

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 23 (2009)

Artikel: Writing, performing, gendering the wicked witch of the west
Autor: Frohreich, Kimberly A.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-131131>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 01.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Writing, Performing, Gendering the Wicked Witch of the West

Kimberly A. Frohreich

Dorothy: Witches are old and ugly. . .
Glinda: Only bad witches are ugly.
(Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz*)

While the fairy tale *The Wizard of Oz* depicts women in positions of power, I argue that the dichotomy between the good witch(es) and the Wicked Witch, in both L. Frank Baum's 1900 novel and MGM's 1939 film, validates one kind of femininity and stigmatizes as masculine, monstrous, and "other" the woman who strays from her gender role. Second-wave feminism as well as postmodernism have re-evaluated the figure of the witch as "other," leading to the two contemporary texts, Gregory Maguire's 1995 novel, *Wicked, The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, and the 2003 Broadway musical, *Wicked*, in which the Wicked Witch is no longer portrayed as the villain. However, while Maguire's novel fundamentally questions identity categories, the Broadway musical merely uses the Wicked Witch character to validate a new kind of femininity, that of the post-feminist model of "girl power." In this paper, I explore how the Wicked Witch is or is not portrayed as "other" in these four texts, and how such portrayals either reinforce or challenge the gender binary.

In his book *On Ugliness*, Umberto Eco writes that many women were accused of witchcraft and burned at the stake "*because they were ugly*" (212, emphasis in original). Their exterior ugliness, their bodily difference, was seen as a sign of a degenerative interior state. Additionally, because they did not properly demonstrate patriarchally defined feminine traits, and be-

cause they often refused to adhere to the morals and lifestyle promoted by the Christian doctrine, they were considered a threat to male power and were accordingly demonized. For a woman, then, “ugly” was not feminine but masculine; and a woman with supposedly “masculine” qualities was monstrous, evil, and aligned with the devil. The stigmatization and the persecution of women who fell under these categories then constituted a warning to other women, those who might stray from their gender role.

Just as they were often maintained at the perimeter of mainstream society, witches were also kept on the border of subject identification, of what Judith Butler calls “uninhabitability”:

This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which – and by virtue of which – the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and life. In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation. (3)

Butler refers to the process of identification in relation to the subject’s “assum[ption]” of their sex. For a human, then, it is necessary to “appropriate” one’s so-called biological sex by adhering to their cultural equivalents of masculine or feminine, always remaining on one side of this gender binary or the other (3). For a woman, to be identified as a witch, as a masculine woman rather than a feminine one, was seen as a virtually unlivable situation because she would be denied any “claim to autonomy and life” as she was “outside” the “defining limit of the subject’s domain” (3). The figure of the witch was then an abject “other,” serving as a threat to those women who differed from the culture’s definition of femininity. Yet, the witch was also “inside” the gender binary. Despite the fact that (and because) she was unidentifiable as feminine, the witch was masculinized through the very gender binary in which she was seemingly denied existence.

The figure of the witch in traditional fairy tales provides no exception. L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* may present the idea of a good witch, but his characterization of the Wicked Witch of the West as the “other” reinforces the gender binary, as does Victor Fleming’s 1939 film version. Though the two Wicked Witches are represented differently, they both exhibit patriarchal notions of the woman who strays from her gender role as masculine, monstrous, ugly, abject, and “other.” The female reader/spectator is asked to distance herself from such a character. However, second-wave feminists have attempted

to appropriate the subversive nature of the figure of the witch as “other” as a site from which to contest patriarchal domination (see Sempruch 1). Their work represents a change in the way one might relate to the “other” in terms of gender definition. Recent re-interpretations of *The Wizard of Oz*, such as Gregory Maguire’s *Wicked, the Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, as well as the 2003 Broadway musical *Wicked* have gone further in attempting to redeem the Wicked Witch of the West. Each work proposes a destabilization of the image of the Wicked Witch as evil. Yet each differs in its treatment of the character in relation to the good/evil binary which then reflects the way they deal with the gender binary as well as its connection to the figure of the “other.” While Maguire’s novel destabilizes identity categories, thereby making any straightforward process of identification with the character difficult, the Broadway musical provides a new sort of heroine for its audience. In this essay, I will examine the Wicked Witch of the West within the fairy tale, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and its adaptations. Through the multiple ways in which the Witch is written, performed, and gendered, I would like to explore how her positioning in relation to the reader/spectator relates to her configuration as the “other,” and how that either challenges or reinforces the gender binary.

It was L. Frank Baum’s mother-in-law, Mathilda Gage, who encouraged him to begin recording the fairy tales with which he would entertain children. Mrs. Gage was a radical feminist for her time and it is believed that Baum was influenced by her thinking (Wolstenholme xxxix). In the year of its publication, 1900, and even for several years after, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* would continue to be considered a “woman-centered” text by feminists (Doty 141). The first wave of feminism was primarily concerned with providing women with the same legal rights as men. It wasn’t until the second wave of feminism that women began to demand political representation. Yet Baum’s text anticipated this. The story follows Dorothy, a young girl, as she journeys through Oz in her attempt to return to her home in Kansas. Oz is a place where women are powerful; four witches rule the regions of the north, south, east and west, whereas men are portrayed in positions of comparative weakness (see Rushdie 42). Dorothy, for example, seeks the help of the Wizard, only to find out that he is a fraud in the end. Furthermore, the narrative challenges the folklore and fairy tale stereotype of the witch as evil by casting all female characters with magical power as witches. Baum’s good witches, those of the North and the South, suggest that women can be both good and powerful leaders. In portraying women in this traditionally male-defined role without the stigma of evil, the text appears to challenge patriarchal thought and to promote the feminist cause of the turn of the century.

