Why *Were* You Born?: An Analysis of the Anti-Feminist Implications of the Film Adaptation of *Coraline*

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Abstract:
It is no secret that the fictional realm of Neil Gaiman is loaded with feminist possibilities. In fact, in the time since Gaiman has risen to critical attention, entire conference panels have been devoted to exploring the feminist implications of his many novels, short stories, picture books, and graphic novels. Moreover, an edited collection of essays on the subject, entitled *Feminism in the Worlds of Neil Gaiman: Essays on the Comics, Poetry and Prose* (2012), was recently published. Gaiman has been lauded for years by feminist critics for his ability to create strong, independent female protagonists, especially in his works for children. *Coraline*, Gaiman's 2002 children's novella, offers an excellent illustration of the author's capacity to create strong female heroines who use their own resourcefulness and independence to overcome whatever complicated (and often terrifying) situation they may have found themselves in. In 2009, the film adaptation of *Coraline* was released. Henry Selick—most known for his direction of Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and *The Corpse Bride*—was responsible for not only directing the film, but for adapting Gaiman's novel for its new medium as well. Probably the most strikingly noticeable dissimilarity between Gaiman's novel and Selick's film is the inclusion of Wyborn "Wybie" Lovat, a male character not present in the novel, who is introduced into the film for no other purpose than to provide Coraline with someone to talk to while she is exploring the "other" world (according to Selick). However, Wybie's role ultimately extends much further than Selick originally intended. In fact, through Wybie's intervention, Coraline is later able to escape the "other" world and the deadly clutches of her "Other Mother." Furthermore, it is Wybie who destroys the hand of the "Other Mother" in the real world, just before the two collectively trap the severed hand down the well at the movie's conclusion. The problem with many of Wybie's actions within the film is, of course, that in Gaiman's novel, these are things that Coraline does herself. Because of this repeated intervention by a male character, Wybie's presence in the film often undermines Coraline's strength and independence, thereby effectively robbing Gaiman's original story of much of its feminist thrust. Due to the anti-feminist problems that Wybie's character creates, several logical questions follow: what is Wybie's true function in the film? Was Selick's decision cultural, commercial, or merely practical? What does the refusal to allow for a strong, independent female character in Selick's film say about our current cultural climate? This analysis seeks to answer these questions while taking into account the broader social implications of Selick's decision to dilute Gaiman's feminist agenda in his film adaptation of *Coraline*.

1 It is certainly no secret that the many fictional worlds of Neil Gaiman are loaded with feminist possibilities. In fact, in the time since Gaiman has risen to critical attention, entire conference panels have been devoted to exploring the feminist implications of his many novels, short stories, picture books, and graphic novels. Moreover, an edited collection of essays on the

subject, entitled *Feminism in the Worlds of Neil Gaiman: Essays on the Comics, Poetry and Prose* (2012), has recently been published. Gaiman has been lauded for years by feminist critics for his ability to create strong, independent female protagonists, especially in his works for children. *Coraline* (2002), Gaiman's children's novella, offers an excellent illustration of the author's capacity to create strong female heroines who use their own resourcefulness and independence to overcome whatever complicated — and often terrifying — situation they may have found themselves in.

2 Gaiman's book tells the story of Coraline Jones, a young girl who discovers a hidden, magical passageway behind a locked door in her house that transports her into a world that is uncannily similar to her own. Through Coraline's often dark and macabre adventures in this 'other' world — adventures which are centered largely on the conflict between Coraline and her Other Mother — she progressively finds her own degree of independence and successfully develops her own unique sense of self. The fact that Coraline accomplishes these rather daunting (and arguably *adult*) tasks by and large through her own resourcefulness speaks to the appropriateness of a feminist reading of the novel.

