

Hag-ridden

A loathly, wrinckled hag, ill fauoured, old.

– Edmund Spenser *Faerie Queene* (1590)

The hag is so invisible her best means of attack comes at night. Night-terrors take the breath as you sleep, sucking out the air from the chest until you sit bolt-right gasping for breath. You have been hag-ridden. Where the poltergeist might be a mischievous young woman, the hag is a powerful hidden horror. She is the basis for many terrifying moments – toiling, boiling, troubling and bubbling beneath the surface of the subconscious. She knows your innermost desire.



Screenshot from Disney's *Snow White* (1938)

The Evil Queen in *Snow White* stares into the mirror as she transforms herself into an older woman (we know this because she is replete with boils on her nose, white hair, wrinkles, crooked fingers). The Queen longs for the promise of youth, which she equates to *being the fairest one of all*. By taking the form of the hag she seeks to achieve one objective: death. The mirror cracks, the aged self is revealed. In the Brothers Grimm's tale, the Evil Queen first laces Snow White into a corset too tightly before selling her a poisoned comb, presuming that the girl will buy into her own mortality. When these tactics fail to work, she dresses as a farmer's wife, and sells the fateful apple. Snow White's altruism, buying the wares of an older woman in need, could have ultimately led to her downfall. The goods are traded as a mode of empathy that demonstrates Snow White's goodness but is also might act as a form of social care, sharing wealth amongst the commune. To persuade Snow White to bite the apple, not only does the Evil Queen transform to perform an excessive and

accelerated ageing process but she also slips down the feudal system from monarch to pedlar. The disguise of age is not enough; she must also perform poverty.

'In England, the witches were usually old women on public assistance or women who survived by going from house to house begging for bits of food or a pot of wine or milk [...] Their poverty stands out in the confessions'

– Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (1998: 171)

Silvia Federici's examination of the witch suggests that older women occupied a fearful corner of the mind precisely because she stood outside of emerging economic structures. Who could be more invisible than the impoverished older woman? And yet, the witch-hunts of 16th century England claimed at least 4,000 victims, many of whom were poor peasant women. The witch, the hag, the crone; their mere presence pointed to a problem of class struggle by which largely communal communities were beginning to devolve into individual, capitalist enterprises (Federici: 1998). By the late 19th century, one older Scottish woman reported on a change. Now, instead of the older woman being the hag, she had become hag-ridden: 'When the females of a house had all the work, and were "stinted" to do a given amount of work at the spinning wheel before they got any supper, and so much before they went to bed, they were very liable to take the "Mare" owing to anxiety connected with their "stints"'. Supper depended on spinning, a job that would be taken away in the next phase of industrial capitalism. Once more, the economic independence of the older woman was destroyed and this time her anxiety led to the 'mare' (the hidden hag) directing her power back onto the very figure she was supposed to represent. The witch strikes fear in the heart, the hag dampens the chest. To trade with the witch is to bargain with the devil. (To trade with the capitalist is not?). The older woman is conditioned by hyper-invisibility and thus stands outside of capitalist structures to challenge them more vigorously than any other figure in the cultural imagination. For this, she must be burned.



Old woman with Irish spinning wheel posing for a nostalgia photograph c. 1900
Library of Congress collection.

Imagine instead the older women's knowledge is examined in the light, passed down, made visible and exchanged without remuneration. Leonora Carrington's 'Kron Flower' (1987) shows three older women, dressed in black, examining a red flower in full bloom with cat-like familiars dotted around them. Playing with the 'crone', these women have all the visual signifiers of old age (wrinkles, white hair, hunched backs) but are non-threatening. They are curious witnesses; one of the older women holds a shopping bag loosely on her arm, taking out her eye to get a better look at the flower. Subconscious figures line the painting, seeming like echoes of the past or shadows of the future. These are the three fates but instead of the thread of life, ready to cut with a cackle, they attract life and coax it from the parched ground. The crone, the hag, the witch is reclaimed, presiding over new life in the light; not hidden away in the dark.



Leonora Carrington, *Kron Flower* (1987), tempera on panel.

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