like Baba Yaga), she is rewarded when she finally does complete the work herself, with minimal aid from her doll. When the Tsar insists that the weaver of his fine cloth be the one to turn it into clothing for him, Vasilisa states, “I knew this work would not pass by my hands” and then “shut herself up in her room and got to work. She sewed without resting, and soon a dozen shirts were ready” (Afanas'ev, 181). This final section of the fairy tale is brief – though the majority of the story is a drawn-out description of the many ways in which Vasilisa avoids housework, when she comes to finally do the work herself both her speed and the story's syntax

are short and to the point. The brevity of the description of her housework (spinning, weaving, and sewing the Tsar's shirts) reinforces the speed in which she completes it. She takes no breaks and has twelve shirts finished in the span of one night. She is able to economize the cloth she had woven for the task and uses it for all twelve shirts, with no waste. Her sudden and brief aptitude for domestic chores implies that she is transcending from her childish, witch-like state of shirking domestic duties to being a "proper" woman within society's standards. Vasilisa, who was similar to Baba Yaga in the early section of the story, distances herself from her youth, freedom, and witchiness by being a "proper woman" and mastering her domestic duties at the end of the story; her domestic capabilities—at first the ability to oversee the doll's work and then her own skill in weaving—is rewarded by becoming the tsarina.

Baba Yaga as the Evil Fairy Godmother?

Finally, Baba Yaga not only mirrors the evil stepmother (mother) and Vasilisa (maiden), but she also foreshadows the role of the Old Woman (crone) who appears at the end of the text. Since it is common in Baba Yaga's characteristics to be a doubling character, as I discussed in the previous chapter, one should assume that the Old Woman is also another version of Baba Yaga. Thorne argues that upon the Old Woman's appearance in the story, she "becomes a shadow or doubling of Baba Yaga, which simultaneously explains her flatness and adds depth to reading the character" (Thorne, 50). There are many reasons why this could be. Firstly, Baba Yaga plays a mirror version of other important figures in the text: Vasilisa and her evil stepmother. It is in keeping with the story's form to have a doubling of Baba Yaga as well. Secondly, this doubling re-enforces Baba Yaga's multiplicity and ambiguousness in the narrative. These three doublings (Baba Yaga and evil stepmother, Baba Yaga and Vasilisa, Baba Yaga and Old Woman) complete

commonly repeated triads: the triad of three Baba Yagas in Russian folklore and the triad of the Mother, the Maiden, and the Crone. Baba Yaga “is a perpetually liminal character—simultaneously a fairy godmother and a devastating hag” (Thorne, 49). In this sense, Afanas’ev’s Baba Yaga is a “devastating hag” as well as a “fairy godmother” in the tale. The Old Woman is the “fairy godmother” side of Baba Yaga. Baba Yaga represents the natural, wild version of women, sexuality, discovery, and freedom; while the Old Woman represents the domestic, mature, controlled woman.

Furthermore, the figure of Baba Yaga is interconnected with “old women, spinning, and fate” (Thorne, 53) and, as Thorne further expresses, her “personal affects orbit around the production of textiles, suggesting a dominion over fate” (Thorne, 49), which is the focus of the final section of “Vasilisa the Beautiful.” The Old Woman helps Vasilisa achieve her fate of gaining the tsar’s attention and becoming tsarina through spinning, weaving, and sewing – all domestic tasks. Thorne suggests that “Vasilisa the Beautiful” fails to “explain why Vasilisa, craving domestic work, is suddenly such a fine weaver and a seamstress” and that “she does not complete these tasks either in her familial home or in Baba Yaga’s abode” (57). I disagree with Thorne’s argument here because Vasilisa’s task which causes her to be forced to visit Baba Yaga’s hut in the first place is spinning: “the stepmother gave all three girls evening tasks. She made one of them tat lace, the second one knit stockings, and Vasilisa spin” (Afanas’ev, 172). Since her stepsisters argue that their tasks use tools that reflect light enough for them to see when the last of their fire (and light for the house) burns out in the evening, and Vasilisa’s spindle does not, she is sent to get light for the house instead of them. Vasilisa’s connection to the spinning wheel, then, is fated twofold: it begins as her doom (the reason she is sent to Baba Yaga’s hut) and ends as her salvation (the method in which she catches the Tsar’s attention). The middle

section of the story, where Baba Yaga challenges Vasilisa, enables Vasilisa to achieve her transformation from a maiden doomed by domestic duty (in the stepmother's house) to a tsarina who masters domestic acts and achieves high social standing.