However, Baum's depiction of the four witches is more conventional than it seems initially. His narration of good versus evil through the witch characters demonstrates traditional nineteenth-century thinking about women. In his attempt to differentiate the good woman from the bad, he adheres to the figures of "angels" and "monsters," as outlined by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* or, in other words, to a feminine ideal versus a masculinized "other." Indeed, Baum's good witches are very angelic. They are both dressed in white gowns, one glistening with stars that look like diamonds and the other with hearts and rubies, suggesting an association between goodness and wealth. In addition, their magical powers and actions are mostly maternal. Before sending Dorothy down the yellow brick road, the Witch of the North "dresses" her with the silver shoes and the silver mark on her forehead left by her kiss. Both mark or "brand" Dorothy as her own. Glinda meets the little girl at the end of the narrative and aids her in returning to Kansas, serving the Wizard as a dutiful wife would serve her husband. In addition, she is said to possess the power to appear young and beautiful despite her old age (Baum 215). As Jessica Zebrine Gray points out, the two good witches represent "the ideals of male desire": "These ideal images of goodness reflect the traditional dichotomy of women in the male imagination – mother figures and sexualized beauties" (168).

The Wicked Witch of the West, on the other hand, is meant to portray the good witches' opposite. Interestingly, although Denslow's drawings allow the reader to visualize the character, Baum does not describe her at all, as if she does not deserve to be looked at. His vision of her only appears through narrative events. She is portrayed as a threat to male control. Selfishly desiring more power, she is masculinized in opposition to the feminine ideal of selfless generosity that the two good witches represent. Having seized control of part of the Wizard's land, she positions herself as the usurper of his power. Moreover, Baum's narrative also depicts her as a threat through her ability to manipulate the eye of the narrator, which may again explain why the narrative lacks a descriptive passage of her. Part of the Witch's power lies in the telescopic sight of her one eye which allows her to see Dorothy before the little girl sees her. As the subject of the vision through which the reader follows the story, never objectified through description as the two good witches are, the Wicked Witch is again a usurper of another privileged and patriarchal role, that of the writer himself. Gilbert and Gubar write:



W.W. Denslow's *The Wicked Witch of the West* on her throne.
(Courtesy of HarperCollins Publishers)



W.W. Denslow's Wicked Witch of the West calling for the winged monkeys.
(Courtesy of HarperCollins Publishers)

If we return to the literary definitions of “authority” with which we began this discussion, we will see that the monster-woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister, embodies intransigent female autonomy and thus represents both the author’s power to allay ‘his’ anxieties by calling their source bad names (witch, bitch, fiend, monster) and, simultaneously, the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained ‘place’ and thus generates a story that “gets away” from its author. (28)

As she is initially “unseen” by the narrator and by Dorothy, it is as if the Wicked Witch’s power of telescopic eyesight briefly “steals” the focalization of the story from the narrator and Dorothy. Yet as the usurper of the Wizard’s power, the Witch threatens less to “replace her angelic sister” than to replace male authority.

Other elements in Baum’s narrative reveal the monstrous physique of the Wicked Witch. In addition to her one eye, we are eventually told that she has no blood in her veins. When Dorothy throws a bucket of water on her, she becomes a “brown, shapeless . . . mass,” a “mess” that Dorothy promptly sweeps away (154). Evidently, the Wicked Witch is dirty and inhuman. With a body that melts upon contact with water, it appears as if she is abject to the human race itself. At the same time, Denslow’s drawings add to her monstrosity through her clothes. She wears a skirt covered in snakes and frogs, for instance, as well as a hat with a demonic face, suggesting two-headedness.¹ Denslow’s drawings also contribute to her masculinization. In each of the pictures, she wears what were defined as masculine clothes in 1900. In one illustration in particular, she sits with her umbrella between her legs, which turns her skirt into pants and resembles an erect penis. Her tall pointy hat doubles her height and turns the Wicked Witch into a representation of the phallus itself. Nonetheless, her skirt and her braid(s) with a bow have a feminine connotation. This mix of masculine and feminine clothing in addition to the ambiguity of her old, wrinkled facial features suggests that the Witch is androgynous. At the end of the nineteenth century, androgyny symbolized “reversion” to a “primal state,” as Darwin held that the origin of humanity was either hermaphroditic or androgynous (Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity* 170). In this sense, the Wicked Witch is degenerate, a regression to a less developed stage of the race of man.

This condition of degeneracy was used to stigmatize not only women with “masculine” qualities, but also other races. The “threat” of migrant Chinese felt by white Americans is apparent in the racist caricature illus-

¹ Bram Dijkstra demonstrates how artists and scientists of the turn of the century believed in and portrayed the bestiality of women, often with snakes (*Idols of Perversity* 304-314).

trations that appeared in newspapers and magazines at the end of the nineteenth century.² One picture, entitled “Darwin’s Theory Illustrated – The Creation of Chinaman and Pig,” demonstrates this idea of regression quite clearly in depicting the evolution of a monkey into a Chinese man and then into a pig (K, *The Wasp*, 1877, as seen in *The Coming Man, Nineteenth Century American Perceptions of the Chinese* 111). Denslow may have been influenced by such propaganda. His drawings depict the Wicked Witch with angular facial features, missing teeth, and a braid in much the same way as the Chinese were often characterized.³ For the white American woman, association with such racial (and lower-class) attributes would have meant shame and stigmatization. As part Oriental, part animal, part man, the Wicked Witch is monstrous, difficult to define except as “other”. Such a characterization would have certainly constituted a threat to the female reader who dared to depart from the “qualities” of the feminine ideal.

In the 1939 film, *The Wizard of Oz*, the gender binary is again reflected through the opposition between good and evil witches. Yet the film sharpens the dichotomy, fusing Baum’s two good witches into the character of Glinda, and making the Wicked Witch of the West Dorothy’s only enemy in Oz. As a youthful and beautiful maternal figure, Glinda alone represents ideal femininity. Although her large, pink ball gown and puffy sleeves evoke a fairy godmother figure (rather than a witch), the image she projects might define the feminine ideal to which all female spectators might aspire in 1939 and for several years thereafter. Aside from her obvious beauty, she is angelic and graceful. Traveling by bubble makes her appear as though she is lighter than air and celestial, while it also implies cleanliness, linking her to water (and perhaps even to soap). Glinda’s jewel-covered gown and tall crown again suggest wealth. In addition, she is evidently white. These final characteristics, especially in contrast to the Wicked Witch, bring race and class into the definition of the feminine ideal.

