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Bad Witches: Gender and the Downfall of Elizabeth Holmes of Theranos and Disney's Maleficent

Lauren Dundes ^{1,*}, Madeline Streiff Buitelaar ² and Zachary Streiff ³¹ Department of Sociology, McDaniel College, Westminster, MD 21157, USA² Hastings College of the Law, University of California, 200 McAllister St, San Francisco, CA 94102, USA; madeline.streiff@gmail.com³ Member of the State Bar of California, Monterey, CA 93940, USA; zachalans@gmail.com

* Correspondence: ldundes@mcdaniel.edu; Tel.: +1-410-857-2534

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Abstract: Female villains, both fictional and real, are subject to unconscious gender bias when part of their iniquity involves the disruption of male authority. Disney's most popular animated villain, Maleficent, from *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and Elizabeth Holmes of the now-disgraced blood testing startup, Theranos, reveled in their power, deviating from idealized feminine propriety. An analysis of scenes featuring Maleficent, the "mistress of all evil", and coverage of Elizabeth Holmes, once the first self-made female billionaire, illustrate how powerful women with hubris are censured beyond their misdeeds. Elizabeth Holmes' adoption of a deep voice and other masculine characteristics parallels Maleficent's demeanor and appearance that signal female usurpation of traditional male power. Both antagonists also engage in finger pricking that penetrates the skin and draws blood, acts associated with symbolic male potency. The purported ability to bewitch, in conjunction with the adoption of patterns associated with male dominance, suggest that Maleficent and Elizabeth Holmes wield power over men and wield the power of men. Discomfort with the way in which magical powers were allegedly employed by these women echo historical fears of witches accused of appropriating male power. Furthermore, powerful women who encroach on male authority but ultimately fail to upend the gender hierarchy trigger schadenfreude beyond that expected from their wrongdoings. In the end, the stories of Maleficent and Elizabeth Holmes celebrate the downfall of women who brazenly embrace power, without showing women how to challenge the gender hierarchy.

Keywords: Theranos; Elizabeth Holmes; STEM; Disney; *Sleeping Beauty*; Maleficent; Aurora; princess; finger prick; Carreyrou; Bad Blood; magic; sorcery; animal symbolism; gender; schadenfreude; stereotypes; witch; spinsters; hubris; male hegemony; villain

1. Introduction

Portrayals of powerful women, both fictional and real, shape conceptions of female villainy (Bindrim 2018; Chang et al. 2019; Kennard et al. 2016; Lester 2015; Olsson and Martiny 2018; Rudman and Kilianski 2000). These figures may act as agents of socialization (Bussey and Bandura 1999, 2004), especially in the area of gender equality (Coyne et al. 2014, 2016; Davies et al. 2002; Gerbner et al. 2002; Pike and Jennings 2005). These types of depictions may also reflect continuing fears about females gaining power at the expense of men (Koushik and Reed 2018; Macaluso 2018; Olsson 2000).

The interplay of gender, power, and villainy has a precedent in Disney animated features that influence children in their formative years (e.g., Coyne et al. 2016; Golden and Jacoby 2018; Griffin et al. 2016; Hine et al. 2018b; Wohlwend 2012). Disney villains illustrate the "gender-role defiance as deviance" archetype (Hoerrner 1996; Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 2003; Patterson and Spencer 2017; Putnam 2013;

Towbin et al. 2004). In particular, female villains tend to possess traits deemed traditionally masculine such as assertiveness and independence (England et al. 2011) and commonly rule with an “iron hand” (Davis 2007, p. 125). The persistence of this pattern is evident in Maleficent, Disney’s most popular villain from *Sleeping Beauty* (1959)¹ (who is also featured in the 2014 reboot of the eponymous saga *Maleficent*).^{2,3} Thus, in Disney films, “echoes of the old continue to reverberate through the new” reflecting paradoxical gendered identities (Griffin et al. 2016, p. 884) including pathologized female masculinities (Halberstam 1998). As a result, motifs found in older films cannot be dismissed as relics of the past. Indeed, Maleficent’s salience begs the question of why her character continues to serve as a model for evil and whether her vilification can shed light on societal views of non-fictional women cast as villains.

Enter Elizabeth Holmes (subsequently EH), the subject of a surfeit of media coverage beginning in 2015. This barrage began after her company, Theranos, failed to deliver on its promise of revolutionizing the laboratory testing industry by running a host of tests on a drop or two of blood from a finger prick rather than conventional venipuncture. Publicity also resulted from EH’s status as the world’s youngest self-made female billionaire (prior to her downfall), despite her dropping out of Stanford University after her first year as an undergraduate.⁴ While her deceit as well as the potential for harming patients catapulted her into infamy, there are unanswered questions about how she became a captivating villain whose debacle was applauded.

This analysis examines these two female villains whose fallibility is presented as especially heinous because they not only wield power over men but also wield the power of men. Maleficent of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Disney’s most popular villain, foreshadows media treatment of EH, founder and CEO of the now-disgraced startup company Theranos. Both women display masculine traits in worlds where males predominate: A fictional kingdom and the disproportionately male realm of STEM (Banchefsky et al. 2016; Banchefsky and Park 2018; Cidlinská 2018; Tao and Gloria 2018). They also appropriate the ultimate symbol of masculinity, the penetrative power to prick (a finger), a latent but meaningful challenge to gender norms.