3 Due to the vast success of Gaiman's novella, a film adaptation of *Coraline* was commissioned and subsequently released in 2009. Henry Selick — most known for his direction of Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) — was responsible for not only directing the film, but for adapting Gaiman's text for its new medium as well. Probably the most striking dissimilarity between Gaiman's book and Selick's film is the inclusion of Wyborn "Wybie" Lovat, a male character not present in Gaiman's original text. According to Selick, Wybie is introduced into the film for no other purpose than to provide Coraline with someone to talk to while she is exploring the 'other' world. However, Wybie's role ultimately extends much

further than Selick original intentions for him. In fact, the problem with many of Wybie's actions within the film is, of course, that in Gaiman's book, these are things that Coraline does herself. Because of this repeated intervention by a male character, Wybie's presence in the film often undermines Coraline's strength and independence, thereby effectively robbing Gaiman's original story of much of its feminist thrust.

4 Through the character of Wybie, the film suddenly includes an anti-feminist stance that warrants further analysis. For example, why did Selick choose to create a character whose presence was clearly unnecessary in Gaiman's original narrative? What is Wybie's true function? Was Selick's decision of a cultural, commercial, or merely practical nature? Finally, what does the refusal to allow for a strong, independent female character that does not embody the abjection of feminine power onto an evil Other Mother in Selick's film say about our current cultural climate? This analysis seeks to explore these questions while taking into account the broader social implications of Selick's decision to dilute the source text's feminist connotations in his film adaptation.

Coraline: From Book to Film

5 To begin, let us examine some key moments in the novel that serve to illuminate the changes those same scenes undergo in their transition to Selick's screen adaptation. In the opening chapter of Gaiman's novel, Miss Spink and Miss Forcible (Coraline's downstairs neighbors) make a point of warning her about the abandoned well at the edge of the property. Following her own natural curiosity, Coraline goes off in search of the well, and we are told that she "found it on the third day, in an overgrown meadow beside the tennis court" (5). In Selick's film version, although Coraline does indeed go in search of the well, it is Wybie who ends up

showing her the well's exact location. While this may seem an irrelevant change to some, it is important to realize that, in establishing her own independent sense of self throughout Gaiman's original text, Coraline often hearkens back to two specific individual traits that she prides herself on: exploration and bravery. Therefore, by denying Coraline's discovery of the well on her own terms, Selick is effectively robbing her of her own feminine agency and also disrupting Coraline's progression towards *individuation*—the psycho-developmental process by which children construct and establish a unique sense of self—by having Wybie perform this task *for* her.

6 A similar situation occurs towards the film's conclusion. After Coraline has won her 'exploring' game with the Other Mother and has returned home safely, we discover that the Other Mother's severed hand has followed her back through the passageway and is now intent on stealing the key that allows Coraline to access the other world. If successful, this scheme would in turn allow the Other Mother to access Coraline's world at will. While Selick's film follows Gaiman's text fairly closely during this particular part of the narrative, there is one significant change. In the novella, Coraline, through her own unique intuition, surmises that she is being stalked by the hand and, in a display of wisdom and cunning, devises a plan to effectively trap the Other Mother's hand in the abandoned well for good: "She spread out the tablecloth and laid it, carefully, over the top of the well. She put a plastic doll's cup every foot or so, at the edge of the well, and she weighed each cup down with water" (154). Coraline's plan to trick the Other Mother's hand by placing the key to the other world on the tablecloth and having the severed hand fall through the flimsy, unsupported fabric into the well below is executed flawlessly. However, this illustration of Coraline's feminine power is once again frustrated in Selick's interpretation of Gaiman's novella. In the film, not only does Coraline fail to utilize her wit to

create a plan to trap the Other Mother's hand, she is also completely unaware of the fact that she is being followed to the well. Therefore, when Coraline is preparing to drop the key down the well for good, the hand suddenly springs upon her. It is then left up to Wybie — who swoops in on a dirt-bike like the very cliché of a chivalric hero, no less — to save Coraline from the creature that has invaded her home world. Not only does Wybie prevent the Other Mother's hand from retrieving the key around Coraline's neck, but it is also Wybie who ultimately destroys the hand by smashing it with a rock and tossing it down the well, trapping it there (ostensibly) for good. What we have in this scene is a perfect illustration of how, through the creation of Wybie and the subsequent actions that he performs on Coraline's behalf, Selick once again denies much of the feminist possibility of the original novella in his filmic adaptation.