The dichotomy between the two witches also creates two possible “role models” for Dorothy to choose between as she grows into a woman. The function, then, of Glinda’s character in the narrative is double-layered: her guiding of Dorothy – both literally down the yellow brick road and then to her Kansas home as well as figuratively on her path towards womanhood and femininity – mirrors her performance of ideal femininity for the female spectator. She is both generous and self-

² Thanks to Deborah Madsen for pointing this out to me.

³ I am referring specifically to illustrations that appeared in *The Wasp*, such as Walter’s “The Chasm of Defeat Awaits His Uncertain Tread” of 1880 and Keller’s “What Shall We Do with Our Boys?”, ca. 1870s (*The Coming Man* 73, 88-89).

less in giving the ruby slippers to Dorothy rather than keeping them for herself. More significantly, she is maternal to both Dorothy and the Munchkins, as she leads them in their song and dance extravaganza. Since she appears at both the beginning and end of Dorothy's journey through Oz, she frames the young heroine's development. Starting from the placement of the ruby slippers onto her feet, Dorothy's makeover does not seem complete until the end of the film when Glinda stands behind her reciting the famous line, "There's no place like home" (*The Wizard of Oz* 1:34:50-1:35:05). Dorothy has let down her girlish pigtails, letting her red hair flow like the Good Witch's. As such, Glinda sends a new and improved Dorothy back home, one who now properly appreciates the space in which patriarchy places women, and one who is now more in conformity with the feminine ideal.

At the beginning of the film, Dorothy is disillusioned with her home-life due to Almira Gulch, the Wicked Witch of the West's double in the Kansas reality frame narrative. Parallel to her Oz counterpart, Miss Gulch also functions as a threat to home-life. Miss Gulch is portrayed in what was traditionally defined as a male role, as a force of economic power, "own[ing] half the county" and "rul[ing]" as she sees fit (*The Wizard of Oz* 9:39-42). She is stiff and rigid in her attempt not only to control her fellow citizens but also her own body. However, as she rides her bicycle to menacing background music, she is portrayed as an uptight schoolmarm, ridiculed for not properly displaying her wealth. When she arrives at Dorothy's home, Uncle Henry allows the fence gate to close on her behind as if to spank her for misbehaving. Yet, Miss Gulch is still aggressive and dangerous. She attempts to take Dorothy's dog, Toto, to have him "destroyed." The scene demonstrates that it is not simply Miss Gulch who is far from the feminine ideal, but Dorothy as well. The young heroine responds with rage, "wildly" fighting Miss Gulch and shouting: "I'll bite you myself," coming close to the aggressive, "savage"⁴ nature of her enemy in Oz (Langley, *The Wizard of Oz* 12, 82-83).

Evidently, the Wicked Witch of the West is very different from Miss Gulch. Nevertheless, the film depicts the cold, bike-riding woman's transformation into the cackling, broom-riding Witch, suggesting that Miss Gulch's attempts to manipulate and control her body are fruitless. As a cold, unmarried woman occupying a powerful "male" role, Miss Gulch's true nature is revealed to be ugly, monstrous, and hysterical. Though the creators of the film decided not to draw from Denslow's illustrations in their rendition of the Witch, it seems that there was still

⁴ The same stage directions that are used in this one scene for Dorothy are used frequently with the Wicked Witch of the West.

an attempt to masculinize her and to portray her as “other” (Haley Jr., *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz: The Making of a Great Classic* 12:10-16). After Disney’s blockbuster success with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Wizard of Oz* writers were originally considering modeling their Wicked Witch after the cartoon’s evil queen, creating a beautiful, sexualized enemy for Dorothy (12:20-30). In the end, they opted for the more traditional figure of the witch. Thus, the Wicked Witch of the West flies around on a broomstick (a phallic symbol, according to Umberto Eco [203]) and wears a shapeless black dress which desexualizes her; she appears and disappears in red smoke and fire which suggests a relationship with Satan; and of course, she is made to portray an ugly, old crone.

Yet rather than simply put Margaret Hamilton, the actress who plays Miss Gulch and the Witch, into a different costume, the film’s creators went further, making her monstrous and goblin-like with her long, pointy nose and chin, and her claw-like hands. Her green skin evokes both the figure of the goblin and a different race, since the people over whom she rules, the Winkies, share the same color. As Salman Rushdie suggests, she is “irregular and misshapen” in contrast to a world dominated by “geometrical simplicity” (21). Her gestures alternate between quick, sharp and aggressive movements and those that are slow, crawling, and slithering. Reminiscent of a spider or a snake, they are far from the grace and poise that Glinda demonstrates. She points and threatens with her high-pitched voice. She frequently extends her bony fingers and long nails as if trying to seize what her irrepressible desire is seeking. For Dorothy, then, an enemy with an appearance and demeanor such as this is much easier to distinguish, to fear, and to oppose. For the young heroine must not “fight fire with fire”; that would be to adopt the wild, aggressive, and masculine qualities of the Wicked Witch. She can only passively kill the Wicked Witch in attempting to save her friend, the Scarecrow. She must conquer this monstrosity while remaining helpless, fragile, and caring; in a word: feminine.

