In This Way Wicked: Elphaba as Bad Mother

by Ky Cochran

Gregory Maguire’s *Wicked* is startlingly female-centric. The novel contains themes of women’s power (even to the point of it being greater than men’s) and is positively rife with female characters—and important, primary ones at that—in a variety of feminine and not so feminine roles, often mixing the two. For example: Melena, the adulterous wife; Nanny, the cantankerous nursemaid; Madame Morrible, the manipulating mentor; G(a)linda, the secretly thoughtful bimbo; and more still. The novel’s protagonist, Elphaba, who was known in L. Frank Baum’s original novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* simply as The Wicked Witch of the West, plays many roles throughout the novel. The role of particular interest at the present juncture is Elphaba, the bad mother. Elphaba’s relationships with mother figures throughout her life directly affect how she herself is as a mother; her lack of attachment in particular helps shape her as a bad mother. As one of the more frightening roles she fulfills, bad mother contributes significantly to the reader’s perception of her as “wicked.”

Before the specifics of Maguire’s story can be discussed, it is important to establish the criteria under which motherhood will be examined, how both the good mother and the bad mother are defined. Various scholars, as well as feminism as both an activist doctrine and a form of literary criticism, recognize the prevalent societal presence of the good mother model. The good mother “caters to her children’s wants and needs, provides emotional and financial support, refers to expert opinions on childrearing, and always puts her children’s wants ahead of her own” (Bemiller 169). Good mothers are “caring, nurturing, patient women who make sacrifices for their children” (Bemiller 174). The bad mother is defined by the absence of any one of the traits of a good mother (Chase 30). That is, if a mother does not always put her child’s wants ahead of
her own, she is a bad mother, even if she fulfills every other obligation of a good mother; if she does not make sacrifices, she is a bad mother, even if she fulfills every other obligation of a good mother; and so on.

To understand Elphaba as a mother, one must understand Elphaba’s relationships with her mother and the mother figures in her life. As a means of doing so herein, attachment theory will be utilized. Attachment theory maintains that infants form attachments with caregivers as a means of survival during the second six-month period of their lives (Morton 1093-1094). The quality of the attachment is determined by the caregiver and whether he/she “consistently and appropriately respond[s]” to the infant (Morton 1094). The strength and quality of the attachment, particularly between the mother as the caregiver and the child, is in large part responsible for how well-adjusted the child becomes. That is, the greater the strength and quality of the attachment, the more well-adjusted the child. Also, children who fail to form secure attachments with their mothers “will be unable to form a secure relationship with their own children” as will be shown to be the case with Elphaba (Morton 1098).

As one would expect, the relationship that plays the most crucial part in creating Elphaba-the-uncaring-mother is Elphaba’s relationship with her own mother, Melena. The relationship between mother and daughter is unsuccessful from the start. Immediately after Elphaba’s birth, Melena is not even able “to look at the thing [Elphaba]” for days (22). Melena’s aversion to her daughter is the product of two factors quite outside Elphaba’s control: her skin color and her gender. Before the birth, Melena daydreamed about the son she was certain she was carrying: “She knew he would be a singing child. … Her son would not be as dull as most men” (8). Her disappointment in having given birth to a daughter is evident in a passage coming soon after the revelation that she cannot stand to look at her daughter: “The twitching, unhappy
bundle was not male; it was not neutered; it was a female” (22). This attitude eliminates the possibility of Melena responding appropriately to Elphaba as her child, who has specific emotional needs. To compound the problem, Melena also takes up regular drug use as a means of escaping the catastrophe that is her firstborn and is thus unavailable to respond to her daughter at all, even if she had the desire.

However, a bit of the edge on Melena’s resentment of her daughter wears away by the time Elphaba is a year and a half old: “Melena sometimes found Elphaba endearing, the way a baby should be” (32). Unfortunately, according to the particulars of attachment theory, it’s six months too late for that initial important mother/child bonding, Elphaba’s critical attachment period has passed. And one mustn’t give Melena too much credit. She fantasizes, aloud, about being rid of the burden of Elphaba—“Shall we go walk by the edge of the lake today and maybe you’ll drown?”—and self-admittedly lacks “motherly feeling” (33). The distance, both physical and emotional, between the two is especially apparent when Melena picks Elphaba up, causing Elphaba to go “limp from the novelty of being touched,” a moment that takes place later on the same day she proposes her daughter’s death (35).