7 Though Wybie's intervention raises several anti-feminist problems for Selick's film adaptation, other characters in the film and the various situations those characters create raise similar issues. For example, during the 'exploring game' in which Coraline searches for the souls of the three dead children locked inside the mirror, it is evident in the original narrative that the Other Mother does not provide Coraline with any hint as to the location of the souls. In fact, the opposite occurs in Gaiman's text; when the Other Mother offers Coraline a hint in finding the third soul, Coraline simply replies "I'm doing fine on my own" (106). This exchange is distinctly different in Selick's film adaptation, since Coraline not only explicitly asks for a clue but is also provided with one by the Other Mother. The issue with this change is that in Gaiman's novel, it is apparent that Coraline has a very strong intuition that is made manifest by her unique ability to 'explore' and to find things on her own. The fact that, in Selick's film, Coraline has to ask for help from the 'Other Mother' seems to grossly undermine her own individual abilities as a strong, positive, female protagonist. Furthermore, the reality that the only true embodiment of

feminine power in the film lies with Coraline's Other Mother — the "amoral, primal mother" (Creed 1) figure that critics like Barbara Creed liken to the inherent masculine fear of women which creates such negative manifestations of the feminine – only adds to the lack of positive femininity in the film, especially considering that Coraline is forced to draw upon this source of malevolent feminine power in order to further her own story in Selick's film.

8 While many of the changes that Selick made do seem to smack of an anti-feminist agenda, some could argue that Gaiman's original novel cannot, in itself, be entirely feminist in nature due to one glaring problem: the male black cat who serves as quasi unofficial guide to Coraline, even in Gaimain's original narrative. However, I would argue that the two versions differ significantly in their portrayal of the cat's gender and in the level of involvement that the cat has in Coraline's dark quest for individuality. For example, in Gaiman's original novel, there are literally only two words throughout the entire narrative that serve as gender markers for the cat: "his fur" and "he" (53, 137). In every other instance in which the black cat is described, the cat is simply referred to as "it." This predominant lack of a gendered referent serves to indicate the lack of emphasis that Gaiman placed on the cat's gender; in other words, while Gaiman might have wanted his readers to know that the cat was male for the purposes of visualization, the cat's gender itself was clearly not important enough to maintain as part of its identity beyond these two brief instances. Furthermore, though the cat is decidedly male in the novella, it is difficult to separate him fully from Coraline, especially when we are told that the cat's voice "sounded like the voice at the back of Coraline's head, the voice she thought words in" (35). Therefore, in Gaiman's novel, the gender of the male cat is often trivialized and even diluted through the author's identification of the cat with Coraline herself, demonstrating how Gaiman's

conceptualization of gender in the novel is not nearly so polarized as it is in Selick's film adaptation.

9 However, this is not the case with the film adaptation; in fact, the very opposite is true in Selick's version. Coraline initially identifies the cat as 'Wybie's,' and although Wybie tries to deny that relationship, the cat is always seen with him whenever Coraline is in the real world. Furthermore, the cat is given a distinctively male voice — actor Keith David — which even further lessens the gender ambiguity. This decision seems, on Selick's part, to serve to identify the cat as more decidedly male than he was in Gaiman's original narrative. The problem with this is that — in a similar fashion to what Selick did with Wybie — the cat often helps Coraline in ways that he did not in Gaiman's original novel, and the ways in which he helps her serve to undermine Coraline's feminine agency in much the same way that Wybie does in other scenes. One rather overt instance of this type of situation comes near the film's conclusion, in a scene in which Coraline discovers the third and final soul of the ghost-children in the mirror during the 'exploring' game that Coraline engages in with her Other Mother. As Coraline attempts to snag the final soul from an elusive rat that is escaping with it, she ultimately fails in her endeavor. Just as she is giving over to despair, the cat appears with the rat in its mouth. While this same sequence of events happens in Gaiman's novel, there is one significant change. In the film, Coraline loses the stone given to her by Miss Spink — the stone that allows her to see the souls of the ghost-children — in her pursuit of the rat, thereby concurrently losing her source of female-bestowed power. This never happens in the original text, and while we are left with the possibility that Coraline might have had to spend even more time searching for the final soul, we are also left with the possibility — and likelihood, given Coraline's distinct independence, intuition, and bravery in the novel — that she would ultimately find the last soul on her own,

even without the cat's help. However, in the film, Coraline is robbed of the tangible source of her feminine power and, because of this bereavement, she has no choice but to rely on the male cat's assistance.