Other Cinderella Stories

In the French (1697) and American (1950) versions of *Cinderella*, the ambiguous witch figure is removed, resulting in good and evil being strictly represented as polarized categories through the roles of the good fairy godmother and the evil stepmother, respectively. Baba Yaga, then, stands out for her ambiguity (and multiplicity as I showed in the previous chapter) and complicates this dynamic by representing both good *and* evil in “Vasilisa the Beautiful”.

In Disney's animated film *Cinderella*, all of the characters' roles are distinct in their categorization: Cinderella and the Fairy Godmother are good; her stepmother and stepsisters are evil. Having a distinct dichotomy between good and evil limits the complexity of the story – no viewer is left wondering about the film's messaging. While this clear separation between “good” and “evil” simplifies the story by omitting moralistic ambiguity, it limits the scope of what is being communicated to viewers: to be “good” you must always be beautiful, docile, and kind no matter your circumstance, and to be “evil” you must always be ugly, fierce, and unwelcoming. Baba Yaga in “Vasilisa the Beautiful” complicates this messaging. If she were to be categorized into the Disney framework of this story, Baba Yaga would fall into the latter category of the “evil” character because she is the threatening cannibalistic witch in the woods. However her actions, though fierce, threatening, and unkind, result in success and happiness for Vasilisa. It is evil of Baba Yaga to have killed Vasilisa's whole family, but it is also good of her to have done so as they were abusive and controlling.

The Perrault version of this story deals with more complex stepsisters who are not entirely evil, just mean spirited, and receive a form of redemption at the end of the story: “They threw themselves at [Cinderella’s] feet to beg her to forgive them for all the bad treatment she had received from them” and when Cinderella graciously forgives them, she also “arranged for both of them to be married, on the same day, to great lords” (Perrault, 78). Though the stepsisters show remorse for their unkindness, their change in character is only due to the fact that Cinderella has risen above them in status. There is no implication that their attitude would have changed towards Cinderella if she had not married the prince. Though there is a small amount of change in the role of the “evil” stepsisters in Perrault’s version, I argue that it is their attitude towards Cinderella and not their character or morals that change. The stepsisters’ remorse at the end of Perrault’s “Cinderella” is motivated by self-interest. Their attitude changes because Cinderella gains a position of power and it is advantageous for them to ask for forgiveness. They only show kindness to Cinderella when she is useful to them. Baba Yaga’s ambiguity, by contrast, is shown in how she treats characters differently depending on their virtues and kindness (or lack thereof) in “Vasilisa the Beautiful”. She is not just the all-around evil character who “ate people as if they were chickens” (Afanas’ev, 172) as she is described to be, but chooses when to be merciful and when to be merciless depending on her understanding of the world around her. For instance, Baba Yaga chooses to be lenient to Vasilisa after Vasilisa has proven herself to be considerate and dutiful, and Baba Yaga is murderous towards Vasilisa’s evil family when they threaten Vasilisa’s life.

Another key difference between the American and French versions of the “Cinderella” fairy tale to “Vasilisa the Beautiful” is the correlation between goodness and domestic labour. Cinderella in both the American and French versions of the fairy tale is beautiful *despite* having