Women, fictional and real alike, that are pegged as interlopers in male-dominated spheres may be undermined by their violation of gender stereotypes. In addition, discomfort surrounding women that threaten to subvert the gender hierarchy may lead to suspicions that they harness nefarious supernatural powers. The societal celebration of their downfall reflects longstanding apprehensions about formidable women. Their notoriety is intensified by subtle gender coding that shapes concepts of villainy for women in power beyond the expected condemnation due to clearly reprehensible acts.

Article Organization

The four major themes explored in this paper are as follows: (1) The significance of gender roles dictating “acceptable” female traits such as compassion and dependence; (2) finger pricking as emblematic of women’s misappropriated phallic power; (3) fears of women controlling men and their use of sorcery to do so; and (4) animal symbolism that reinforces the traditional gender pecking order. These four themes support the argument that powerful women that overtly display single-minded ambition are guilty of hubris. When these females are stripped of their power by male heroes, the resulting schadenfreude suggests a lack of progress toward gender equality.

¹ Maleficent’s notoriety is heightened by her comparison to the passive Aurora, the most recognizable of Disney princesses (Hine et al. 2018a), and a Disney character that remains popular as measured by sales of Disney princess merchandise (Dundes and Streiff 2016).

² Maleficent reigns as the most popular of the Disney villains (according to sales on the Disney store website: www.shop.disney.com), a popularity apparent in plans for a sequel to the live action *Maleficent* (2014) (with a release date scheduled for late 2019).

³ For a plot summary of Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), see Davis 2007 (pp. 242–43).

⁴ By contrast, Kylie Jenner’s cosmetics company made her the youngest person ever on Forbes’ annual ranking of America’s Richest Self-Made Women in 2019. Notably, however, her income was from purveying beauty products (not STEM), a realm where women are accepted as authorities.

2. Method

Comparing EH to Maleficent in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) entailed textual analysis in which salient themes were extracted from the definitive book about EH by *Wall Street Journal* investigative reporter and two-time Pulitzer Prize winner John Carreyrou. His acclaimed book, *Bad Blood: Secrets and Lies in a Silicon Valley Startup* (Carreyrou 2018a), chronicles EH's rise and fall from 2003 to 2018. Subsequent journalistic coverage provided the opportunity to assess concordance with themes that emerged in other media portrayals of EH.⁵ Content analysis of these same patterns in scenes of Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) was employed in order to carry out a comparative analysis. In addition, the prevalence of these motifs in everyday symbolism provided additional information about whether the violation of gender norms magnifies the iniquity of female villains.

3. Expectations of Female Altruism Not Ambition

Traits that are valued vary according to the gender of the person under evaluation. For males, competence is paramount while for females, compassion is a primary desideratum, a trend revealed by the words used to describe men versus women in a study of peer performance reviews of US Naval Academy students (Smith et al. 2019). In this study, of the 81,774 total attribute assignments described, the top two words used to extol men were analytical and competent. For women, the two most salient adjectives, compassionate and enthusiastic, conveyed the value placed on emotional warmth. These findings suggest that women without such qualities risk disparagement.

Children pick up on these patterns as well, as kindness and politeness were the qualities most frequently mentioned by girls interviewed about what they had learned from Disney princesses (Uppal 2019). Communal traits related to connectedness and expressivity (like supportiveness, compassion, and warmth) are associated with women, while traits like autonomy, agency, and independence (such as dominance, leadership, and powerfulness) are linked to males (Carter 2014; Pillemer et al. 2014).⁶

Ubiquitous Disney films expose young children to this restricted definition of suitable female comportment (England et al. 2011; Golden and Jacoby 2018). Furthermore, because women who exercise authority (especially over men) are labeled "power-hungry", a "dominance penalty" may result. Even without misdeeds, but rather only because of possessing an agentic trait, females may be "demonized" to preserve the gender hierarchy, a phenomenon informed by the Status Incongruity Hypothesis (Brescoll et al. 2018; Rudman et al. 2012).

The status incongruity hypothesis explains the fallout from the perceived mismatch between the agency of powerful women and expectations stemming from their low ascribed status. As women's actions become more similar to men's, they narrow the disparity between the genders and call into question a system that privileges men. This threat of disrupting the status quo posed by women with agency can drive backlash against women's advancement (Rudman et al. 2012), a reaction that could be heightened in cases of flagrant female fallibility.

3.1. Elizabeth Holmes (EH)

EH had a singular focus on success and felt no need to defer to males. Her actions were driven by ambition, and although she professed the importance of the altruistic benefits of her aspirations, she wanted to achieve her goals in a way that would earn her power, wealth, and fame.

⁵ Coverage of EH includes an ABC News podcast, *The Dropout* (2019) and a documentary distributed by HBO, *The Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley* (2019). A Hollywood film based on Carreyrou's *Bad Blood: Secrets and Lies in a Silicon Valley Startup* (Carreyrou 2018a) is forthcoming.

⁶ In the updated *Sleeping Beauty*-themed live action film *Maleficent* (2014), the title character is redeemed when she demonstrates the gender-conforming traits of maternal love and compassion for Aurora, transforming from a witch to a mother figure.

3.1.1. Childhood Ambition

Even as a child, EH betrayed a sense of superiority to males. She had a remarkable answer to the proverbial question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” EH dismissed the dream of becoming president, explaining that as a future billionaire, the president would want to marry *her* (Carreyrou 2018a). This anecdote shows EH’s departure from the tendency for women to prefer a male with greater power despite dynamics of gender and power that disadvantage women who outshine men, such as in “the mating market” (Kim et al. 2019, p. 197).