10 A further example of this sort of masculine reliance comes just after this scene, when Coraline is attempting to find her real parents and to escape the twisted world of her Other Mother. In the novel, Coraline uses her own wit and intuition to discover her parents' location: "If she had stopped to think, she might have known where they were all along. The other mother could not create. She could only transform, and twist, and change [. . .] and, Coraline realized with surprise…[that] she knew exactly where her parents were" (124). In this section of the text, Coraline uses her impressive deductive powers to ascertain that the snowglobe on the mantelpiece of the Other Mother's living room is not present in her own world, leading her to the realization that her parents are actually trapped within it. However, in Selick's adaptation, Coraline is at a loss as to where to find her parents, and it is ultimately up to the cat to physically *point* to the snowglobe that the Other Mother has entrapped Coraline's parents in. Here, Selick has once again denied the feminist possibilities of this particular scene by tailoring it to include Coraline's *need* for the cat in her search for her real parents, and it is this continued reliance on male power that serves to further implicate the idea of anti-feminism at work in Selick's adaptation.

11 In addition to these anti-feminist sequences in Selick's film version of *Coraline*, there is the issue of Selick's creative decision to include Wybie in his screenplay, something he explains as happening because "Coraline needed someone in her real world to talk to" (Selick, "Interview"). The word *need* is telling here, especially given the previous evidence of Coraline's continual "need" for masculine assistance throughout Selick's film adaptation. Furthermore, his

decision is fairly questionable when one takes a look at Selick's other popular films for children. To be specific, anyone who has seen either *The Nightmare Before Christmas* or Selick's film version of Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach* (1996) knows that Selick, at least at one point, was content with having his *male* characters not only engaging in fantastic, solo adventures without the "need" for someone to talk to, but he also seemed perfectly content with having those same male characters occasionally bursting into random moments of solitary song and dance as well. Given these previous artistic choices, Selick's reasoning behind his decision to include Wybie in his own adaptation of Coraline seems, at best, highly suspect.

Coraline and the Construction of Gender

12 Following the notoriety of post-structuralist discourse during the 1960s and 1970s, increasing attention has been paid to the ways in which language functions in social constructionism, or the way that civilizations create and reinforce socio-cultural ideals and norms. Arguably, one of the most prominent focal points for these types of critical discussions has revolved around the question of gender and identity. Judith Butler, who has produced some of the most important critical work on the socio-linguistic construction of gender in her seminal texts *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), tells us that the construction of gender involves "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface" (9). In other words, the gendered subject is formed through its performance — or lack thereof; according to Butler, even the absence of gender markers is itself a kind of 'performance.' The way that this articulation of gender construction ties into the film adaptation of *Coraline* is two-fold, and at the heart of the problematic nature of the film is, once

again, the creation of a secondary character not present in Gaiman's original novel — Wybie.. As Lindsay Myers notes in her own analysis of the film:

> This essentially peripheral character and his equally peripheral Other-World double are awarded most of the significant moments in the story. Wybie provides Coraline with the spy doll, the Other Wybie pulls Coraline from the dungeon in which the Other Mother has imprisoned her, the Other Wybie pushes Coraline into the tunnel so that she can return home after the Other Mother has threatened to keep her in the Other World, and the real Wybie miraculously appears in the nick of time at the end of the film to save her life. (248)