Like Dorothy, the female viewer of 1939 had to choose to live her life in favor of either “home,” aspiring to the feminine selflessness, grace and beauty of Glinda, or the selfish pursuit of more power, modeled after the monstrously masculine Wicked Witch. For more than two decades after the film was released, the choice was perhaps obvious for the vast majority of women. It is true that in 1939, the concept of “home” had patriotic connotations. However, when the film was re-released in 1949, after World War II, a time when many women were sent into the home to start families, I believe “home” had more narrow implications. The new film trailer, specifically designed for the occasion, addressed husbands and wives: “Ladies! Are your husbands grouchy? Men! Are your wives irritable? Solve your problems by taking them to

see MGM's Wonderful 'Over the Rainbow' Technicolor Musical!" (*The Wizard of Oz* 1949 Trailer). Boasting of the film's ability to solve marital discords, *The Wizard of Oz* promised to remind its viewers of the value of home. In the mid-50s, the era in which the woman as homemaker was epitomized, the movie first appeared on television, entering the space of the home itself virtually every year since then and subsequently regulating the woman's role as homemaker from within that space.⁵ For example, a young girl might look at her mother in search of Glinda's feminine ideal, while the mother's viewing of the film with her daughter mimics Glinda's role as Dorothy's guide towards womanhood. Just as Glinda watches over (rescuing her from the poisonous poppy field from afar) and directs Dorothy back home, the mother observes and indoctrinates her daughter into her future role as a homemaker.

In this sense, Glinda is not the only character who oversees Oz through her powers of vision. The Wicked Witch also demonstrates her ability to permeate all levels of vision in the film. In one horrific moment, when Dorothy sees Aunt Em in the Witch's crystal ball, Aunt Em is replaced by the Witch, as if invading Dorothy's home in Kansas. After mocking the weepy heroine for wishing to return home, she looks directly at the camera as it pans forward into a close-up on her cackling face. For a brief instant, it is as if the Witch looks at and addresses the spectator, threatening to invade her/his home as well. The boundaries between spectator/screen/character are blurred as it appears as though we are entering the Witch's hungry, gaping mouth. Referring again to the passage I previously quoted from Gilbert and Gubar's work, the film thus posits the Witch as controller of the camera and the way it sees her. The "mysterious power" of the Witch "who refuses to stay in her textually ordained 'place'. . . thus generates a story that 'gets away from its author.'" Such "intransigent female autonomy" vindicates the film's creators' choice to emphasize her monstrosity, abjection, "otherness" (Gilbert and Gubar 28).

Evidently, the Wicked Witch of the West's character was written and performed in such a way as to make her hated. Arguably, as the villain of the story and as a seemingly superficial character, she seems an unlikely figure of identification. Yet second-wave feminism has attempted to turn her into just that. Indeed, the numerous re-viewings on television have, over the years, opened up a space for re-interpretation. Bon-

⁵ Here my reading follows Reid Davis' line of thinking in his article "What WOZ: Lost Objects, Repeat Viewings, and the Sissy Warrior" when he suggests that a little boy being watched by his parents as he watches the awkwardness of the Cowardly Lion will regulate his actions in order to be appropriately masculine (5-7).

nie Friedman, for instance, stated that she “‘shouldn’t have hated the witch so much’ as a child because she represents ‘non-normative female desire and power’” (Doty144).⁶ Echoing second-wave feminists, Salman Rushdie encourages the viewer to see past the witches’ alignment with good or evil:

Of course Glinda is “good” and the Wicked Witch is “bad”; but Glinda is a trilling pain in the neck, and the Wicked Witch is lean and mean. Check out their clothes: frilly pink versus slimline black. *No contest*. Consider their attitudes to their fellow-women . . . just as feminism has sought to rehabilitate pejorative old words such as hag, crone, witch, so the Wicked Witch of the West could be said to represent the more positive of the two images of powerful womanhood on offer here. (*The Wizard of Oz* 42-43)

Rushdie suggests then that the Wicked Witch can be re-examined as a positive figure for women in the same way that the Cowardly Lion has been re-read and re-appropriated as a figure of pride for queer culture.⁷ Friedman’s and Rushdie’s remarks reflect a change in attitude towards femininity, one that does not demonize the “other” but uses the figure to challenge traditional notions of femininity. Rushdie’s thinking seems to go even further than second-wave feminism by advocating the Wicked Witch in part because she is more “cool” than Glinda. It is a sign of the move towards the contemporary “girl power” model. I will return to this in my discussion of the Broadway musical.

In her analysis of the figure of the witch and its relation to feminism, Justyna Sempruch, quoting Judith Butler, writes: “Although the feminist witch succeeds in subverting her abject identity by converting it into a political fantasy of gender, the ‘category of women for merely “strategic” purposes’ remains problematic” (14). Although we are not dealing with a feminist witch, I believe Sempruch’s remark is valid here as well. For Butler and Sempruch, the category of woman for political purposes is “problematic” because it reinforces the gender binary, ultimately maintaining the repressive forces of patriarchy. In addition, second-wave feminism’s appropriation of, or attempt to identify with, the “other” threatens to erase other categories of difference. Rather, perhaps for a more “positive” understanding of the Wicked Witch to occur,

⁶ Alexander Doty’s own recent reading suggests that the whole plot of the film is non-normative, interpreting the two witches as lesbians, with the Wicked Witch as “butch” and Glinda as “femme,” both competing over Dorothy’s sexual development.

⁷ Reid Davis demonstrates this in his article “What WOZ: Lost Objects, Repeat Viewings, and the Sissy Warrior.”

a blurring of identity categories, and specifically of the gender binary, is necessary.

In recent postmodernist thought, the numerous re-readings and interpretations of *The Wizard of Oz* have contributed to the critique of the gender binary. With Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity in mind, Cristina Bacchilega writes that "repetition functions as reassurance within the tale, but this very same compulsion to repeat the tale explodes its coherence as well-made artifice" (23). In this sense, retelling the story of *The Wizard of Oz* through literary criticism and through a re-interpretation both confirm the story's narrative "authority" and demonstrate the construction of the narrative. Gregory Maguire's novel, *Wicked, The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, published in 1995, might then work with the re-viewings of *The Wizard of Oz*, not only to illustrate the narrative's "artifice," but also to expose the monstrous woman as constructed. Maguire's novel follows the life of Elphaba, the future Wicked Witch of the West, and demonstrates how her identity is created, gendered and demonized through narrative construction. In this respect, Maguire's novel is a "postmodern revision." Bacchilega writes: "Postmodern revision . . . seek[s] to expose, make visible, the fairy tale's complicity with 'exhausted' narrative and gender ideologies" (50). Maguire claims his original project was to question the idea of inherent evilness in the Wicked Witch (Witchel, "Mr. Wicked"). Yet the author does not simply redeem her, making her into someone the reader can like without hesitation. He employs the same elements of characterization that were used to create the original Wicked Witch of the West. As such, she is as difficult to fix within typical identity categories as her predecessors. Yet she is presented in such a way as to question these categories, rather than to enforce them. In other words, the reader witnesses the Wicked Witch within the same framework as the original story, but the original hierarchy of race and binaries of good versus evil, of gender, of human and animal are displaced, blurred, and destabilized.