worked hard labour their whole lives, signifying that their beauty comes from within – Afanas'ev's Vasilisa is beautiful because she hasn't had to do work. Her beauty is not a reward for inner goodness. As mentioned earlier, the Disney and Perrault versions of Cinderella focus on the importance of representing the virtuousness of characters through looking beautiful and the evilness of villains through being depicted as ugly. Cinderella is beautiful despite all her laborious work because she is intrinsically good. In "Vasilisa the Beautiful", Vasilisa is "bad" for a good part of the story, but is still beautiful (and doesn't need hard labour to justify her beauty or her goodness). Baba Yaga is "good" in many ways, though she is not described to be beautiful, and is portrayed to be horrible as well. The rise to power both Cinderellas experience is not based off of the Prince's respect for their skills at domestic labour, but is because they impress him with their looks and charm, not talent. However, Vasilisa's transformative experience regarding domestic duties is what immediately calls the tsar to insist "to see the master who worked on the shirts for him, and to reward her from his own royal hands" (Afanas'ev, 182). Domestic labour is thus used as a vehicle for improving one's circumstances in "Vasilisa the Beautiful", providing readers with a more radicalized idea of domestic labour and the power of women (and witches) who know how to use it to their advantage.

By viewing domestic duties – chores and expectations that have been tied to womanhood for centuries – from a viewpoint of liberation and autonomy, one disrupts the idea of confinement and control that is associated with domestic acts. Through a witch-centric, feminist viewpoint, domestic labour becomes an aspect of womanhood that can liberate and provide the opportunity of hypergamy. By using Baba Yaga as a guide, women can draw from the well of knowledge "bad" women (like witches) use to subvert domestic tasks and manipulate them to work for their own benefit.

Conclusion

By specifically analyzing the concept of ambiguity and its relationship to witchcraft through the lens of the character Baba Yaga, this thesis has aimed to highlight the complexity of witch figures outside of the common polarized depiction of “good” and “bad”. Baba Yaga embodies the complexity and fluidity of representation that has historically not been seen in witch characters until recently. Her long history within the Slavic tradition and her new emergence into Western media representation continues to emphasize Baba Yaga’s importance as a cultural representation of not just witches, but female characters in general. She is wicked, treacherous, ugly, helpful, rewarding, and protective interchangeably – Baba Yaga cannot be easily explained. Though modern representations lean into the fearsome aspect of her character depiction, Baba Yaga cannot simply be classified as a “villain” because she is not *just* a villain. Baba Yaga’s complexity re-enforces the importance of the need for strong female characters to be uncategorizable from the simple distinctions of “kind” or “wicked”. As modern representations of witches stray away from the influence of the witch trials as well as the mindset and suspicion they created surrounding powerful women, there has been a resurgence of feminist interest in re-infusing witch characters with empowering features. Women no longer need to be perfect or good to be respected, their power – like witches – can stem from somewhere more wicked without making them intrinsically evil.

Works Cited

- Afanas'ev, Alekandr. "Baba Yaga and the Kid" *Baba Yaga: The Wild Witch of the East in Russian Fairy Tales*, edited by Forrester, Sibelan E. S., et al, University Press of Mississippi, 2013. pp. 9 – 13.
- Afanas'ev, Alekandr. "Baba Yaga and the Runt" *Baba Yaga: The Wild Witch of the East in Russian Fairy Tales*, edited by Forrester, Sibelan E. S., et al, University Press of Mississippi, 2013. pp. 14 – 18.
- Afanas'ev, Alekandr. "Finist the Bright Falcon II" *Baba Yaga: The Wild Witch of the East in Russian Fairy Tales*, edited by Forrester, Sibelan E. S., et al, University Press of Mississippi, 2013. pp. 19 – 27.
- Afanas'ev, Aleksandr. "Vasilisa the Beautiful" *Baba Yaga: The Wild Witch of the East in Russian Fairy Tales*, edited by Forrester, Sibelan E. S., et al, University Press of Mississippi, 2013. pp. 170 – 182.
- Arden, Katherine. *The Winter of the Witch*. The Winternight Trilogy. New York: Del Rey Books, 2017.
- Becker-Cantarino, Barbara. "'Feminist Consciousness' and 'Wicked Witches': Recent Studies on Women in Early Modern Europe." *Signs*, edited by Susan Dwyer Amussen et al., vol. 20, no. 1, 1994, pp. 152–75.
- Cinderella*. Directed by Clyde Geronimi, Hamilton Luske, and Wilfred Jackson, Walt Disney Pictures, 1950. Disney+, <https://www.disneyplus.com/video/7976c2a3-abd9-4f56-ae2f-7151b5db4b22>.
- Evgeny, Dobrin. "Geese and Swans". *Baba Yaga: The Wild Witch of the East*, by Sibelan Forrester University Press of Mississippi Jackson, 2013, 130.