In other words, Wybie is the primary mover in the film version of *Coraline*, appearing time and time again not only to guide Coraline through her adventures in both her own world and in the uncanny realm of her Other Mother but also to *literally* save her from danger when her life is threatened. Because of this repeated intervention, Wybie becomes the hero of Selick's filmic narrative, and Coraline remains a passive participant in her eponymous story. The way that this ties back to Butler's articulation of gender construction is that Selick, in his adaptation of Gaiman's unquestionably pro-feminist text, perpetuates a gendered discourse of male empowerment over and against any notion of positive female strength and agency, relegating Coraline to a static position that forces her to rely on others — almost always male characters — to move her along her own narrative and save her from the malevolent forces that seek to destroy her. In doing this, Selick undermines Gaiman's original intent for his novella, which was to create a strong, independent heroine who overcomes whatever obstacles are placed in her way.[1] Instead, Selick creates a passive victim who is more akin to the typical, helpless fairy-tale princesses of the 18th and 19th century than to Gaiman's brave, autonomous young heroine.

13 However, Wybie's inclusion in Selick's adaptation has certainly not gone unnoticed by other critics, and the resulting observations have been accordingly condemning. In Brit

[1] "I wanted it [the novel] to have a girl as a heroine [. . .] who had seen what lay behind mirrors, and had a close call with a bad hand, and had come face-to-face with her other mother, [and who had] rescued her true parents from a fate worse than death and triumphed against overwhelming odds" (Gaiman xiii).

Mandelo's "Doing Damage to the Text: Gender in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*," she also draws comparisons between the film and Gaiman's novella. Like others, she makes note of the ways that Wybie transforms the feminine empowerment inherent in Gaiman's original narrative, asserting that, in Selick's inclusion of Wybie and his repeated intervention in Coraline's adventures, "individuality is made into a duality" (n.p.). In other words, Mandelo focuses on the ways that Wybie's character forms a male counterpart to Coraline's femininity, resulting in the creation of a normative, heterosexual power dynamic that diminishes Coraline's individuality in favor of the creation of their gendered partnership. However, by effectively making Wybie the hero and primary mover of the film, I would argue that Selick creates a repeated need for male salvation which places Coraline in a dependent position that goes beyond the creation of a heterosexual duality and effaces her identity *entirely*. In other words, the way that Selick's film constructs gender on a fundamental level is to assert that females are the passive recipients of the action that their male counterparts must inevitably initiate and perpetuate. In this way, the females in filmic narratives like Selick's never push any of the "boundaries" or "fixity" (to use Butler's terms) that lie at the heart of heteronormative, conservative gender constructions and, therefore, only serve to perpetuate stereotypical notions of gender and normative sexed positions. Should they do so, they are relegated to monstrous-feminine roles that the Other Mother embodies. While this depiction is vastly mitigated in Gaiman's text by the positive agency and power of Coraline, Selick's film adaptation presents us with no positive female lead characters and instead gives us only a passive young girl who is not very bright in comparison to her literary counterpart and a demonic mother-figure whom critics like Creed show only perpetuate paranoid masculine fears regarding female power.

14 Needless to say, this construction of gender is problematic at baseline. However, what is potentially even more disturbing is that Gaiman's narrative — and Selick's subsequent adaptation — is a story created for children. One of the predominant concerns for scholars of children's literature and culture is how adults construct the figure of the child and what those constructions say about society as a whole. In Myers' "Whose Fear Is It Anyway: Moral Panics and 'Stranger Danger' in Henry Selick's *Coraline*," she notes that "Selick's *Coraline* is first and foremost the story of the Other Mother's abduction [and that] Coraline's discovery of the door and practically everything that happens thereafter is not ascribed to Coraline but rather to the calculated machinations of the Other Mother" (247-f.). In other words, Myers claims that Selick's film adaptation constructs a figure of the child that both disempowers children and caters to adult fears about child welfare and kidnapping. In this way, Gaiman's original intention of creating a strong, independent character for children to identify with is subverted in favor of quelling adult anxieties surrounding the safety of children. However, this is certainly not the only problematic construction of childhood in Selick's adaptation. If, as I have been arguing, Selick's film adaptation asserts an active, masculine agenda over and against a passive characterization of the feminine, then this problem extends to the generic issues inherent in the film's status as children's media. In other words, Selick is not simply creating a problematic representation of gender in his filmic adaptation; he is also extending that representation to the construction of childhood and sending a deeply troubling message to children — the message that young boys are responsible for "saving" and guiding young girls and that those same, seemingly helpless girls can never be capable of attending to life's problems without the assistance of their male counterparts. The disturbing nature of this message is compounded by the fact that Selick's Coraline adaptation won the BAFTA Children's Award for Best Feature Film, was nominated

for Best Animated Feature by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and the reality that the film itself still stands as the second highest-grossing stop-motion picture of all time.[2]