3.1.2. Adoption of Male Traits

As an adult, at a time when EH sought a high-ranking position, she adopted male traits ranging from consistently wearing pants to making black turtlenecks her trademark attire, emulating male icon Steve Jobs. Her masculine posture when seated and chopping hand gestures also projected male authority (McCarthy 2019). She named her mysterious blood testing machine an Edison, channeling the acclaim of male inventor Thomas Edison. In perhaps the most conspicuous example of deviating from gender norms, she adopted a baritone voice. The jarringly low tenor of her voice was reportedly manufactured as a way to “be taken seriously” in Silicon Valley, in what is “overwhelmingly a man’s world” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 98). In one case, her “deep voice” caused a colleague to be “taken aback” as “it was unlike anything he’d heard before” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 162).

3.1.3. Relentless Work Ethic and Autocratic (Male) Management Style

EH had no work–life balance as she worked 16 hours a day, seven days a week, and purportedly slept only four hours a night. She expected a similar commitment from employees, whose hours she monitored, questioning the loyalty of those who balked at her demands (Carreyrou 2018a). Her autocratic style included divesting her board of power, as was evident when she “took offense” at an employee’s simple question about the role of her board, leading her to proclaim, “I make all the decisions here” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 298). This take-charge attitude of independence is a repudiation of interdependence characterized by “collaboration, sharing, and teamwork ... [associated] with displays of femininity” (Fletcher 2004, p. 653).

Her lack of praise for employees, and indeed her firing of those who crossed her, ran counter to the stereotypical ideal of a nurturing female leader who is expected to selflessly put others’ needs before her own (Borgerson 2019). Her deficient leadership was attributed to a “lack of empathy” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 149), a trait that created a work environment that one employee felt “was gradually stripping them all of [their] humanity” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 149).

Even once EH’s company had collapsed, Carreyrou remarked, “I still didn’t sense any real remorse or empathy” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 286), concluding that EH “had displayed a pattern of ruthlessness [... such that] if there was collateral damage on her way to riches and fame, so be it” (Carreyrou 2018a, pp. 298–99). This description of blind ambition, a marker of status incongruity, is especially unattractive for a woman described as being like a “sociopath”, (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 291) for never “apologizing or admitting fault” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 299). In other words, her lack of empathy and singular confidence in accomplishing her lofty goals were a type of assertiveness that was self-serving and thus especially unseemly in a woman (see e.g., Amanatullah and Tinsley 2013; Tannen 1994). Her confidence is aptly summed up by her belief in her ability to “change the world”, as she declared (even after negative media coverage): “First they think you’re crazy, then they fight you, then all of a sudden, you change the world” (Carreyrou 2018b, embedded video:1:55–59).

3.2. “Male” Ficent: Confidence without Empathy

Maleficent displays similar bravado. She shares EH’s zeal for self-aggrandizement, epitomized by her iconic declaration, “I am the mistress of all evil!” Her arrival at Aurora’s christening is heralded

by thunder and lightning, a storm power associated with Zeus-like male power (Dundes et al. 2018; Primo 2018). To reinforce her usurpation of male authority, she wields a phallic staff.

While Maleficent may appear to be offended by her exclusion from Aurora's christening party, her ostracization indicates that she was also excluded from the highest social circles, the "royalty, nobility, and gentry", as Maleficent herself notes. Thus, her reaction could be more about a desire to be among the powerful than about fears of social rejection, consistent with the higher value assigned to the masculine-associated trait of agency versus the feminine trait of communality among leaders (Vial and Napier 2018). In fact, the good fairy, Fauna, notes that Maleficent is ignorant about love, kindness, and the joys of helping others, traits coded as feminine (England et al. 2011; Griffin 2000).

Maleficent's most salient gender-defying trait is perhaps her gleeful cackling. She tends to laugh derisively when she displays her powers, a signal of her superiority that emasculates males. This first occurs—not coincidentally—when she shows that she is impervious to a phalanx of palace guards pointing their spears at her (positioned in a way that suggests their phallic nature); the guards clearly evince fear while she laughs at their impotence because she is impenetrable.⁷

Maleficent's trademark cackle violates gender norms for females in the same way that female comedians are discouraged from making men the target of their jokes (Dyner 2008, 2009) or portraying men as powerless relative to women (which as a result, commonly causes female comedians to resort to self-deprecating humor instead (Frewen et al. 2008; Martin et al. 2003)). Notably, while laughter at someone else's expense is unbecoming for heroines, it is a tool of symbolic castration for female villains who use it to put men in a one-down position.

4. Finger Pricking

In a prominent instance of gender inversion, both Maleficent and EH engage in finger pricking that is associated with the act of penetration. The slang meaning of the word prick goes back to at least the 16th century, with its phallic connotations likely linked to the "image of a thorn":

Like the phalanx of the ancient armies, the prick is an effective weapon to penetrate an enemy's fortress. In this case, the fortress the prick wants to penetrate is either the vagina or the assertiveness of a female colleague. Men fight women's attempts to gain equality ... [using a] metaphorical phallus that reminds women of who in contemporary society is entitled to privilege and power. (Murphy 2001, p. 77)

Thus, the semiotics of the word "prick" involve penetrative actions that can be either sexual or aggressive (or both, as with the marketing of "Trojan" condoms that conflates romantic and martial conquests).