Federici, Silvia. *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*. PM Press, 2018.

Forrester, Sibelan E. S., et al., editors. *Baba Yaga: The Wild Witch of the East in Russian Fairy Tales*. University Press of Mississippi Jackson, 2013.

“Glinda the Good Witch played by Billie Burke (1884-1970)” Flickr, Dec 6, 2006,

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/tom-margie/3087777606/in/photolist-5GMF8D-5GWU5-5GREGW-5GRVJ6-5GWU4s-5GWU5A>. Nov 23, 2023.

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone. Directed by Christopher Columbus, Warner Bros Pictures, 2001.

Hocus Pocus 2. Directed by Anne Fletcher, Walt Disney Pictures, 2022.

John Wick. Directed by Chad Stahelski, 87Eleven Entertainment, 2014.

Johns, Andreas. *Baba Yaga: The Ambiguous Mother and Witch of the Russian Folktale*. Peter Lang, 2004.

Khudiakov, Ivan. “Ivanushka” *Baba Yaga: The Wild Witch of the East in Russian Fairy Tales*, edited by Forrester, Sibelan E. S., et al, University Press of Mississippi, 2013. pp. 45 – 49.

Kosman, Marcelle, and Hannah McGregor, hosts. “Appendix: Witch Hunts with Niki Fitzgerald.” *Witch Please*, 21 March 2023, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/appendix-witch-hunts-with-niki-fitzgerald/id979059619?i=1000605102244>.

Lozinsky, Maya. “Baba Yaga: An Ecofeminist Analysis of the Witch of the Woods.” *Scripps Senior Theses*, Jan. 2023, https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/2101.

Magnolia, Mike. *Hellboy, Vol. 3: The Chained Coffin and Others*. Darkhorse Comics. 2004.

- Murphey, Kathleen. "Baba Yaga, the Intersex Witch." *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, vol. 10, no. 2, Summer 2018, pp. 210-214, 217.
- Oleg Kuzovkov, creator. *Masha and the Bear*. Animaccord Animation Studio, 2009-present.
- O'Reilly, Andrea. *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering*. Canadian Scholars' Press, 2004.
- Owens, Yvonne. "The Saturnine History of Jews and Witches." *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2014, pp. 56–84. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.5325/preternature.3.1.0056>.
- Perrault, Charles. "Cinderella: Or The Little Glass Slipper." pp. 74-79.
- Rich, Adrienne Cecile. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Norton, 1995.
- Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, creator. *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*. Warner Bros. Television, 2018-2020.
- Schwartz, Stephen. *Wicked: a New Musical: Original Broadway Cast Recording*. New York, NY: Decca Broadway, 2003.
- Spoto, Stephanie Irene. "Jacobean Witchcraft and Feminine Power." *Pacific Coast Philology*, vol. 45, 2010, pp. 53–70.
- The Craft*. Directed by Andrew Fleming, Columbia Pictures, 1996.
- Thorne, Rhiannon. "The Time between Vasilisa and Baba Yaga: Queer Enchantment in Aleksandr Afanas'ev's 'Vasilisa the Beautiful.'" *The Lion and the Unicorn (Brooklyn)*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2023, pp. 46-. *stfx.novanet.ca*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.2023.a903110>.
- Vidor, King, et al. *The Wizard of Oz*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 1939.

'Who killed my sister?', the Wicked Witch appears in Munchkin Land" Flickr, Dec 6, 2008,

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/tom-margie/3086940999/in/photolist-5GPB8n-5GQGYk-5GWdVh-5GRd5y-5GMo1F-5GWmVE-5GS4N2-5GMnWX-5GWdRw-5GMF9K-5GWdUA-5GS4P6-5GRVJ6-5GMFkD-5>