The Abject Maternal in *Coraline*

15 Much of what has been written by children's literary critics in response to Gaiman's original novella centers around the point at which psychoanalysis and the Gothic intersect. Of course, this is only fitting since the world of "otherness" that pervades Gothic and horror literature make the genre incredibly predisposed to psychoanalytical readings. One major theoretical figurehead that several Gothic critics draw upon is Julia Kristeva, whose work on the abject (which draws largely on Freudian and Lacanian theory) gives scholars an effective theoretical lens through which to view the "otherness" most often associated with Gothic and Horror literature. Kristeva's theories on the abject center heavily on the maternal: "the abject confronts us…within our personal archaeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold the maternal entity even before existing outside of her" (13). Because of this connection between the mother/child and abjection, one subgenre rife with scholarly possibilities is Gothic narratives written specifically for children — narratives like Gaiman's original novella and Selick's subsequent screen adaptation. In her *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva defines the abject as that which "disturbs identity, system, [and] order. [That which] does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (*Powers of Horror* 4). In other words, Kristeva's notion of the "abject" embodies everything that exists outside of the individual's sense of self — both physically and psychologically speaking. This can include everything from blood and

[2] "Animation—Stop Motion." *Box Office Mojo*.
<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=animationstop.htm>

bodily waste to various physical, mental, or emotional manifestations of all that seeks to deny the autonomous, living nature of the self.

16 Critic Jerrod Hogle makes an important observation regarding Kristeva's theories as they apply to Gothic texts when he states that "the Gothic depicts and enacts these very processes of abjection, where minglings of contrary states and culturally differentiated categories are cast off onto antiquated and 'othered' beings" (296). There is no doubt that the abject in both Gaiman's original text and in Selick's film adaptation is embodied by the figure of the "beldam," or Coraline's Other Mother — whose very name explicitly demarcates her "othered" nature. Although the abject or "othered" status of the beldam is virtually indisputable, the way that critics have posited the purpose of this abjection has varied. For example, Myers asserts that the figure of the Other Mother — especially in Selick's film version — embodies the anxiety-ridden parental fear of the potential kidnapper, the wicked individual who comes to steal the child away. Deriding Selick's take on the beldam, Myers argues that his characterization of the Other Mother "essentially transforms the heroine's journey of empowerment into a panic-ridden battle against the evil 'out there'" (249). Gary Westfahl's in-depth critical review of the film posits Selick's characterization of the beldam as part of a wholesale effort to "condemn motherhood" (n.p.). While I tend to agree with both Myers and Westfahl in their analyses of this abjected maternal figure, I would also argue that it is important to recognize that the purpose that the beldam serves in the two versions of the story is distinctly different. Specifically, in Gaiman's original text, Coraline's Other Mother becomes the repository for all of the unwanted traits of her real-life mother — traits which Coraline, as a young girl in the process of forming her own self-identity, will inevitable define herself both with and against.

17 Previous scholars have written extensively on the psychological development and construction of identity in Gaiman's *Coraline*[3], so rather than re-hash their arguments here, I would simply like to point out that these analyses were all written before the release of Selick's film adaptation and therefore cannot take the changes he made into consideration. These changes, as discussed previously, have largely to do with the way Coraline constructs her identity. Particularly for adolescents like Coraline, the process of individuation is a crucial psycho-developmental in childhood. In psychological terms, individuation is:

> A state in which a person is differentiated, to some degree, from other parts of his or her social and physical environment. This state can be produced by both individual and social factors, as well as by physical aspects of the environment. If a person chooses to become more individuated, he or she must be cognizant of others in the immediate environment and, on the basis of social comparison processes, must determine how he or she can differ from them. (Barbaranelli 75)