4.1. The Pricking Power of Maleficent

When Maleficent shapeshifts into a pulsating, green will o' the wisp (a variant of the enchanting flickering of a Jack-o'-Lantern),⁸ she assumes the form of a mythical, unknown, seductive force that historically misled people in a mysterious way (traditionally in marshes). She morphs into a throbbing green spinning wheel with a green will o' the wisp atop a pointed spindle quill. Its neon green coloration matches the green shade of the ball of her staff, implying that the phallic power of the spinning wheel and spindle quill are associated with the ball at the base of her rod. To make clear that Maleficent has transformed herself into the spinning wheel, her voice emanates from it, when she

⁷ To "have the last laugh" does not connote that something is literally funny, but rather satisfaction from being in a superior position relative to someone who has disrespected the subject, as evident from the cackling of the Wicked Witch of the West in the *Wizard of Oz* and popular Disney villains such as the queen as witch in *Snow White*, Ursula the Sea Witch in the *Little Mermaid*, and Cruella de Vil (a "deVil") in *101 Dalmatians*.

⁸ In Thompson's Motif-Index of Folk-Literature, "Jack-o'-Lantern" and "Will-o'-the Wisp" are both examples of Motif F491 (Baughman 2012, p. 232). Their mesmerizing quality may explain why candles are considered romantic, with even ersatz renditions designed to flicker. They are employed only at night when their flickering possesses the same enticing, magical quality.

echoically intones, “Touch the spindle. Touch it, I say.” In this incarnation, she commands Aurora to prick her finger on the spindle quill.

Within the context of the above quotation from [Murphy \(2001\)](#), the scene signifies that Maleficent, although female, has assumed the physical form of a penetrative phallic symbol, specifically one connoted by the word prick (a word Maleficent uses when she announces her curse). Maleficent’s misappropriated power serves as a warning to vulnerable maidens about the potential of phallic power gone awry. It also sets the stage for a battle in which a male must vanquish a female who has usurped the male role.⁹

Maleficent later uses her phallic power in an attempt to humiliate Prince Philip through symbolic feminization by pricking him with “a forest of thorns [intended to] be his tomb.” Prince Philip, however, averts fatal impalement by thorns by skillfully wielding his mighty sword, cutting through the web of thorny briars between him and the sleeping princess Aurora (also known as Briar Rose). He later uses this same sword to lethally impale Maleficent who has shapeshifted into a dragon depicted with a thorn-shaped nose and thorn-like talons and fangs.

4.2. EH as Wielding Pricking Power

EH has been directly compared to Sleeping Beauty (Aurora), although the analogy is more apropos for Maleficent, rather than Aurora:

[W]hat made Holmes’s quest to defy death so fantastical was the magical element at its core. With only a minuscule amount of blood, Holmes claimed—just a fingertip’s pinprick, like Sleeping Beauty on her spindle—a mysterious, proprietary black box [an Edison] could screen for dozens of diseases and disorders. Holmes would never disclose exactly what went on inside her mysterious machines, insisting that she was entitled to her trade secrets. ([Bruenig 2019](#), para 3)

Although the above passage does not expound on the deeper meaning underlying the comparison between EH and the finger pricking scene in *Sleeping Beauty*, the connection has been noted. EH herself recognized the fantastical elements of her venture in seeing herself as a martyr, “as sort of a Joan of Arc who is being persecuted” ([Bilton 2018a](#), para 6). Indeed, her historical comparison can be expanded to events of the Middle Ages.

5. Women’s Independence as a Threat that Is Historically Linked to Witches and Sorcery

Women’s autonomy was a threat expressed during the European witch hunts of the Middle Ages at a time when concerns about women upsetting the status quo emerged:

The fantasies about the unlimited sexual powers and depravity of women may have been a reflection of the fear engendered by the large number of unmarried women not subject to the authority of fathers or husbands, as, according to prevailing views, they ought to have been. ([Ben-Yehuda 1980](#), p. 22)

Witches were burned in the Middle Ages (the chronological setting for *Sleeping Beauty*) as punishment for their alleged appropriation of male power during societal upheaval. In fact, the persecution of witches “served as a means of social control of women at a time of great social change, and when

⁹ Disney artists erred in drawing the “spindle” which is in fact depicted as a distaff (used for storing unspun flax before it is spun into linen). The distaff, a word that denotes a female and means a “visible display of feminine virtue” ([Do Rozario 2018](#), p. 136), is mistakenly portrayed as mounted by a phallic quill which would actually be both useless and hazardous ([Ohio Memory 2017](#), para 6; see [Ashford 2019](#)). Thus, this spinning wheel contains an incorrect mélange of male and female symbols (that is, a female distaff and a phallic quill) that perhaps symbolizes its use as a tool by a female that usurps phallic power.

men were actively pursuing the more lucrative and influential positions within the emerging capitalist economy” (Hester 1992, p. 4).

At this time, women were becoming involved in new types of industries. As a result, “during the 13th and 14th centuries, women’s differing roles as part of the traditional family structure and as unmarried workers became very problematic”, making them the scapegoat during periods of societal instability and anxiety (Ben-Yehuda 1980, p. 18). Thus, the unconscious goal of the persecution of female witches allegedly collaborating with Satan was a futile attempt “to cleanse the world from all the effects of social change and anomie and to restore the moral boundaries of medieval society” (Ben-Yehuda 1980, p. 22).

