# HAGS: QUEERING THE POSTMENOPAUSAL WOMAN THROUGH MYTH

By

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**Abstract**

The demonization of women in literature has been studied extensively, particularly in the area of feminist criticism, but the research to date has taken a rather monolithic approach by treating women as an undifferentiated group. Few texts seem to have been directed specifically toward representations of postmenopausal women, who are frequently characterized as fearsome, hideous, and often carnivorous hags living as outcasts from, or on the fringes of, society. Representations of postmenopausal women as evil and ugly can be found in the mythology of nearly every culture. They are particularly ubiquitous—and particularly harmful—in children's literature, where they become didactic archetypes that reinscribe misogyny from generation to generation. In this paper, I will compare and analyze myths involving hags from multiple cultures in an attempt to examine common social, psychological and biological underpinnings that underlie this transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon, including Shakespeare's weird sisters, the Baba Yaga figure of Eastern Europe, the onibaba of Japan, and the soucouyant, or female vampire of the African diaspora in the Caribbean. I suspect that my research will corroborate what I perceive to be a pervasive revulsion toward the postmenopausal women that is based on fear, which I propose to name 'presbygynephobia.'

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## INTRODUCTION

Nearly every culture in the world has a story about a demon hag: an evil, ugly, often carnivorous older woman who lives alone on the fringes of society and preys on children, her neighbors, or hapless travelers. These dehumanized figures are particularly harmful to postmenopausal women because they encode queering stereotypes that contribute to the devaluation and alienation of women as they age within patriarchal systems. In this paper I will be comparing hag myths from around the world in an attempt to show how they are all based on a similar intersectionality of fears that is unique to older women and irrespective of culture.

## THE MAKING OF A HAG

So what exactly is a Hag? The traditional definition of a hag is a witch in the form of an old woman. But the hag is an evolving stereotype. In recent times, the term has come to be used to refer to a much younger woman: one who is middle-aged, and particularly one who is unattractive and/or holds a position of power. This trend was made blatantly and shockingly obvious during the recent 2016 presidential campaign in comments made by Donald Trump about his fellow candidate, Hillary Clinton. While the definition of a hag has changed over time, the basis for the definition has not; it is still based on the fear of female empowerment, and specifically, empowerment of older women.

This fear response, which seems to be universal among all cultures, leads one to wonder what it is about postmenopausal women that makes them so scary. A survey of the available literature reveals a multiplicity of factors that contribute to a fearful view of older women, including, but not limited to, the following: postmenopausal women are more likely than younger women to challenge male authority and control; they may trigger displaced anger in people who have unresolved childhood trauma; hormonal changes during menopause and

declining cognitive abilities can increase emotional lability and lead to unpredictable behavior that makes others uncomfortable; humans are programmed by evolutionary biology to be attracted to youth and beauty, which predisposes them to be biased against—and even repelled by—the aging body; women live longer than men and are more likely to need assistance in old age, which creates anxiety, resentment and guilt among those who may have to help care for them; and accelerated aging after menopause is a visible reminder to others of their own mortality, which may cause them to project their fears back onto the aging woman. With this heap of horrors on her head, the postmenopausal woman becomes an easy target for demonization…and thus a hag is born.

Keeping these factors in mind, I move now to a discussion of hag myths from various cultures around the world.

## BABA YAGA (Eastern Europe)

Baba Yaga is one of the oldest hags in the world. She hails from Russia, and she may be nearly 6000 years old. In some versions of the myth she is referred to as Satan's grandmother. One of the origin theories of Baba Yaga—and there are many—is that she was constructed as a personification of the Russian winter, and she is sometimes depicted with blank, white eyes and a chilling look that support this theory. She also has long white hair that flies wildly about her head reminiscent of a snowstorm.

Baba Yaga flies through the forest on a mortar and she steers with a pestle. This bizarre mode of travel is a symbolic inversion of the good mother, who uses a mortar and pestle to grind grain to feed her family, or the wise woman, who grinds herbs for healing. By contrast, Baba Yaga grinds the bones of her victims. But she also carries a broom made of birch, which is a

symbol of domesticity (in the case of the broom) and renewal (in the case of the birch). She is therefore associated with both life and death, which makes her somewhat ambiguous. Baba Yaga is nevertheless a sinister figure overall, traveling mostly at night and using her broom to sweep away her tracks so that she cannot be followed. Her night flights are therefore subversive and reflect patriarchal anxiety about female independence and freedom of movement.

Baba Yaga lives in a hut that stands—and walks—on chicken legs. The symbolism of the hut is obscure, but it may be a carryover from pagan practice since the cock was the most common sacrificial animal in Eastern Europe. The hut also bears an uncanny resemblance to Sami granaries, which were built on the stumps of closely growing trees and are still in use today. All versions of the myth describe her as being surrounded by human bones, usually in the form of skulls atop a wooden fence. She is also represented as cannibalistic, with long, sharp teeth (sometimes made of iron) and a preference for children. She predates and is the precursor of the Hansel & Gretel myth.

