

From stepmother to mentor: a new archetype for the female-led action film

With a couple of notable exceptions, the female action hero has, until the turn of this century, been a single, exceptional woman amid a cast of men. As such she is weighed down by a burden of representation that does not afflict her male counterparts, and haunted by the spectre of the fetish which, as Claire Johnston argued at the dawn of feminist film theory, does not represent woman at all but a 'lack' that functions to define the male. Her very exceptionality, moreover, serve to contain any revolutionary threat she might pose to gendered norms, rendering her 'the exception that proves the rule'.

In the last two decades we have seen the development across action orientated genres, of films featuring a number of female protagonists cutting across this narrative logic. This remains a very youthful cohort, however, despite the parallel rise of the aging (male) action hero. While the older male action hero is often seen mentoring his younger spiritual heir, albeit with a bit of Oedipal sparring along the way, his female counterpart is largely absent from our screens. Indeed where our female action heroes have the benefit of a mentor (and they frequently do) that mentor is invariably male, once again reinforcing a sense that the power wielded by the female action hero is inherently masculine and provisional.

Where Hollywood films do explore the relationship between an older woman and the younger woman preparing to replace her, moreover, it is more likely to be represented in terms of jealous rivalry - whether through a variation of the traditional 'wicked stepmother' trope, through the effective weaponising of conflicting feminisms as explored by Cobb (2011) or through a reworking of the scenario epitomised by *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950) – a film recently remade for the stage by another male director (Ivo van Hove, 2019).

In this paper, I will explore how these traditional patterns are disrupted in three recently released, female-led actions films – three films, incidentally, directed by women: *The Old Guard* (Gina Prince-Bythewood, 2020), *Mulan* (Niki Caro, 2020) and *Charlie's Angels* (Elizabeth Banks, 2019). Despite the generic, stylistic and structural differences between them, all three, in their particular ways, challenge the trope of the wicked step mother or jealous 'older woman' threatened by the usurping ingénue, and replace it with a narrative of mentorship.

The myth of the wicked step mother has deep roots. Marina Warner (in her book from the Beats to the Blonde) discusses this myth at some length in the context of the European fairy tale. Although she does suggest that these have global implications since “All over the world, stories which centre on a heroine, on a young woman suffering a prolonged ordeal [interesting definition,] before her vindication and triumph, frequently focus on women as the agents of her suffering.” Not infrequently the wicked women in the original tales are jealous mothers but in others the ‘splitting’ of narrative functions as described by Bettelheim protects the child listener from having to feel guilty about anger towards actual mother - a split deliberately fostered by the Grimm Brothers who softened the edges of many tales for a 19th century audience. What we are left with, then is the figure of the ‘belle-mere’ – which translates from the French as either mother-in-law or step-mother – the English term – mother in law serving for both until the mid-nineteenth century)

Importantly Warner suggests that these tales are not “concoctions from the depths of psyche” but are rooted in the historical experiences of women: “they are about power, battles over resources by dependents on patriarchal controllers of resources. As well as rivalry over sexual attention.” The wicked stepmother or jealous older woman is, in other words, a politically and historically contingent archetype – but none the less dangerous for that with the “power to compact enmity, recharge it n recirculate it.” She remains a culturally pervasive figure, replicated in the fairy tales of the modern age – the Hollywood film. With examples ranging from *Monster-in- Law*, and *The Devil Wears Prada* (films which Shelley Cobb has argued rehearse different generational models of feminism through their female leads) to the classic dynamic of the *All About Eve* – a dynamic predicated on the idea that there can be only one female star. She is most certainly an archetype in need of an update.

The three films I want to talk about today each in their own way addresses and transforms this archetype – often exploiting the expectations and assumptions attendant on the archetype to dramatic effect. All three have something of a fairy tale quality – the *Old Guard*, despite its ‘war movie’ aesthetic and matter of fact tone, involves a group of immortals, with their origins in antiquity - – superheroes in effect – who range the world looking for worthy causes to champion. *Mulan* is based on an ancient legend to which the live action film introduces a supernatural element in the form of the shape-shifting witch, Xiannian; *Charlies*

Angels has the status of a modern myth with the 21st century films spinning off from the successful 70's TV series – a fact reference in the voice over introduction to the 2000 film: “Once upon a time there were three little girls.....” – and to the reappearance of previous angels from assorted previous versions in the final sequences.