5.1. Significance of Burning the Spinning Wheels after Maleficent’s Finger-Pricking Curse

When King Stefan (and not his barely visible, nameless wife) orders the incineration of all the spinning wheels in the land in a futile effort to foil Maleficent’s curse, it is a decree that historically would have limited progress towards gender equality as “spinster” became a last name for unmarried women defined by their work. The surname Spinster, much like Brewer or Weaver, could substitute for the surname of a woman’s father or husband who had power over the women under their aegis. Although the burning of all spinning wheels in the land was fictional, there are lingering negative associations in modern-day expressions that derogate women’s work as spinners, evident in the meaning of idioms like: To spin a yarn, spin a line, political spin, and spinning one’s wheels that reinforce negative connotations of this female-dominated profession. These associations could have been aggravated by the power of the three female Fates in Greek mythology, one that was a spinner, another who measured the thread of life, and the third that cut the thread of life resulting in death: Clotho (“spinner”), Lachesis (“assigner of lots”), and Atropos (“unavoidable”) (Thorburn 2005)—perhaps the model for the three witches in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (Nelson 2010). In her incarnation as a spinning wheel topped with a spindle quill, Maleficent not only poses a phallic threat but also proves her ability to circumvent the bonfire ordered by King Stefan that aimed to annihilate spinning wheels and what they represented.¹⁰

The symbolism of spinning wheels also relates to perceptions of spinsters as independent women who were able to fend for themselves with the income they produced without males (Ben-Yehuda 1980; Gray 2005; Goldberg 1992). The pejorative connotations of “old maids” and spinsters contrast with the male counterpart, bachelor.¹¹ This shows discomfort with women who are not under the dominion of men (Do Rozario 2018), a feeling reinforced by associating such independent women with threatening tools. Spinsters wielded hackles, a steel comb for separating flax fibers with long, sharp teeth or spikes, related to raising hackles (arousing anger), a phallic instrument that arguably exacerbated fears of these independent women. Furthermore, a cognate of hackle, “heckler” (from *hekelen*: Middle Dutch: to prick, irritate), is someone who insults or teases, often at a comedy show. Thus, the spiked instrument linked to female spinsters connotes the power to incite anger and ridicule.

5.2. EH as a Pseudo-Spinster

EH, described as having spun tall tales (Whigham 2018), was like a spinster not only because of her independence and power, but also because she created the appearance of being “married” to her job. Despite being in a relationship with Theranos’ chief operating officer Ramesh “Sunny” Balwani, she hid this part of her life and portrayed herself as single (Carreyrou 2018a). Being single was part of her image, perhaps because she wanted to avoid the impression that she was subject to any romance-related emotional turmoil that could interfere with her leadership. Keeping the relationship *sub rosa* also

¹⁰ Rumpelstiltskin “elevates male spinning to a form of alchemy and magic” in which a male with a phallic wand accomplishes the spinning without labor (Do Rozario 2018, p. 142).

¹¹ At the close of ceremonies conferring “bachelor” degrees, graduates toss their tassel-adorned caps in the air, a tradition started by men in the Naval Academy. The tassel, commonly yellow, is like a corn tassel that discharges pollen to fertilize female ovules via wind, a symbol of male power.

helped create the impression that she was driven to the extent of forgoing romantic relationships. This, in turn, may have minimized any speculation undermining her authority, as employees and investors might otherwise have questioned the impact of power dynamics intertwined with romance, especially given that Balwani was nearly 20 years her senior. Another possibility is that her single status could have been more appealing to older male investors who were susceptible to her charms.

6. Supernatural Powers

If women wielding power is unnatural, then women who are able to do so might be perceived as having supernatural powers that allow them to control others against their will, as when Maleficent puts Aurora in a hypnotic state in order to prick her finger. Similar powers have also been attributed to EH.

6.1. EH and the Power to Beguile

Arguably, since EH convinced investors that her finger-prick blood testing would make them money, her Edison machine is like Maleficent in her incarnation as a will o' the wisp that also misleads and entices her victims. Headlines, like the following, convey EH's supernatural powers: "*It's undeniable, her marks were, again and again, older men': How Elizabeth Holmes seduced the world's most powerful*"; this is a story in which EH is described as "seduc[ing] powerful men to keep the charade going" (Whigham 2018). The word seduce connotes her powers to sway others rather than her sexual prowess (perhaps because for women, power can be perceived as a substitute for sex (Streiff and Dundes 2017a)). This *femme fatale* motif, in which women manipulate men to do their will with calamitous repercussions, harkens back to sirens in Greek mythology that lured sailors to their demise. As such, *femmes fatales* are seen as dishonest and devious, taking advantage of men with resources that are valuable to them (Kanter 1977; Sheppard and Johnson 2019; Watkins et al. 2013).

Carreyrou uses a number of expressions to convey this same type of sorcery (Heffernan 2018). EH purportedly cast a spell on assorted investors that allowed her to bilk this mostly male group of \$724 million (Herper 2016). On the Twitter feed of Carreyrou, former Theranos employee James David Atkins responded to a question posed about why more employees did not leave: "We were ALL under her spell" (Carreyrou-Twitter 2018, emphasis in original). EH's actions were also called "sleight of hand" (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 7) while her gaze was described as "almost hypnotic" (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 7), consistent with a promotional video about her with "a hypnotic quality to it" (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 212).

