

## Subversion of the 'Evil Matriarch' in Ken Liu's Paper Menagerie

Cinderella's stepmother, the Evil Queen from Snow White, Mother Gothel from Rapunzel, Other Mother from Coraline, Lucille Bluth from Arrested Development, all characters deserving of the 'Evil Matriarch' title. One could even claim that Hera, queen of the Greek Pantheon, would fall under this trope for the way she treats her step-children. The idea of a cruel mother, undesired either by her children, her whole family, or even the whole world, is hardly something new. The evil matriarch is a relatively common trope in both modern and older writings, but for those who have lived under a rock and never read a story in their lives, here's a brief breakdown of the trope.

The mother is often an influential person to the main character of the story, and while most heroes are raised by their virtuous mothers, there were others that were born trying to escape the wicked hand of a mom. She often isn't in line with the political and religious leanings of the time, such as with Cinderella's step mother (in the original story, Cinderella is told by her mother to remain true to her faith, and all will work out), and is controlling of her children's lives. She destroys the self-esteem of her children to make herself look better, and often doesn't approve of her children's choices (as seen with Lucille Bluth and Mother Gothel). The mother may even be outright abusive or murderous, in the case of the Evil Queen and Other Mother. The trope has even saturated modern culture and real life, with multiple people having tales of their 'evil' mother-in-laws.

Ken Liu's short story, The Paper Menagerie, published in The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction in 2011, supplies its own evil matriarch figure in the form of Jack's Mother-although, there's something quite different about her in comparison to her trope counterparts. The thing is, she's actually a nice lady. She's only evil in the eyes of her son, Jack, for how her

being Chinese has driven a cultural wedge between him and his peers, leading to him being discriminated against. Ken Liu subverts the 'Evil Matriarch' trope through the tale of Jack and his mother.

Jack's mom is a loving woman, and the story begins with one of Jack's first memories, which involves his father leaving him to cry because they couldn't find a way to get him to stop crying, but his mom staying, and continuing to try helping. She folds him an origami tiger made of Christmas wrapping paper that comes to life, stopping his tears, and at that time he says "This was her magic" (Liu). She wasn't always a villainous figure in Jack's life- that would only come once others started to discriminate against him.

He is his mother's son- he, too, can blow life into these animals, and so he plays endlessly with these paper toys until one of his neighborhood friends, a boy named Mark, calls his toys trash. Jack is embarrassed, and upset by Mark's destruction of Laohu, Jack's tiger, until eventually, after two weeks of bullying at Mark's hands, Jack begins to reject his mother and her culture. He demands that she speak English, and she responds with "If I say 'love,' I feel here.' She pointed to her lips. 'If I say 'ai,' I feel here.' She put her hand over her heart" (Liu). He still makes her speak English, asks for 'real toys,' and puts the paper menagerie away in the attic of the house, so they cannot come out to find him.

This is where the subversion of the trope truly begins, because generally, while the mother is evil, the child is innocent in contrast. In Gretchen Rous Besser's review of Kathy by Patrice Juiff, a novel telling the story of a young woman named Kathy who, after being raised by a kind foster family, seeks out her blood family only to find them cruel and horrendous, she does a brief examination of this comparison. At the beginning of the review, Besser calls the story a "topsy-turvy fairy tale" (Besser, page 1), and details the monstrosity of Kathy's blood family,

including an evil mother. Besser states that “By contrast, Kathy appears saintly, the epitome of goodness” (Besser, page 2). However, in the Paper Menagerie, Jack begins to appear, well, cruel.

He refuses to talk to his mother unless she speaks in English, but even when she does, “her accent and broken sentences embarrassed [him]” (Liu). It eventually came to the point that they didn’t speak to each other at all. She abandoned aspects of her culture that have made up her whole life in an attempt to make her son feel better, such as trying to give her son hugs the way she saw American mothers do on T.V., but he thought it was “ridiculous” and “uncertain.” She starts to cook American food instead of Chinese food, and gets better at English. In a desperate final attempt at connection between her son and her culture, she gifts him with more origami animals that Jack always squeezes the life out of, until eventually, she stopped trying. Jack comes to view his mother as alien, rejecting her to the point that while standing at what would be her deathbed, he is thinking about what he should do to get recruited for a job when he goes back to his college campus. All his mother asks is for him to pull out his box of origami animals, and remember her sometimes, which he tries to skirt around doing with excuses of being busy, and not knowing when Qingming is. She tells him that she loves him in Chinese, speaking with her heart instead of her lips, and Jack tells her to stop talking. She dies while he is on his flight back to school.