Nanny enters Elphaba’s life positioned to be an othermother for the infant. The role of othermothers, as defined by Rosalie Riegle Troester and presented by Mary F. Rogers, is to “help bloodmothers ‘guide and form’ their daughters” (Rogers 236). Having raised Melena and being summoned to aid in the family’s attempts to cure Elphaba’s skin condition, thus already initiating her into a caregiver role in Elphaba’s life, Nanny is the perfect candidate for an othermother and perhaps even eventually the mother attachment figure Elphaba needs. Nanny is also the first to show Elphaba any affection, saying “Nanny likes you,” even if it is a lie, as she brings Elphaba to her lap (25). Had it not been for an offense made by Frex shortly thereafter,
Nanny could very well have fulfilled the roles Elphaba needed her to fulfill at the time (i.e. during her critical attachment period) she needed them fulfilled. Nanny’s premature departure sealed Elphaba’s fate by depriving her of a substitute mother figure and depriving Melena of the support she needed in order to act as the bloodmother should, leaving Elphaba struggling on her own.

Elphaba is further denied a proper mother figure upon the arrival of her sister at Crage Hall in their adolescent years. Nessarose, as the more helpless sister, had by that time replaced Elphaba as the object of Nanny’s attention. This is strikingly apparent when Elphaba is sent to school alone, Nanny has remained behind with Nessa so Elphaba is bereft of an Ama—someone who is to function as a kind of mother figure and chaperone to the schoolgirls. As a consequence, Elphaba is placed under the care of Galinda’s Ama, who accepts graciously and then treats Elphaba kindly, but cannot forge the same connection Nanny would have had with Elphaba in her spot. Elphaba is then left without a mother, or othermother, to guide her adolescent years, and the sting is worsened by the inequality created between her and her sister when Nessarose comes to school with Nanny unhesitantly in tow to fulfill the societal requirement of an Ama for her, while letting Elphaba carry on on her own.

Also during her schooling in Shiz, Elphaba encounters Madame Morrible. Madame Morrible takes a special interest in Elphaba, and had that interest been one of kind-hearted intent, if instead of seeing Elphaba as a pawn, Madame Morrible had been interested in Elphaba as a person, she could have been a good mother figure for her. As a matriarchal authority figure, she was well positioned to be one. Instead, Madame Morrible becomes yet another example of a woman lacking in maternal warmth.
It seems inevitable, then, that Elphaba would be unable to create an attachment with her own child, without ever having had a significant attachment at any point in her life with any mother figure. To further complicate matters, Elphaba is unconscious on the occasion of her son’s birth and remains so for a year. After that she “was another full year recovering” (291). Thus, Elphaba was as literally gone during the early years of her son’s life as Melena was metaphorically gone during hers. This similarity between Melena and Elphaba is only the first of the list. As Melena admitted to having no motherly affection for Elphaba, so Elphaba says, “I have no motherly warmth toward the boy [Liir]” (291). Also, touch is an issue, or rather, a non-issue between Elphaba and Liir, in a way reminiscent of Melena and Elphaba: “[Elphaba] had reached out and put her hand on his shoulder. He had twitched it off; he was not used to such a gesture” (289). Neither mother/child relationship features a physical closeness, much less an emotional one. And finally, it is Nanny who “raise[s] yet another generation of Thropp[s],” in the way she succeeded in raising, or mothering, Nessa, but failed to do successfully with Elphaba (292). “Nanny began to attend to Liir’s needs…lovingly… Elphaba registered it with shame, for she also saw how willingly Liir responded to Nanny’s attentions” (292). Liir soaks up Nanny’s attention in the absence of attention from his mother and though Elphaba recognizes Liir’s need and desire for that attention, she still does nothing to meet that need or fulfill that desire. Thus evidence indicates that in lacking someone else to model herself off of or to learn from, Elphaba fell into recreating her relationship with her mother, even inasmuch as allowing Nanny to act as a substitute mother (hopefully more successfully with Liir than she had with Elphaba).

However, there are significant differences between Elphaba as mother and Melena as mother. For example, Melena is expected to perform her motherly duties under extraordinary circumstances—Elphaba is far from a normal child. From her green skin, to her teeth that are so
sharp Melena is unable to “give milk to [her] for fear of amputation,” to her preternatural aura, Elphaba is distinctly not the child Melena (or any other woman would have) anticipated raising (33). Elphaba has no such excuse with Liir; he is perfectly normal—color, teeth, aura, and all. Further, Melena’s belief that Elphaba is an “extravagant punishment for a sin so minor she didn’t even know if she had committed it” also adds difficulties to mothering Elphaba, difficulties Elphaba does not face (47). In fact, by all powers of prediction, Elphaba should have embraced Liir as her last tie to Fiyero, a symbol of a love she is reluctant to let go even to the end of the novel when she hopes that he has disguised himself as the scarecrow and returned to her (389). Also it should be noted that Melena does not completely fail to be a parent: “I may not be able to summon much maternal warmth, but I feed her…and I keep her from hurting herself!” she points out (47). Melena acknowledges and then takes care of Elphaba’s basic needs. Elphaba does neither for Liir. “I look after Liir,” Nanny scolds her, “which is more than you do” (298). With these considerations, Melena becomes sympathetic but Elphaba does not.