In a *Wall Street Journal* video, Carreyrou remarks on EH's unblinking gaze saying, "Her eyes are part of her magic spell" (Carreyrou 2018b, 2:59–3:02). Furthermore, he adds, "She had the ability to make people suspend disbelief; she has this reality distortion field" (Carreyrou 2018b, embedded video 3:24–33).¹² Notably, "making" people think a certain way suggests the victims are credulous rather than gullible, allowing them (i.e., rich, elderly male investors) to feel less like fools in dispensing with due diligence before parting with their money (which in the case of Rupert Murdoch, owner of the *Wall Street Journal*, was an investment of \$125 million (Abelson and Thomas 2018)).

Beyond her appearance, her "mesmerizing" (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 7) voice was employed to "instantly captivat[e]" men (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 18). In fact, Steven Burd, former CEO of Safeway, was described as "in her thrall" (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 111) after working out a deal in which Safeway built clinics in over 800 stores yet ultimately never used Theranos blood tests, even after spending about \$350 million preparing to do so (Carreyrou 2018a). In another telling example, journalist Nick Bilton commented that EH would have liked to "use her magic witch powers" to convince Carreyrou

¹² Carreyrou traces the notion of a reality distortion field (from television show *Star Trek*) to its inception in EH's role model, Steve Jobs. The magical powers linked to this term are described as resulting from an "indomitable will" that manifests like "a force of nature", traits more acceptable in men who are supposed to wield power and influence (Hargrave 2016).

not to expose her (Bilton 2019a, 35:36–37, podcast). Through the lens of gender, “magic witch powers” are threatening (especially compared to wizards’ powers that are more respected given their association with males).

EH’s mystical qualities were also expressed by the man serving as Theranos’ chief creative officer who believed her “fairy tale was real” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 211) although by the end, Carreyrou characterizes her continued trickery as her “latest Houdini act” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 290). Despite that after her debacle, “the spell was broken” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 291), the public still entertained “the possibility that Holmes might pull a rabbit out of her proverbial hat” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 192) given the many persons “bewitched by Holmes’s mixture of charm, intelligence, and charisma” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 299). These perceptions of EH as possessing a type of magical abilities suggest that those under her spell were less responsible because of her manipulation that is likened to sorcery.

6.2. The Personal Legend as Magical Inspiration

These perceptions of enchantment were fueled in part by EH herself, as she informed employees that she was “building a religion” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 173). This remarkable instance of self-aggrandizement is surprising given that Theranos was allegedly based on science and data rather than ideology. She and Sunny Balwani threatened nonbelievers, that is, employees who were “not prepared to show complete devotion and unmitigated loyalty to the company” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 173). As part of instilling her “religion”, EH gifted each of her employees a copy of *The Alchemist* (a 1988 novel by Brazilian Paulo Coelho). The story, one that clearly reflected her sense of self, is about an Andalusian shepherd boy, Santiago, in search of his “personal legend”, or the fulfillment of his dreams. The story clearly resonated with EH, especially the notion that truly desiring one’s goal will cause it to come to fruition (what Freud called omnipotence of thought in *Totem and Taboo*, 1913). For this to happen, forces of the universe will allegedly align.

Later in the novel, Santiago journeys with a wise alchemist who reiterates the need for Santiago to realize his true self by showing evidence of his oneness with “the soul of the world” in the form of a *simoom*. A *simoom* (from Arabic: “To poison”) is a strong, dry, dust-filled wind that blows in the Sahara, parts of the Middle East, and deserts of the Arabian Peninsula. Its etymology, poison wind, relates to its sudden onset that is so desiccating that it may cause heat stroke. Santiago asserts that he hopes his transformation into the wind will allow him to reach all corners of the world—just like EH’s desire to have a worldwide impact while also transforming herself into a powerful and intimidating being.¹³ EH seemed to believe that her personal legend could substitute for the usual rigors involved in scientific education and training.

The significance of the book is that it suggests that EH identifies with (1) a male character, Santiago; (2) a *poison* wind; and (3) alchemy, “a seemingly magical process of transformation” synonymous with sorcery and witchcraft (Lindberg 2012, p. 27). The novel also places her ambitions within the context of a fantastical personal legend, seen in iconic pictures in which she holds up a tiny tubule of (fake) blood, with her hand in a magician-like pose (Carreyrou 2018b, embedded video 1:25–26). In fact, Carreyrou implies that her ambition (i.e., the ability to perform tests using only a drop or two of blood) would require supernatural providence.

Carreyrou calls her aspiration the “Holy Grail” of microfluidics (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 181), an interesting choice of metaphor considering the association of the chalice with the blood of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ In fact, in the penultimate sentence of his book, after Carreyrou concludes, “Her ambition was voracious” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 299), he describes her goal as “a quest to be the second coming of

¹³ Elsewhere, the authors discuss shapeshifting as a reflection of phallogocentric power and how the power to desiccate is linked to the evil eye in which envy is destructive and threatens male virility (Streiff and Dundes 2017b).

¹⁴ Only male knights were permitted to seek the Holy Grail as women were seen as either “the mother or the temptress” and thus were expressly excluded from participating (Lopez 2007, p. 8).

Steve Jobs” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 299), a description that connotes megalomania, if not a god complex.¹⁵ These traits bring to mind Maleficent’s announcement that she is the mistress of all evil as well as her last words prior to transforming into a dragon: “Now shall you deal with me, old prince, and all the powers of hell!”.