Despite all that his mother has done for him, Jack still rejects her, and blames her for the things that make him different, the things that people use to make fun of him and reject him. This blame is not dissimilar to the blame Macbeth places on his wife in Shakespeare’s Macbeth, according to Stephen Leo Carr and Peggy A. Knapp in their analysis of the play, Seeing Through Macbeth. When discussing how Macbeth is repulsed by the “oedipal” crime he has committed in killing and usurping the former king, he blames his wife for spurring on his actions. “Lady

Macbeth has invited this identification with the terrible mother by “teaching” Macbeth his duties, putting herself in charge of his initiation into adulthood, linking his obedience to her with her continued love for him, and making him depend on her for the actual plan of the crime” (Carr, page 9). It is through these comparisons that yet another subversion of the “Evil Matriarch” is made apparent.

Because it is not Jack’s mother that made him who he is- rather, it was him who forced his mother to change for his own desires. Jack’s mother never tried to make Jack something he wasn’t, only try to get him to understand her, which he doesn’t do until it is too late. The mother, who is “evil” to Jack, is the one being controlled in this scenario, opposed to being the one who is controlling. She isn’t set in her ways, but because she is something other than American, she is designated as the cruel mom stepping on her son’s destiny. She did not fit in with the culture, such as many other evil mothers, so she has become villainized, despite not being particularly horrid, or even simply misguided. She was just a mother who loved her son.

The final subversion of the story takes place in its ending- particularly, the tragedy that is the ending. A typical ending for the “Evil Matriarch” is for her to be defeated, for justice to be served and for the hero to live a happy life, never having to fear the wrath of the mother again. It happens in Snow White, Cinderella, Rapunzel, Coraline, Macbeth, Kathy, practically any story one can think of that has a wicked mother figure. The inverse of this is true for Paper Menagerie.

In the end, when Jack finally learns of his mother’s life story, he feels ashamed for his actions towards her throughout the course of her life. He is guilty that he can’t read the last note his mother left for him, and he, the ‘hero’ of the story, is punished by his rejection of his mother. In Jonathan Parry’s review of Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts, by Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, which is an examination of Hindu mythology and the various hierarchies

within it, he explains how “The central theme of the book is introduced by a discussion of sexual fluids” (Parry, page 2). I feel the need here to put a disclaimer that I am not suggesting incest between Jack and his mother, but because of Freudian psychology and its influence in the literary world, any examination of relationship between mother and son is almost automatically assumed incestuous, so finding works that don’t at least reference this idea is near impossible.

Anyways, the sexual fluids in question and their symbolism are in regards to milk and semen, and the inequality present in the relationship between the two, or, more accurately, the inequality of the presentation between mother and father. Parry puts forth the summation that “while ‘the breast that feeds itself’ is symbolic of the evil mother, the phallus that retains its own seed is symbolic of the perfect man conserving his life-blood” (Parry, page 2). Paper Menagerie subverts this idea through Jack, who preserved himself by rejecting his mother, being presented as the one in the story who caused discord between him and his mother. Meanwhile, when Jack’s mother tries to sustain herself and her relationship with her son by adapting to Jack’s wants, she comes across as a loving mother, the one who is on the ‘right’ side of things, despite being Jack’s “Evil Matriarch” figure for most of the story, reshaping the common narrative of said “Evil Matriarch.”

In Ken Liu’s Paper Menagerie, nearly every aspect of the “Evil Matriarch” is subverted, from the mother being evil herself, to the actions of the ‘heroic’ child, while still maintaining the key to a story about an wicked mother- that she is different. The difference of Jack’s mother to other women and people as a whole villainizes her in Jack’s eyes, despite her best attempts to fit in for her son’s sake. Jack’s mother is not cruel, and does not try to dictate his life for him, she is simply ‘other.’ For most, that’s all it takes to become evil.

## Works Cited

Besser, Gretchen Rous. *The French Review*, vol. 82, no. 1, 2008, pp. 202–03. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25481529>. Accessed 16 Dec. 2022.

