

Women and the Abuse of Power

Emerald Interdisciplinary Connexions

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Women and the Abuse of Power: Interdisciplinary Perspectives

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Preface

I have been thinking about evil women and their power for a long time. Most children, unless unlucky enough to have a truly unfortunate upbringing, encounter evil women for the first time in fairy tales. This is where women with power lurk, in the underlying malevolence of the usurped queen wreaking havoc in a kingdom or the wicked stepmother intent on destroying a child for no reason other than she is loved or beautiful, or both. Even as a child I never fell under the spell (sic) of fairy tales, the behaviour of the characters always seemed odd to the prosaic, practical little soul that I was. Five-year-olds can believe in magic; they can even believe in monsters. What did seem farfetched is the passive, docile characters onto whom this magical monstrosity was directed. Feminist despair of the damsel in distress motif is well-documented. For example, Leiberman (1972) points to representation of women and girls in fairy tales providing a limited sex role concept in terms of attaining power. The 'heroine' only sets out on an adventure because of the manipulations of those around her. Turkel (2002) goes further and says that the necessary happy ending of the fairy tales, particularly in those told to children from the nineteenth century onwards, reinforces traditional gender stereotypes, as the heroine is simply a passive recipient of the whim of other characters. It is, however, in one of the other tropes that we may find something more stirring of interest and worthy of inspection – the evil woman whose machinations almost lead to the downfall of Snow White, Cinderella, or Sleeping Beauty, or any other lacklustre ingénue (Porter, 2013). An evil woman is one who steps outside the required and expected behaviour of the elder female role. Motherly and protective she is not, but what is she instead? The stories gathered by Perrault or the Grimm brothers give us almost no motivation for the evil women they feature. It is in later retellings of the stories that we encounter underlying reasons why our ladies are evil. As I watched the newer versions of the stories unfold, depicted by Hollywood giants such as Charlize Theron, Meryl Streep, or Angelina Jolie, I began to understand why these women had been ignored in stories for children in a world where acceptable female behaviour was confined to the home. The evil woman here has, without doubt, power, and she enjoys it. The original folk tales from which they are drawn are not sanitized and are representative of a traditional gendered world but contain the full horror of pre-industrialized life where distrust of strangers was a form of community security and violent crimes were daily occurrences. Here then, the fantastical

represents real people, and the evil woman was a genuine character, the one who held the power, usually ill begotten, which she gleefully abused.

I have been fortunate to have encountered women who held power without abusing it. Aside from key relationships with men, such as my kind father and my wonderful husband (and, of course, the dreadful men I will not give space to here), I have been encouraged by women. The primary school teachers who showed women can be relied on to foster a love of learning, and the secondary school music teacher who found, inside a shy, awkward nerd, a confident musician. Then, later, female managers who picked us up after we encountered browbeating male bosses. To these women I will be eternally grateful. But this book is not about them. It is about the women whose lives intersect with power that they either exploit or of which they fall foul. It is about the conversations that we had about them.

Progressive Connexions, directed by Dr Rob Fisher, is a network of interdisciplinary projects in which scholars can pursue ideas without needing to submit to business models that may stifle creativity. This network is more nurturing of ideas and associations than might normally be encountered in a modern academia that needs to fulfil demands beyond the scholarly. Meeting experts outside one's own discipline sometimes sparks a different direction in theory and research or collaborations across themes that might not otherwise happen. The chapters in this book were developed from papers presented and conversations held at *Evil Women: Women and Evil, the first global conference* held in Vienna, December 2018, hosted by Progressive Connexions. Recognizing an emergent theme of women, power, and its abuse, several conference presentations have been extended and consolidated in the light of the research undertaken, and the discussions then and later. Here, psychologists and criminologists talking with literary specialists, professional writers, and historians all learned something about each other's viewpoint. These considerations were not judgemental but placed women who were seen as evil due to some behaviour, whether that was criminal, magical, or supernatural, in the heart of our discussion. Here, we realized that many of 'our' evil women were in the grip of power, either their own or others, which was wielded with the intent to abuse it. This transcended any disciplinary focus each of us had, and a selection of papers were developed to appear here. An interdisciplinary focus incorporates political and social commentary with the historic and fictional accounts of female behaviour and its analysis with respect to power and its abuse. This book happened because we were all thinking about evil and women and sharing how we viewed this set of symbols. In addition, an observation of themes related to the abuse of power and women's relation to it grew from this. This resulting book provides a contextual view on how power and women who wield it or are affected by it are topics that transcend examination from one set of theories and evidence alone. Each section is followed by a commentary exploring how the set of chapters relates to a specific theme, how that theme is exported from different disciplines and viewpoints and to the overall theme of the book. Sections explore a set of concepts related to how women seize

and abuse power and how power in the hands of other people inflicts abuse on women. Key issues raised by the papers are discussed in the conclusion to each section with a pointer towards further exploration and research. The final concluding commentary will bring these issues together into a focussed examination of women and power and abuse. Through the eyes of interdisciplinary scholars, the fate of women who abuse or are abused by power is therefore explored in depth.