7. Male Animals as Alter Egos

7.1. EH

Maleficent’s form as a fire-breathing dragon lent credence to her evocation of hell. Similarly, EH complemented her image with surrogate totem animals of sorts (an eagle and a dog). As in Disney films, associations with animals draw on “primal fears” that heighten the dangers animals can pose (Bell 1995, p. 117). This assertion is supported by a study of how animals have links to gender: Women described as predatory (versus prey-like) were more apt to be perceived as unfeminine (Tipler and Ruscher 2019). This finding is also consistent with research showing that men are more likely to identify with animals that are predators rather than prey (Robinson et al. 2017).

EH’s security detail identified her by the code name Eagle 1, associating her with a raptor that is an apex predator. Similarly, Maleficent is linked to a male raven, a type of bird that inspires fear (suggested by its group name, that is, an “unkindness” or a “conspiracy” of ravens). Furthermore, her raven’s name, Diablo (Devil), is an appellation befitting a carrion bird connected to the dead and lost souls (Lévi-Strauss and Layton 1963).

The name of EH’s male Siberian Husky, Balto, was also significant as it was consistent with research showing that pets are an expression of owner attributes (Tesfom and Birch 2013). Named for the canine that in 1925 delivered antitoxins to Nome, Alaska during a diphtheria outbreak, the historical Balto’s role as a savior likely resonated with EH. Her treatment of Balto was notable in that Balto often walked with her in the halls of Theranos and even accompanied her into what were supposed to be sanitary labs (even though he was not housebroken) (Bilton 2019b). She also sometimes traveled with Balto to professional meetings. Thus, Balto was more than a mere dog to EH. In fact, “she decided that Balto wasn’t really a dog, but rather a wolf. In meetings, at cafés, whenever anyone stopped to pet the pup and ask his breed, Holmes soberly replied, ‘He’s a wolf.’” (Bilton 2019b, para 7).

Given EH’s remarkable devotion to her dog, it is notable that dogs are associated with masculinity (Budge et al. 1996; Mitchell and Ellis 2013; Perrine and Osbourne 1998) in contradistinction to the femininity associated with cats. For example, a dogfight—involving military planes and “wingmen”—contrasts with catfights, a derogatory term that trivializes disagreements among women as catty (Douglas 1994; Evans et al. 1998; Jones and Palmer 2011; Reinke 2010). In fact, cat-related insults have gender coding that connotes stereotypical feminine weakness, e.g., scaredy cat, to pussyfoot around, and cat’s paw—someone duped into helping to accomplish the goals of another person.

Thus, the dog-wolf male coding enhanced masculine facets of EH’s identity, as wolves, like eagles, are alpha/apex predators and coded as males (as seen in the term wolf whistle or lone wolf) (Dundes et al. 2018). As a result, presenting her dog as a wolf augmented her (male-based) authority, albeit at an unconscious level.

7.2. Maleficent

The symbolism of human links to animals is more overt with Maleficent’s bullhorns that are attached to her head at all times. Her Minoan-bull type horns (Acocella 2014)¹⁶ substitute for hair which then cannot detract from her power. In fact, in recognition of the semiotics of

¹⁵ Steve Jobs himself drew on Biblical references with his company’s logo of an apple with a bite missing, harkening back to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve.

¹⁶ For a photo of a libation vase with bullhorns like those of Maleficent (at the Heraklion Archaeological Museum in Crete), see http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/4/eh430.jsp?obj_id=7883.

tresses, some women consciously choose to “defeminize themselves” due to the association between professional incompetence and long hair (Weitz 2001, p. 278).¹⁷

Maleficent’s bullhorns also connote power due to their association with masculinity, especially given the etymology of horn as “an erection of the penis” (Horn 2018). Various expressions draw on the power of bulls, including the following: Mess with the bull and you get the horns; hung like a bull; to be in the bullpen (a place to warm up to pitch, associated with the strength and stamina of a bull); bulldoze; to take the bull by the horns; and a bull that is a papal edict or official proclamation that enhances the authority of the (male) Pope through coded masculinity. The bullhorn as a means to amplify sound is based on the animal’s tendency to gain notice and receive respect.

8. The Downfall of the Villains

Although Maleficent transforms into a dragon during the film’s climax in her battle with Prince Philip, when the prince penetrates her with his magic Sword of Truth, it is reminiscent of a matador’s *estocada*, or sword thrust that occurs in bullfights. With Maleficent acting in a male role, Prince Philip conforms to the pattern in which a male must conquer or feminize another male—or symbolic male—to establish his masculinity (Dundes 1997) and in this case, to re-establish male hegemony as well.¹⁸

Similarly, in the Theranos saga, a young man attained hero status by helping to unseat his boss and oppressor, EH. Theranos employee Tyler Shultz, grandson of former secretary of state George Shultz, was “the first employee to blow the whistle to a state regulator about what he saw as troubling practices” at Theranos (Carreyrou 2018b, para 16). Even after Tyler became disillusioned by Theranos and quit, EH still tried to control him. She arranged to lure him to his grandfather’s home to have her legal team pressure him to sign a nondisclosure agreement (NDA), a type of gag order. Nevertheless, Tyler Shultz “steadfastly refused to sign any document” prepared by Theranos attorneys (Carreyrou 2018a). The pressure to remain gagged (via non-disclosure agreements) was intense given that Theranos attorneys had threatened “to bankrupt his entire family” if he refused to sign an affidavit (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 247), an example of truly villainous tactics.