Charlies Angels 2019 is perhaps the most explicit in terms of playing on assumptions about the jealous older woman. The Angels, in this version of the franchise, are no longer a single, exceptional unit but just one of a world-wide network of such units – and ‘Bosley’, originally the name of the male intermediary who represents the mysterious ‘Charlie’ is reconstructed as a rank within the organisation. Patrick Stewart plays the retiring ‘Bosley’ who is replaced by a new incumbent played by Elisabeth Bank’s – who also wrote the screenplay and directed the film. The new ‘Boz’ is an ex-Angel, and is set up as the prime suspect when it becomes apparent that there is a traitor at work within the organisation. This is done in part through her mysteriously timed and unexplained absences – but mainly by a play on stereotypes: the fact that Stewart, the real villain, comes over as such a benevolent old patriarch and the fact that Banks is a 40 year old single woman and can thus be assumed to be jealous of her young proteges.... This key fact is emphasised in a scene where the youngest recruit we discover that the angels keep a stash of food alongside their stash of weapons, because ‘All women are starving all the time.’ The new recruit played by Naomi Scott thinks that Bank’s declaration “I need cheese’ is some kind of code. Banks enlightens her: ‘its code for ‘I’m 40 and I’m single and I have a cheese shaped hole that needs to be filled. ‘ In the event of course Banks’ character turns out to be exactly what she seems – a highly experienced mentor dedicated to who heroically protecting, developing and supporting her Angels - and the final scene is populated by ex-angels of various generations helping to train up their successors.

Mulan 2020 also plays upon our expectations of female rivalry. Our heroine Mulan (played by Liu Yifei) has disguised herself as a man to join the battle to defend China from the enemy, Khan. Khan is supported by the witch Xiannian, played by Gong Li. She has been shunned by her own people because of her powers and fights with Khan because he accepts her and treats her as an equal. . However she has something of a moral epiphany as a result of her two encounters with Mulan. At their first meeting the older woman mocks the younger for pretending to be something she is not – that is to say a male warrior (although, somewhat

ironically when the witch tries to kill the young heroine she is prevented by then leather chest binding that forms a key part of Mulan's disguise). Mulan is nevertheless affected by their exchange and decides to discard her disguise – with the result that she is rejected by her former comrades. At their second meeting Xiannian takes pity on Mulan and decides to help her, betraying the evil Khan. Her assistance is instrumental in Mulan's final victory. In joining forces with the evil Khan, Xiannian has effectively sold her soul while her shapeshifting has taken her to the dark side – but she sets aside her bitterness ensure Mulan maintains her integrity s where she could not – and Mulan fights her final battle as a woman – as herself..

The Old Guard 2020 js the most explicit mentoring narrative of the three – closest to those captain-and-rookie narratives so often encountered in male-led action films. Charlize Theron plays Andy (aka Andromache) – leader of a small gang of what appear at first to be mercenary soldier but are soon revealed to be immortals who intervene in human wars on the side of the just or the vulnerable. Kiki Layne plays a young soldier Nile, a somewhat reluctant new recruit to the band who has just discovered her own immortality and is most unwilling to accept this new reality. In their initial encounters Andy and Nile battle physically, with the older, more experienced woman coming out on top. Gradually Nile accepts that Andy has her best interests at heart and accepts her leadership – and the 'tough love' that involves. Very quickly, however, the dynamic shifts as Andy (who as an immortal is used to regenerating after every battle however horrible her wounds) suffers an injury that does not heal. It seems that the 'immortality' bestowed on these superheroes is not infinite but eventually falls away – and Andy is becoming mortal again. Meanwhile Nile goes from strength to strength, learning how to manager her newfound qualities alongside her pre-existing military training and intelligence, to rescue her comrades (who are, naturally, imprisoned by a deranged scientist set on monetising their ability to heal). In particular she becomes Andy's protector and is very clearly being set up as the future leader of the group.

For me, then, what is striking about all three of these female- led films, with their female led creative teams, is the extent to which they very explicitly overturn the myth of the wicked stepmother and replace it with a new archetype – the female mentor. Not an ancient crone, nor a mother figure, not yet a sister-in arms exactly but an older, wiser and above all supportive female ally for the female action hero. I look forward to observing her progress with interest.....