The claim that Elphaba was incapable of mothering Liir further loses legitimacy when her relationship with Nessarose is discussed. Elphaba clearly mothered Nessa. Throughout their childhood Frex placed Elphaba as Nessa’s caretaker. Though Nanny at some point took over that role, Elphaba is ready to step back into it should the situation arise. Easily, she says that when Nanny dies she’ll “have to take care of [Nessa] again” (135). Elphaba’s not particularly enthused with the idea of mothering Nessa for the rest of her life because, it is acknowledged between her and Glinda, it would require her to give up her own life, an example of putting Nessa’s needs before her own. She does not shirk from this responsibility, rather accepts this condition of motherhood, though Nessa is not even her child. Also, once Nessa arrives at Crage Hall, Elphaba begins restructuring her life around her even in such simple ways as changing the
angle of the drapes to protect Nessa’s fragile skin and forgoing after hours conversations so that Nessa may sleep peacefully (136). By doing these things, Elphaba is catering to Nessa’s wants and needs and making sacrifices for her, just as good mothers do for their children. Elphaba, it can be understood, is entirely capable of acting as a good mother. With that in mind it becomes obvious that with Liir, she *chooses* not to do so.

Elphaba fails on all good mother points. When Elphaba actually becomes a mother, she does not cater to her child’s wants and needs. Nor does she provide emotional and financial support or refer to expert opinions on childrearing (in her case, Nanny would suffice as an expert). She never once goes to her with questions nor does she respond to her promptings. She just lets Nanny do the work of mothering Liir. She never puts Liir’s wants ahead of her own; it’s safe to say she doesn’t even know what they are. Elphaba is not caring or nurturing or patient and she makes no sacrifices for Liir whatsoever. And not only does Elphaba fail to be a good mother, she doesn’t even have a good excuse. She is capable of exhibiting the traits of a good mother, she chooses not to and, by virtue of a bad mother being defined as one who is not good, is a bad mother. A bad mother is perceived as “wicked” and so Elphaba is perceived as wicked, though bad mother is far from the only contributing factor in that perception.

The perception of bad mother as equal to wicked is evident in other aspects of popular culture, such as the unavoidable example of Disney. In Disney films the bad mother figure is often transformed into an evil stepmother, because of the audience’s aversion to bad mothers (the same aversion audiences exhibit toward Elphaba), and then the character is labeled wicked (Davis 108). Essentially, regardless of the constructed barrier of “step” mother, the *bad* mother is what is wicked. The change in terms only helps us stomach them.
But for there to even be an argument about whether Elphaba is a good or bad mother, such as the one presented here, there has to exist a societally constructed ideal of a good mother, in this case, the good mother model described in the second paragraph. Motherhood itself is simply a biological fact. There is no genetic code dictating that a mother does all the things the good mother model says a mother should. One may be predisposed to “motherliness” but one does not come with a genetic rulebook. That rulebook is created, for good or ill, by the time and place in which a mother exists. For Elphaba, written and read in a North American context, that means the good mother model. All this is not to say that those expectations of a good mother are bad in and of themselves. In fact, they seem to be very good traits. The trouble is that the model overall requires perfection by making any singular failure tantamount to being a bad mother—there is no gray area, one is a good mother and if one is not that one is a bad mother. Simply, the definition of a good mother is too narrow and, by default, the definition of a bad mother is too broad to allow any woman to live up to them. It is impossible to always put one’s child’s wants before one’s own. For some mothers, it is impossible to provide financial support for their children. As every human is incapable of perfection, the list of impossibilities continues.

So Elphaba’s designation as a bad mother and, at least in part consequentially, as wicked is just due to and a reflection of a societal construct based on unrealistic goals. While it is true that Elphaba as bad mother is a more minor detail of the book (as Liir himself is a minor detail to Elphaba), that truly only serves to emphasize the prevalence of the idea of a good and bad mother. Maguire had no need to spotlight Elphaba’s failings here, because social expectations would do that for him, either consciously or subconsciously in the minds of his audience. Elphaba as bad mother is present in the novel, as shown, and, however minor, is significant in its implications. Elphaba serves, on a larger scale, to raise the question of what makes a good
mother and in so doing to force us to question whether that definition is a fair standard by which
to judge a character and, by extension, if it is a fair standard by which to judge a woman.
Works Cited