While no one in the media identifies Tyler Shultz as a prince per se, he and others saw EH as an evil queen, partly because with her wealth (estimated by Forbes to have been \$4.5 billion in October 2014), she had become “Silicon Valley royalty” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 213). For example, in noting the power EH wielded in the presence of powerful males, Tyler Shultz commented, “It was as though she were the queen and they were her court, kissing her ring” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 191). Likewise, an employee of Theranos compared its climate to royal politics, opining, “When you strike at the king, you must kill him.” Carreyrou then notes that the coup failed, saying, that although employees had “struck at the king, or rather the queen . . . she’d survived. The queen didn’t waste any time putting down the rebellion . . . [with a] purge” (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 51).

As a whistleblower who risked reprisal, Tyler Shultz earned praise from observers, including Carreyrou who extolled “his courage”; Shultz was the key source for Carreyrou’s first *Wall Street Journal* exposé in 2015 (Carreyrou 2018a, p. 287). Tyler’s version of a Sword of Truth and Shield of Virtue was as a metaphorical brave knight that helped bring down EH—the “dragon lady” (that is, an overbearing or tyrannical woman). In fact, after bringing to light dark secrets, Tyler Shultz was awarded the James Madison Freedom of Information Award (Shultz 2019).

¹⁷ Ironically, both male and female British judges distinguish their status by wearing wigs longer than those of barristers. All the wigs in court are based on centuries-old men’s hairstyles indicating that it is not the hair itself that confers status, but rather its association with males. This pattern applies to gowns worn in court or by esteemed religious figures that signal gravitas due to associations with male-based power.

¹⁸ Disney recapitulated this theme in *The Little Mermaid* (1989) when the Sea Witch Ursula usurps male power as evidenced by her newly masculine deep voice that makes her a fitting target for feminization by impalement, allowing Prince Eric to establish his masculinity (Dundes and Dundes 2000).

9. Unseating Maleficent and EH to Restore the Gender Hierarchy

Maleficent's power is conflated with villainy, a portrayal in which her threat to the gender hierarchy demands remediation. Her dramatic defeat and refeminization as a power-hungry character is the climax of the film while uniting Prince Philip and Aurora for the impending marriage is the denouement. To complement stereotypical gender roles, the ending scene of *Sleeping Beauty* reminds viewers of the alleged female preoccupation with the ideal dress color that, thanks to the good fairies' disagreement about Aurora's gown, alternates between pink and baby blue as she dances with the prince in the ballroom.

The end of the story of EH remains unwritten but so far, her depiction as arrogant and remorseless makes her a prime target for schadenfreude. Schadenfreude is provoked by what is perceived as hubristic pride or a desire to exert dominance that can be assuaged by the expression of embarrassment (Lange and Boecker 2019). According to journalist Nick Bilton who speculated about why the story of EH has generated so much interest, this is because she "ended up suffering the consequences" of her misdeeds, comeuppance that is rare for people in power (Bilton 2019a, podcast 42:1–3).

10. Conclusions

The patterns decoded in this article reveal that power and masculinity are conflated. Maleficent and EH are not just flawed and fallible individuals, but women that disrupted and appropriated male authority. The 1959 release of Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* depicts a gender role defying "mistress of all evil" that would be expected to reflect what are now outdated stereotypes. However, the schadenfreude resulting from Maleficent's spectacular downfall is still relevant. We can look at the way stories are told to consider whether the female villain paradigm perpetuates unease about women's advancement.

EH targeted and duped both her powerful male investors as well as her all-male board but as Carreyrou plainly states, she only did so because she sought men with authority that she lacked as a woman. In reference to the powerful males comprising the board at Theranos, Carreyrou comments, "She was looking for the credibility that came with their reputations . . . [as] larger-than-life figures" (Bilton 2018b, podcast: 44:38–42; 45:10–13). However, her hubris, violation of gender stereotypes, and power over men heighten her villainy which in turn echoes the schadenfreude seen upon Maleficent's downfall.

EH's debacle has evolved to be a cautionary tale about women at the helm with the potential to reinforce pre-existing, unconscious beliefs about women's mismatch with power. In a recapitulation of her predecessor Maleficent, EH's portrayal as a villain endowed with the powers of sorcery could deepen discomfort with women who exercise authority over men.

Although EH can be viewed as a failed entrepreneur, a fraud, or simply a villain, she must also be recognized as a woman who attempted to thrive in a male-dominated sphere whose failings risk reinforcing the notion that women are ill-suited as industry disruptors. As we have suggested in this article, "There's a particular kind of way that powerful women fall, a revelry and pleasure in it that's less common with male leaders" (Ossola 2019, para 13). Because of the similarities between Maleficent (1959) and EH (2019+), the way forward starts with awareness of an unconscious gender bias that is collectively promulgated and then unwittingly internalized and reinforced by individuals exposed to fictional and non-fictional narratives alike. As Microsoft founder and STEM magnate Bill Gates warns, the Theranos scandal might become "an excuse to write off" women who break boundaries (Gates 2018, para 11), especially given the propensity to ignore the successes of female entrepreneurs (Dean et al. 2019). We must think critically about stories that demonize powerful women whose progress is perceived as being at males' expense. Understanding female villains that audiences love to hate can provide insight into impediments to gender equality.

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