However, Kristeva gives us a nuanced articulation of individuation that is not present in this general definition. She tells us that "for a man and for a woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous. Matricide is [the] vital necessity […] of our individuation, provided that it takes place under optimal circumstances" (*Black Sun* 27-30). In light of Kristeva's distinctive description of individuation, we can see that Coraline's unaided conquering of her Other Mother in Gaiman's original text provides a liminal space in which the "matricide" inherent in her own psycho-developmental process of identity creation is physically acted out against an abjected mother figure. However, in Selick's film adaptation, we must remember that it is Wybie who helps Coraline throughout her adventures in the uncanny world of the beldam, and it is also Wybie who physically overpowers the Other Mother's severed hand at the end of the film. In terms of the differences

[3] See David Rudd‟s "An Eye for an I: Neil Gaiman‟s *Coraline* and Questions of Identity," Elizabeth Parson‟s "The Other Mother: Neil Gaiman‟s Postfeminist Fairytales," and Richard Gooding‟s "Something Very Old and Very Slow: *Coraline*, Uncanniness, and Narrative Form."

between the original text and the film adaptation, we have — on the one hand — the inherently psychologically beneficial purpose of the Other Mother in Gaiman's original text, who serves to allow for the essential component of matricide in the process of Coraline's individuation. On the other hand, in Selick's version, we have an evil stepmother-like figure whom — when all is said and done — seems to be there for no other purpose than to serve as a chauvinistic representation of the malevolent potential of feminine power and to be the hackneyed monster (or some other formulaic embodiment of "evil") that Wybie, and *not* Coraline, defeats and conquers. Psychoanalytically speaking, what this does to Coraline is to severely impede the progress of her own process of individuation and to deny her the opportunity of acting out the matricide that Kristeva asserts is an essential step in the task of constructing a sense of self. While Selick would have us believe that all of this is done in the service of children's entertainment by providing a companion for Coraline to talk to during her adventures, the fact remains that the negative psychological and gender-regressive implications of his creative decisions run much deeper than simple film marketability and venture into the realm of the culturally dangerous. It is certainly disturbing to consider that, in order for a film to be commercially viable in contemporary society, the underlying narrative must be changed from a story of feminine empowerment to the repetitious, obsolete tale of the rescued fairy-tale princess, or as Westfahl bluntly puts it, to "the story of a girl who succeeds mostly through dumb luck and by being rescued by a male knight in shining armor" (n.p.).

Conclusion

18 While I have spent the majority of this analysis pointing out the ways in which Selick's adaptation of Gaiman's novella could be considered anti-feminist, the larger issue is, of course,

what the popular acceptance of this particular type of adaptation says about our own culture. Contemporary feminist concerns point to a veritable 'war on women,' citing gender-equality regressive legislation, political and social inequities, and a general antagonism towards the modern, independent woman. While I certainly do not believe that Selick's film serves as a conscious contribution to this specific notion of feminine antagonism, I do believe that it is an illustration of why it is important to examine and analyze the ways in which females are portrayed in popular media, especially in films made for children. It is, after all, more than a little disturbing to consider that the message that popular filmmakers are sending to children is one in which boys are completely capable of being strong, independent heroes, whereas girls must always rely on help from their male counterparts. Clearly, there is a significant, gendered tension perceivable in a thorough critical analysis of the film adaptation of *Coraline*. While I have attempted to point out the many examples in Selick's adaptation that illustrate this gendered imbalance, what I have been pursuing here has not been my attempt at a critical diatribe against Selick's possible chauvinism. Rather, I have simply aimed to point out, among the things I have already discussed, the problematic nature of representations of femininity in a cultural climate in which the social concerns of feminism itself are still very clearly ongoing. Ultimately, what is important is that we continue to actively question the ways in which we construct, portray, and receive gender performance in popular media, and that we persist in critically analyzing the rationale behind the major changes that occur during the transition of a narrative from book to film.

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