Elphaba is born green with a long face and nose, sharp finger nails and teeth, and cannot come into contact with water. While the greenness of the Witch's skin in the 1939 film suggests racial marking, in Maguire's *Oz*, it is abnormal. For her father, Frex, a religious minister, this means she is devilish, while her Nanny refuses to see her as such. Elphaba's mother is equally disgusted with her daughter's animal-like qualities, but seems equally upset not to have had a boy. The pronouns "she" and "it" are used interchangeably by the characters to discuss the baby. In addition, there are moments during the narrative in which certain characters that see her nude body have doubts about her sex, as if she might be a hermaphrodite. In this way, Maguire demonstrates how Elphaba's body is a site on which conflicting meanings are projected

and debated. Her body contests the notion of the “either/or” of gender as well as of binaries in general (Bacchilega 70). After learning that her biological father is the Wizard, she is told:

“You . . . are neither this nor that – or shall I say *both* this and that? . . . You are a half-breed, you are a new breed, you are a grafted limb, you are a dangerous anomaly. Always you were drawn to the composite creatures, the broken and reassembled, for that is what you are.” (478)

Elphaba is then both (or neither) human and animal, masculine and feminine, good and evil, human and god, as well as perhaps “other” and “I.”

Furthermore, the narrative does not place Elphaba within binaries in relation to other characters. Arguably, the structure of the narrative does not impose binaries in the same way as the original story does, simply because the focus of the novel is on the one character of Elphaba. Glinda is a major presence in only one part of the novel, appearing briefly in two others. Despite pinpointing the Wizard as the evil character (he is a cruel, fascist-like dictator), thereby validating the Witch’s rivalry with him, the good/evil binary is relatively ambiguous for all the characters in the novel. Nor can Glinda’s character serve as a source of comparison, an ideal against which Elphaba can be measured. Having befriended Elphaba as her college roommate, Glinda ultimately chooses wealth and social status over fighting the Wizard. In addition, she also undergoes identity questioning throughout the novel, changing her first name from Galinda to Glinda at one point. In one brief appearance in the middle of the narrative, she is described in a similar manner to the Glinda the reader may remember from the 1939 film: “giddy,” wearing “voluminous skirts” and “a tiaralike thing” (266-267). Yet later she acknowledges that her giddiness, her “dumb[ness]” is an “act” (272). As such, Glinda’s ideal femininity is presented as ridiculous, idiotic, and her statement serves to suggest the performativity of gender roles.

Yet Elphaba is not merely difficult to define in relation to other characters. Her somewhat contradictory actions make it difficult for the reader to “place” her in any kind of category, while they also leave one feeling ambivalent with regards to her character. Maguire’s narrative allows us to get to know the Witch, to understand her, ostensibly making her less “other.” Because she is the heroine of the novel, the reader wants to like her, to relate to her and possibly even to identify with her. Yet the author makes this difficult for us, portraying her at times as more of an anti-heroine. While she fights for Animal (a race of animals that can talk and participate in society) rights, we find her towards the end of the narrative attempting genetic manipulation by attaching wings

onto monkeys' backs. While she demonstrates maternal love and protection for a baby monkey that she finds abandoned, even attempting to teach it to speak, she virtually ignores her own son, Liir, claiming that she has no recollection of ever having been with child, nor of giving birth. Elphaba's maternal instincts for an animal rather than for her own child seem "wrong." Not only do they question the woman's role as mother, they seem devoid of human sentiment and suggest that she is more animal than human. Elphaba is not only "other" to the characters of the novel, but she is also sometimes "other" to us. As such, it is not merely identity categories that are destabilized, but also the reader's process of identification with the character.