While the Baba Yaga myth survives in its traditional form, it has also been incorporated into popular culture and transformed. Video games in particular continue to represent her as a fearful and mostly evil character; but consistent with gaming aesthetics, she is sometimes represented as a grotesque parody of womanhood with corpse-like gray skin, a blood-red mouth, and a hypersexualized body. She is also often depicted without her broom, thereby severing her symbolic connection with life, so that she represents only death.

## THE ONIBABA (Japan)

The phonetic similarity of Onibaba and Baba Yaga would seem to imply a connection or a common origin between the two myths; but if there is one, it seems to have been lost to time.

Onibaba translates as “female ogre,” and onibabas are also anti-mothers who kill and consume children, and sometimes an unwary traveler. They are often depicted with horns and fangs, gleefully holding dead babies or severed heads dripping with blood. Other representations include bulging eyes, which are characteristic of Japanese demons. And like Baba Yaga, they usually have bare feet, are dressed poorly or in tatters, and are partially nude, which denotes their poverty and their bestial nature. Perhaps the most infamous onibaba in Japanese myth is the Onibaba of Adachigahara, who lived on a lonely moor and preyed on pregnant women, cutting the unborn infants out of the mothers’ abdomens while they were still alive.

## THE SOUCOUYANT (The Caribbean)

The soucouyant is an old woman who sheds her skin each night, turns into a flying ball of fire, and sucks the blood of her neighbors as they sleep. She places her skin into a mortar as she sheds it; and once again, the nurturing, healing symbolism of the mortar and pestle is inverted and turned into something fearful and evil.

In her manifestation as Old Hige, which is colloquial for Old Hag, the soucouyant does not suck blood but instead steals breath—another signifier for life—by sitting on the chest of a sleeping person. The person wakes exhausted and is said to have been hag-ridden.

## SHAKESPEARE’S WEIRD SISTERS

The three witches from Macbeth represent the Three Fates of Greek mythology, but Shakespeare inverts them in order to capitalize on the popular view of witches in his day. He does not mention their ages in the play, but Banquo notes that they are bearded, so they are clearly postmenopausal.

In addition to robbing the Three Fates of their youth and beauty, Shakespeare changes their elegant white robes into poor women's rags and replaced their weaving tools with a cauldron. He also makes them fearsome and evil by giving them demonic powers and a desire to cause trouble or harm. Like the other hags, the weird sisters are an inversion of the good wife and mother: instead of using their cauldrons to cook food for their families, these non-nurturing mothers use them to cast harmful spells and cook up poisonous potions.

Western European witches were sometimes depicted holding divining rods, and divining rods were usually made from hazel wood. They were originally used to find water, precious gems, and minerals; but they were still considered magical, and over time they were transformed into the magic wand. As an obviously phallic symbol of power, the magic wand was eventually removed from the province of witches and reserved solely for sorcerers, and later fairies, who were not considered human. Thus the witches were left with only their symbolically female pots.

## WITCH HAZEL

Witch Hazel is a Loony Toons character. With her dumpy figure, her saggy bustline, and a few missing teeth, she is clearly postmenopausal. She is also a composite witch: she has the long beaked nose that originated with Baba Yaga; her skin is Hollywood green like the Wicked Witch in The Wizard of Oz; she wears a Puritan hat and old-fashioned shoes that look like raven's feet when she floats in the air; she is cannibalistic and boils her victims in a cauldron reminiscent of the Weird Sisters; and she is named for the American version of the divining rod, which was made from witch hazel.

The Witch Hazel character appeared in several shorts that were produced from 1954-1963. In her first episode, titled "Bewitched Bunny," she tries to boil Bugs in her cauldron for

dinner; but he foils her plans by using a magic powder that turns her into a sexy Playboy bunny. As he strolls out of frame with Miss Bunny on his arm, he breaks the fourth wall, turns to the audience and says, “Yeah, sure, I know. But aren’t they all witches on the inside?” This shockingly misogynistic portrayal of women aired until 2004.

## CONCLUSION

Hag myths queer postmenopausal women by reinforcing the stereotype that young and beautiful is good and old and no-longer-beautiful is evil. Furthermore, these myths condition fear in children toward older women whom they do not know, which is the classic mechanism of othering. Social conditioning reduces their fear but does not banish it entirely because fear is contextual and it may be reacquired. And what is worse, disgust and aversion, which are conditioned along with fear, are much more resistant to extinction than the original fear, so first impressions tend to be lasting impressions.

While feminist authors, educators, and allies have done significant work in recent years to expose and deconstruct these damaging stereotypes—even Disney has been pressured into producing more empowered female characters—these efforts have been based on a broad-based feminism that often does not address the unique position of postmenopausal women, who are in different life stages and may have different needs.

Based on the universality of the fearsome, disgusting hag in myths across time and across the globe, I submit that she signifies a unique intersectionality of fears and anxieties that is rooted in human psychology irrespective of culture. I searched for a word to describe the fear of postmenopausal women, and I discovered that there is none. I therefore propose to call this phenomenon: presbygynephobia.

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