In Besser's review of Kathy, she does a brief analysis of the novel written by Patrice Juiff. The story is about a young woman named Kathy who leaves her loving foster family to seek out her blood family, only to discover said family is cruel, and essentially become their indentured servant. Besser discusses the authors background in television, and how his novel leans more towards extremist caricatures than realistic characters, as an allegory for the various psychological reasons a person may choose to stay in an abusive situation, as Kathy does. Besser compares the piece to a fairy tale for its ridiculous leanings towards an abstract idea of abuse squallor, but compliments the author for his use of descriptive language and prose, which keep the reader hooked on the story itself. This piece is useful for gaining insight into Kathy on its own, but also for isolating its main themes, and how this story can be connected to other stories, or even real life scenarios that have the same ideas behind them. It is a quick read, and offers a good jumping off point to spark ideas for the themes of one's own writing.

Carr, Stephen Leo, and Peggy A. Knapp. "Seeing through Macbeth." *PMLA*, vol. 96, no. 5, 1981, pp. 837–47. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/462127>. Accessed 16 Dec. 2022.

Seeing Through Macbeth by Stephen Leo Carr and Peggy A. Knapp is an eleven page literary analysis of Macbeth, which is used as the framework to examine how Shakespeare's works are as universal as they are, and how said universalness shifts through the ages and different cultural examinations. It begins by looking at how other pieces have achieved such far reach, such as Christian works, and then focuses in on

Shakespeare, then further in on Macbeth. The section I used for my essay focused on Freudian Psychology, and how Lady Macbeth is both Macbeth's wife, but also symbolically his mother for pulling him into the world of crime and intrigue that is afoot in his court. This piece provides ample insight to the story and its characters through psychological and historical examination, providing great supporting evidence, and serving well as a way to cross-check ideas and insure they make sense. Stephen Leo Carr works as the director of the Literature Program at the University of Pittsburgh, and Peggy A. Knapp works at Carnegie Mellon University as a professor emeritus of English.

Liu, Ken. *Paper Menagerie*, November 8, 2012,

<https://gizmodo.com/read-ken-lius-amazing-story-that-swept-the-hugo-nebula-5958919>.

Accessed 16 December 2022.

Paper Menagerie by Ken Liu is a short story telling the life of Jack, a biracial Chinese-American boy, and his struggles to come to terms with both of the cultures he has inherited. Initially, he rejects his mother's Chinese culture, as it leads to bullying for him in school to be Chinese, and he forces his mother to speak in English and cook American foods instead of the Chinese ones she grew up with. The title of the story comes from the toys that Jack's mother used to make for him when he was little, origami animals that would come to life and play with him, such as Laohu the tiger, who was made from Christmas wrapping paper. Eventually, when Jack is in college and his mother is 40, she dies of cancer, and Jack largely doesn't think of her until one Qingming (Chinese Day of the Dead), he opens up an old shoebox containing all his paper animals, and discovers Laohu, despite being still for years since Jack's mother's death, is alive and walking. Laohu unfolds, and Jack finds a letter from his mother inside Laohu, but is

unable to read it because he never learned Chinese. He has to ask a tourist to translate it, and when he reads it, he cries, guilty for abandoning his mother, and not loving her like he should have.

Parry, Jonathan. *Man*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1981, pp. 317–18. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2801421>. Accessed 16 Dec. 2022.

Jonathan Parry looks at Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, which is an examination of Hindu mythology and the various hierarchies within it. He shortens it down to its key elements in his review, which is how O'Flaherty views the women within Hindu mythology to be demonised for doing the same things the men do, but get praised for. An example of this idea is “while ‘the breast that feeds itself’ is symbolic of the evil mother, the phallus that retains its own seed is symbolic of the perfect man conserving his life-blood.” He gets straight to the heart of O'Flaherty's work with the line “The central theme of the book is introduced by a discussion of sexual fluids.” He criticizes her for not looking at the mythology from a Hindu perspective, but from her culture as a white woman, and for imposing the structure of Hindu mythology on to modern day Hindu family structures. Jonathan Parry is a philosopher based in The London School of Economics and Political Science, specifically in the Department of Philosophy, Logic, and Scientific Method.