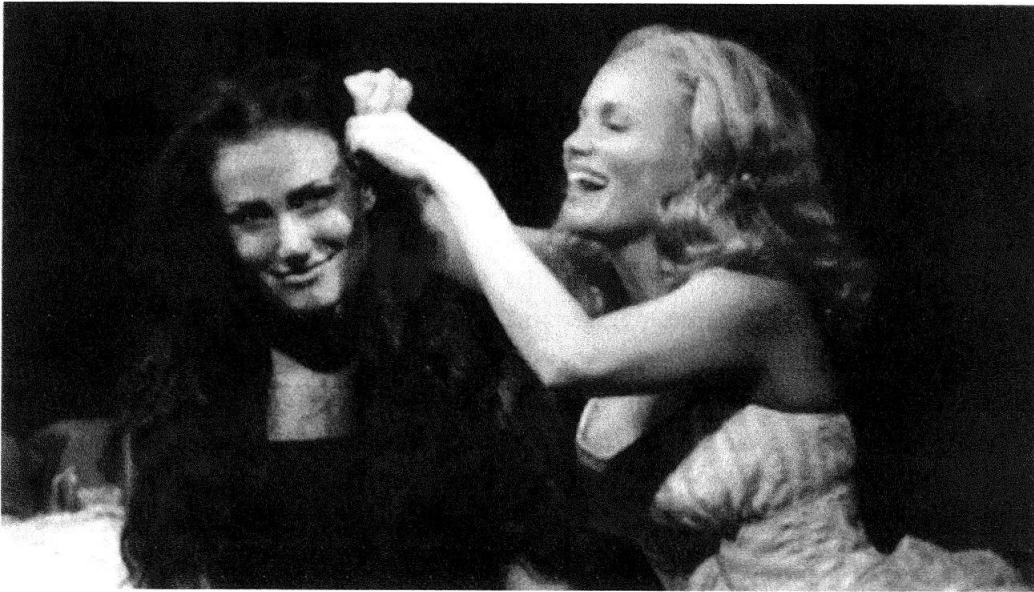
Nor does Maguire provide a clear, defining, singular vision of his heroine's actions. His use of an omniscient narrator with the focalization of several other characters through almost four out of five parts of the novel highlights several different elements of her character. We see Elphaba through her parents and Nanny, through her college classmates, through her lover, Fiyero, and so on – multiple voices that create multiple visions of Elphaba and her story. However, in the fifth part of the novel, when Elphaba begins to accept the title that rumor has started to call her, "The Wicked Witch of the West," we begin to see the story through her eyes. Ironically, it is as if she must surrender to the exterior construction of her identity before she is permitted her own subjectivity. The narrator also abruptly begins calling her "the Witch" instead of Elphaba. Because the fifth part of the novel is where Maguire's story meets the original *The Wizard of Oz*, Maguire may have simply been attempting to align his narrative with that of Baum's, using the same name that the early author employed. Yet, Maguire may also have been playing with the idea of narrative authority in relation to his character. Rather than naming the Witch a witch because of her "autonomy" as Baum does, Maguire *waits* until his character names herself (Gilbert and Gubar 28). As the teller of the story, the narrator then both acknowledges his "authority" over the character while at the same time suggesting that Elphaba/the Witch has some agency in the creation of her identity.

Ultimately, however, Elphaba cannot control the way in which she is defined. Both her body and society betray her into definitions, despite her attempt to escape them. Knowing that a relationship with Fiyero would categorize her, she tells him: "I'm not a woman, I'm not a person," while her body moves uncontrollably, her arms "wheel[ing] of their own accord" (245). At the end of the novel, her death by water suggests that she is not human. Again trying to resist definition, she refuses to believe in the "soul." Similar to the way in which Butler defines gender, Foucault defines the soul as "a normative and normalizing ideal

according to which the body is trained, shaped, cultivated, and invested” (Butler 33). Interestingly, the novel hints at the fact that Elphaba’s disbelief in the “soul” is connected to her capacity to melt upon contact with water. Thus, the novel seems to ask: If Elphaba attempts to resist the shaping of her body by cultural constructs, then what is there to keep it from being deconstructed? In the end, Elphaba/the Witch must die in the same way that she does in the original story of *The Wizard of Oz*. By refusing a different ending for his protagonist, Maguire illustrates that there is no escape from narrative and identity construction, just as Butler contends that there is ultimately no way out of gender performance. At the end of the novel, we are told that all that is left of the Witch is “her reputation for malice,” as if the Wicked Witch of the West had always been monstrous. The Witch remains abject then, like her predecessors. Yet the idea of abjection is complicated through the reader’s possible identification with her, and through witnessing the “well-made artificial[ity]” of the Witch as such.

The 2003 Broadway musical, *Wicked*, on the other hand, creates some unquestionable artifice of its own, perhaps illustrating the discordances surrounding feminism today. While Maguire’s novel represents non-essentialist thinking about the category of “woman,” the musical places third-wave feminism and/or postfeminism center stage. Significant changes to the plot of the novel were made by the show’s creators. Elphaba still fights against social injustice and the Wizard, and she is still something of an outcast because of her green skin. In this manner, the musical mimics third-wave feminism’s supposed inheritance of the “second-wave critique of . . . power structures . . . and beauty culture” (Stasia, quoting Heywood and Drake 239). Indeed, Glinda’s obsession with appearance is seen as excessive with her 20 pairs of shoes displayed in full prominence in the two witches’ bedroom.

However, Elphaba’s sober taste in fashion is presented as too dull and dreary and in need of a makeover from Glinda. The scene in which Glinda teaches Elphaba how to do her hair and then how to properly “toss” it is, of course, excessive and comical, providing another opportunity to laugh at Glinda as well as a point in the narrative in which the two girls can bond. Yet Elphaba takes Glinda’s advice. She begins wearing her hair down while her costume changes from “drab sulky school-girl” to “sultry sorceress” with a form-fitting dress full of glitter (Cote 122). In addition, while Margaret Hamilton was chosen for her role partly because of her unattractive features (Haley, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* 12:52-14:15), the actresses who play Elphaba are all quite lovely. Aside from the green skin, no make-up is used to change their features as was done to Hamilton. Rather, the make-up designer, Joseph Dulude II, stated: “Elphaba is not supposed to be ugly. She’s supposed to be beau-



Glinda and Elphaba's "sleepover" – Glinda sings
"Popular" while giving a makeover to Elphaba.
(Photo by and courtesy of Joan Marcus)

tiful. People just hate her because she's green" (Cote 128). Elphaba's story is rather similar to the story of "The Ugly Duckling." In becoming more feminine, she becomes someone worthy of love, receiving it from important characters in the show as well as from the audience. The musical merely pretends to critique beauty culture, just as it pretends to offer young girls a choice in what kind of woman they become.

The musical's focus on the friendship/rivalry between the two witches creates a new binary between the ultra-feminine and the less feminine social misfit. Cristina Lucia Stasia, quoting Astrid Henry, writes that feminism "has frequently been reduced to" the issue of choice:

In the end, young women do not need collective activism, they just need a sleepover so they can understand each other and respect each other's choices. In postfeminism, choice is so powerful that exercising it in any direction is empowering – whether choosing a lipstick or a political platform. ("My Guns Are in the Fendi!" 242)

As roommates, the "sleepover" between the two characters stages Glinda as Elphaba's coach for femininity. Similarly, Elphaba attempts to influence Glinda in her social activism. Yet regardless of how they influence each other within the narrative, the overall effect created is one of a feminine "either/or." The theater lobbies reinforce this notion with green and pink T-shirts and merchandise for sale, encouraging young girls to buy the femininity that they prefer. David Cote's *Wicked, The Grimmerie*, offering "a behind-the-scenes look" at the musical, provides a quiz resembling those found in beauty magazines, which asks "Are You More Glinda or More Elphaba?" and allows girls to identify themselves with either female character (68).