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Author Biographies

Kristin L. Bone is a *USA Today* bestselling author of dark fantasy and paranormal romance. Her works include the *Black Rose Guard* dark fantasy series and the *Flames of Kalleen* paranormal romance series. Kristin has a master's degree in modern literary cultures and is working towards her PhD in creative writing. She wrote her first short story at the age of 15 and grew up with an equally great love of both classical literature and speculative fiction. She has spent the last few years as a bit of a world traveller, living in California, London, and most recently, Belfast. When not immersed in words of her own creation or those she is studying, you'll find her travelling to mythical sites that have inspired storytellers for generations.

Laura Button is a community worker in Melbourne, Australia, and has just completed a Master of Human Rights Law at the University of Melbourne. Laura works alongside women who have been criminalized, have experienced violence, and with women who have enacted harm against others.

Miranda Corcoran is a Lecturer in twenty-first-century literature at University College Cork. Her research interests include Cold-War literature, genre fiction, popular fiction, sci-fi, horror and the gothic. She has published articles on paranoia, literature, and Cold-War popular culture and contributed a book chapter on transnational paranoia to the recently published book *Atlantic Crossings: Archaeology, Literature, and Spatial Culture*. She has also published articles on horror and science fiction in *The New Ray Bradbury Review* and *Supernatural Studies*. She is a host on the *New Books in Literary Studies* podcast and a regular contributor to the popular online magazine *Diabolique*.

Helen Gavin (Editor) teaches criminal psychology and advanced research methods at undergraduate and postgraduate level at the University of Huddersfield, UK, where she holds the post of Principal Lecturer and Subject Lead. She researches and writes on topics such as deviant sexual expression, female violence, homicide, and sexualized and gendered homicide. Previous books include *Understanding Research Methods and Statistics in Psychology* (2008, Sage), *Criminological and Forensic Psychology* (2014, 2019, 2022, Sage), and the Interdisciplinary Press 2010 text *Sex, Drugs and Rock & Roll: Psychological, Legal and Cultural Examinations of Sex and Sexuality* which was co-edited with Jaquelyn Bent. In order to find relief from such bleak themes, she indulges a fascination with fairy, folk, and supernatural tales. However, she has inevitably discovered this world has its dark side, and people often regret looking over her shoulder to see what she is reading.

Gina Gwenffrewi is a trans scholar from a Welsh-speaking community in Holywell, Wales. As a doctoral researcher in Trans Studies at the University of Edinburgh, she studies representations of trans women in the Americas through the prism of neoliberal society, with a focus on some of the literary and cinematic texts that are excluded from the mainstream. Gina is also passionate about trans theatre and blogs on trans-centred and trans-produced shows at the annual Edinburgh Festival.

Cynthia Jones is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah. Her main research interests lie in the representation of the monstrous in literature and media, especially within nineteenth century France and Quebec. She is also interested in Folklore, Fairy tales, and Legends and the role they play in creating personal, cultural, and national identities. Other research interests include the representation of evil women in nineteenth century French Literature, French Decadent Literature, and the Occult.

Morag Claire Kennedy is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology who leads the MA Criminology course at Nottingham Trent University. She researches and writes on topics such as intimate partner abuse/homicide, digital coercive control, and feminism. She likes to relax and unwind to new shows on Netflix and is a huge foodie.

Almudena Nido works at Isabel I University (Spain), teaching in the Department of Modern Languages and Social Sciences. After completing her PhD thesis at University of Oviedo, she has published articles about the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* and the interactions of power and resistance. Her current research interest lies in investigating the depictions and interpretations of the female monster in *Beowulf*.

Theresa Porter is a Forensic Psychologist working for the State of Connecticut, USA. She specializes in violence by women. She has published and lectured on Foetal Abduction, Infanticide, Child Neglect and Abuse, Child Homicide by Stepmothers, Elder Abuse, Hyper-Femininity, and Sexual Abuse by Women. She has collaborated with Helen Gavin on several publications; for example, their article on infanticide was selected for inclusion in the fourth edition of *Current Perspectives in Forensic Psychology*, and they co-authored the book *Female Aggression* (2015, Sage). They are currently writing articles on Serial Infanticide, whilst Theresa continues her day job of providing psychological treatment to individuals with severe and persisting mental illness.