Like the novel, the musical no longer uses Glinda and her opposition to Elphaba to define the good versus evil binary. Arguably, Glinda is no longer needed to do so as Elphaba is unquestionably good. In fact, Jessica Zebrine Gray writes that the musical "questions traditional oppressive binaries, breaking down the definite distinction between good and evil" (163). However, while it is true that Glinda and the Wizard are neither wholly good nor wholly evil, the definition of good is plain for us to see in the character of Elphaba. In addition, through Glinda's reformation, good easily triumphs over evil in the end. I would argue then that, while the binary is not as clearly defined as it was in the 1939 film, it is not put into question but merely displaced. The audience leaves knowing that good once again triumphs over evil, this time with the Wicked Witch on the good side rather than the evil. The same displacement occurs with the gender binary. While Gray argues that the gender binary is destabilized through various methods, such as in the

moment Elphaba flies into the “realm of the vertical [that once] belonged to men,” “transforming her femininity into her power,” one could argue the same thing of Glinda in the 1939 film (175). Again, it is not the distinction between masculine and feminine that is “[broken] down,” but merely the definition of them. In other words, ideal femininity still exists, but no longer through the character of Glinda; it is now defined through the Witch.

Indeed, the musical does more than simply illustrate this “either/or”; it creates a new feminine ideal, aligning Elphaba with the postfeminist model of “girl power.” Within the narrative, Glinda represents feminine perfection while Elphaba is marginalized. Yet the audience is made to feel differently. Glinda is a bubbly blonde in extravagant bubblegum pink and white dresses. Her ultra-femininity is excessive and ridiculous. We laugh at her. Elphaba’s femininity is thereby normalized. Furthermore, the love story serves to feminize and normalize her even more.⁸ While in the novel, her lover, Fiyero, is something of a social misfit himself (due to his race) and is eventually killed by the Wizard’s army, his character in the musical is defined as the masculine ideal, a prince and a hero. Initially, he is the perfect match for Glinda, but he ends up falling for Elphaba because of her fight for social justice and her “girl power” persona, and leaves Glinda. It is perhaps ironic then that, in the end, Elphaba abandons her social battle in order to live happily ever after with Fiyero. In the musical, Elphaba fakes her death by water, running away from Oz with Fiyero, never to return. Thus it seems that Elphaba becomes a princess. Her “girl power” persona becomes the means, not to fight the Wizard and social injustice, but to achieve a marriage to a prince. The story’s moral dilemma is then left to the other heroine, Glinda. Believing her friend, Elphaba, to be dead, she drops her exces-

⁸ In her article, “Defying Gravity”: Queer Conventions in the Musical *Wicked*,” Stacy Wolf argues that despite the plot’s realization of the heterosexual romance between Elphaba and Fiyero, the song and dance numbers suggest a queer love story between the two women. Wolf’s interpretation certainly has weight, and if the musical retained any of the subversive power of Maguire’s novel aside from its critique of political rulers and propaganda, then this may have been another inheritance, as the novel suggests that Glinda sometimes finds herself desiring Elphaba. However, though there are emotionally charged moments between the two women, the overall message of the musical is heterosexual. Elphaba’s relationship with Fiyero defines her empowerment as a female and tells the young female spectator who might identify with the green heroine that she too can win the heart of the handsome prince through “girl power.” This is not only demonstrated in the plot, but also in the song “I Am Not That Girl” sung by Elphaba and later Glinda which illustrates how being a specific kind of girl is defined by whether or not Fiyero loves her. In parentheses, Wolf calls it “a slightly nauseating and conservative, male-centered choice in a show that otherwise privileges women and their strength and autonomy” (19).

sively feminine demeanor and demands that the Wizard leave Oz. This request is all that is needed to dispose of his patriarchal rule and it illustrates the way in which today, women believe that “equality is achieved by seizing power not changing power structures” (Stasia 240). The male ruler is disposed of and replaced by the female ruler as easily as if patriarchy didn’t exist at all, as if we lived in a “post-patriarchy” (238). As such, the musical’s postfeminist model of “girl power” contributes to the “artifice” which women must continue to question today; that is the idea that further questioning of the gender binary is no longer needed and, consequently, nor is the “other.”

Interestingly, *Wicked* stages an ostensible acceptance, or perhaps even a dismantling, of the “other,” just as it pretends to question binaries. In the beginning of the story, Elphaba is a girl who wants very much to be normalized within Ozian society, but later learns that she cannot be because of its corruption. Yet Elphaba gets her wish anyway, becoming normalized for the audience through her femininity. Rather than witnessing Elphaba becoming more and more “other,” moving towards the Wicked Witch character of *The Wizard of Oz*, we witness her becoming progressively “normal.” The only difference that remains is her green skin; and while within the narrative this is ground for her stigmatization as the “other,” she is portrayed against a backdrop of green and black (Wolf 14). Thus, for the audience, Elphaba blends in while Glinda stands out; the former is again normalized while the latter is framed as the oddity. Elphaba’s difference then is not so much of a difference at all and, rather, becomes symbolic of any physical difference, making it easy for the female spectator to identify with her. The actresses who have performed her role highlight this normalization of difference. Shoshana Bean relates it to her experience of growing up a Jewish girl in Oregon; Stephanie J. Block mentions having had “issues with [her] physical appearance”; and Jennifer Laura Thompson, who played Glinda, claims that she felt more like Elphaba in her teenage years as she “certainly [was] not a pageant girl” (Cote 43-44). Again, there is an “either/or” portrayed in the musical’s representation of difference, one in which the existence of the “other” is an illusion. In presenting Elphaba’s rejection as misfit and then as wicked as “wrong,” in placing its audience in the privileged position of knowing what is “right” and of knowing that it is Elphaba who is “right,” the musical leaves its audience feeling as if it knows that difference is “good,” that it is “normal,” as if social exclusion no longer existed.

To conclude, I would like to ask: is it possible to identify with the Wicked Witch if she poses a threat to the gender binary? Baum's work and the 1939 film position the Wicked Witch as both inside and outside the binary. Her very existence, as so extremely different from the feminine ideal, is a threat to gender roles in itself. Yet because she is made "other," she is distanced from the women of the first half of the twentieth century, reinforcing the power of the feminine ideal rather than destabilizing it. However, the musical's portrayal of the Witch as supposed "other," one with whom it is possible to identify, reinforces the gender binary much more. In this adaptation, the "outside" is non-existent; a female character is always feminine in one way or another, and, if taken in the context of the original story, the Wicked Witch always was.

In contrast, Maguire's novel makes it difficult to place the Witch within any binary except those which the constructed narrative of the original *The Wizard of Oz* story imposes on her. Similarly, while the author humanizes the Witch, he makes it difficult for the reader to identify with her. He positions her as both "other" and "I", fundamentally questioning the process of identification, whether it is with the character of Elphaba or with identity categories themselves. It seems then that my question is obsolete. To be able to "identify" supposes an ontological truth to the concept of "identity," one that the novel asks us to be wary of. Rather, it seems that identification of any kind places us within binaries that are then immediately related to other categories and labels. In other words, Baum's and Fleming's Wicked Witch of the West is evil, masculinized, "other." The musical's Elphaba is good, feminine, and capable of representing what is "normal," whereas Maguire's is ambiguously good and evil, masculine and feminine, the "other" and "I." Despite changing the figure of the Wicked Witch in relation to the position of the "other," despite the blurring (or not) of binaries, each work portrays a constant connection between the binaries. The intertextual relationship between these adaptations thus illustrates the interdependence of one category on another, of one binary on another. As such, the musical's liberating illusion of flexible, even breakable, binaries makes them all the more impossible to escape from. They become more resistant as their existence is denied.

References

- Bacchilega, Cristina. *Postmodern Fairy Tales, Gender and Narrative Strategies*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997.
- Baum, L. Frank. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. 100th Anniversary edition. New York: Harper Collins Publishers and Books of Wonder, 1900.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Cote, David. *Wicked, The Grimmerie*. New York: Hyperion, 2005.
- Davis, Reid. "What WOZ: Lost Objects, Repeat Viewings, and the Sissy Warrior." *Film Quarterly* 55.2 (2001-2002): 2-13.
- Dijkstra, Bram. *Idols of Perversity, Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Doty, Alexander. "'My Beautiful Wickedness': *The Wizard of Oz* as Lesbian Fantasy." *Hop on Pop, The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*. Eds. Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc. London: Duke University Press, 2002. 138-157.
- Eco, Umberto. *On Ugliness*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2007.
- Fleming, Victor, dir. *The Wizard of Oz*. Perf. Judy Garland, Margaret Hamilton, and Billie Burke. Turner Entertainment Co., Warner Bros., 1939.
- Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.
- Haley Jr., Jack, dir. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz: The Making of a Great Classic*. Turner Entertainment Co., Warner Bros., 1990.
- K. "Darwin's Theory Illustrated – The Creation of Chinaman and Pig." *The Wasp*, 6 January 1877, p. 217. *The Coming Man, Nineteenth Century American Perceptions of the Chinese*. Eds. Philip. P. Choy, Lorraine Dong, and Marlon K. Hom. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994. 111.
- Keller. "What Shall We Do with Our Boys?" *The Wasp*, ca. 1870s, pp. 136-7. *The Coming Man, Nineteenth Century American Perceptions of the Chinese*. Eds. Philip. P. Choy, Lorraine Dong, and Marlon K. Hom. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994. 88-89.
- Langley, Noel et al. *The Wizard of Oz* (screenplay). Ed. Michael Patrick Hearn. London: Dell Publishing, 1989.
- Maguire, Gregory. *Wicked, The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995.
- Rushdie, Salman. *The Wizard of Oz*. London: British Film Institute, 2001.
- Sempruch, Justyna. *Fantasies of Gender and the Witch in Feminist Theory and Literature*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2008.

- Stasia, Cristina Lucia. "My Guns Are in the Fendi!": The Postfeminist Female Action Hero." *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*. Eds. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford. 2nd edition. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 237-249.
- Walter. "The Chasm of Defeat Awaits His Uncertain Tread." *The Wasp*, 27 October 1880. pp. 8-9. *The Coming Man, Nineteenth Century American Perceptions of the Chinese*. Eds. Philip. P. Choy, Lorraine Dong, and Marlon K. Hom. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994. 73.
- Wicked*. Music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz. Libretto by Winnie Holzman. Dir. Joe Mantello. Pantages Theatre, Los Angeles. 9 September 2008.
- Witchel, Alex. "Mr. Wicked". *The New York Times* (11 March 2007) 1 March 2008. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/11/magazine/11maguire.t.html?_r=1.
- The Wizard of Oz* Trailer. Turner Entertainment Co., Warner Bros., 1949.
- Wolf, Stacy. "Defying Gravity": Queer Conventions in the Musical *Wicked*". *Theatre Journal* 60 (2008): 1-21.
- Wolstenholme, Susan. "Introduction" *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. ix-xliii.
- Zebrine Gray, Jessica. "From Witch to *Wicked*: A Mutable and Transformational Sign" *Fantasy Fiction into Film*. Eds. Leslie Stratyner and James R. Keller. Jefferson: McFarland and Company Inc., Publishers, 2007. 163-177.

Illustrations

- Denslow, W.W. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. 100th Anniversary edition. New York: HarperCollins Publishers and Books of Wonder, 1900. 137, 140.
- Marcus, Jean. *Wicked, The Grimmerie*. New York: Hyperion, 2005. 78.

