



“Children Will Listen”: an exploration on Judaism, motherhood, and stereotype in Stephen Sondheim’s Into the Woods

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“Children Will Listen”: an exploration on Judaism, motherhood, and stereotype in Stephen
Sondheim’s *Into the Woods*

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Abstract

This thesis explores the interplay between themes of motherhood, stereotype, and Judaism in one of Stephen Sondheim's most famous and most often-performed musicals, *Into the Woods*. It endeavors to prove that some of the characters in *Into the Woods* are coded as stereotypical Jewish Mothers, as seen on television, in movies, in books, and other forms of popular culture. This coding allows audience members to engage with a character that may feel familiar to them, but, like his use of popular fairy tales in *Into the Woods*, Sondheim's portrayal of a well-known stereotype complicates an audience's typical understanding of what it means. Exploration into relevant historical background of the history of Judaism in musical theatre, Stephen Sondheim's life and upbringing, and the Jewish Mother stereotype all provide an entry point into how these topics play together. Historical background and thorough analysis of some of the female characters in *Into the Woods* reveal the ways in which the Jewish Mother stereotype is evident throughout the musical and offer insight into the broader importance of subversion of these stereotypes.

Author's Biographical Sketch

Becca is a multi-hyphenate theatre artist: producer, actor, singer, director, and educator who finds joy in everything theatre. Becca has worked as the Interim Associate Producer at The Old Globe Theatre in San Diego, CA, the Managing Producer of the Lipinsky Family San Diego Jewish Festival, and NNPN Producer-in-Residence of San Diego Repertory Theatre. Becca also created and artistically leads the annual new play festival "The Whole Megillah" , which offers new Jewish plays a workshop and development opportunities. Becca serves as a founding member and Managing Director & Associate Artistic Director of Living Light Theatre in San Diego, CA. Becca received the Sandy Fisher Award for Excellence in the Creative Arts from Brandeis University, which is awarded for exceptional work in theatre, including behind the scenes support, activism, and onstage work. Becca has worked as a Theatre and Enrichment Facilitator for STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) Academy at University of San Diego, and as the instructor of an engagement course through J*Company Youth Theatre's Random Acts of Culture program.

Dedication

For Abue and Tutu, the matriarchs of our family.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Jeff, my advisor, who took a chance on this project, and has offered encouragement and advice throughout the process—thank you especially for making sure I kept going, even when I felt unsure.

Thank you to my parents and the Jewish mothers in my own life who have raised me and taught me to see more than stereotypes in the people around me. Thank you to my family, who have always supported my passions—and driven me to countless rehearsals. And to my brother, who inspired my love of theatre.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

Musical theatre in the United States has been used as a cultural device for decades, serving as a versatile tool for entertainment, fostering understanding of different cultures, and evoking empathy across a wide range of audience members. Musical theatre writers and creators imbue their works with their own truths, their personal triumphs, their failures, their perspectives, and their biases. Whether intentional or not, these infusions of personal experience leave a permanent mark on their work, and in turn, their work elucidates their personal experiences.

The writings of composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim have long been lauded as remarkably witty, profoundly touching, and thought-provoking, and *Into the Woods* is one of his most renowned and commonly produced. High schools, community theatres, and professional companies keep coming back to *Into the Woods* perhaps in part due to the complexity of the characters in the story: their moral quandaries, their characterization, the ways in which they respond to the action of the musical, and the ways in which they are relatable to the real world. These characters seem wholly dimensional and look like people in our own lives or even ourselves. We can relate with them and empathize with the situations they get trapped in.

Though widely varying in presentation on the stage, close observation reveals that the women in Sondheim's *Into the Woods* share common characteristics. Many of the women characters in *Into the Woods* are brash, overprotective, anxious, and excessively

demanding: all attributes that are shared with another member of common culture: the stereotypical Jewish Mother. This thesis reveals the relationship between the cultural phenomenon of coded Judaism in contemporary musical theatre, Sondheim's upbringing, the image of the stereotypical Jewish Mother, and the characters in *Into the Woods*, suggesting connections among all four.

The definition of what makes a person or character a "Jew" or "Jewish" has been academically debated for many years by scholars such as Stacy Wolf, Jill Dolan, Henry Bial, Elyce Rae Helford, and more. Because "Jewish" can refer to a religion, an ethnicity, a culture, and/or a title passed down matrilineally, defining it can prove complex. For the purposes of this thesis, the term "Jewish" will apply to ethnic, cultural, and religious Jews, inclusive of Jews in a matrilineal line. In terms of "coded" Judaism as a concept, "Jewish" will also apply to actions or characteristics that are culturally, ethnically, or religiously related to Judaism through Jewish holy texts, culture, and/or history.

In the context of this thesis research, "coding" or "encoded" will refer to the often intentional, though sometimes inadvertent, inclusion of certain themes, characters, traditions, and/or culture. Works that are Jewishly "coded" might not be recognizable as Jewish to one unfamiliar with the culture. "Coding" can include use of or inspiration from Jewish culture, or utilization of popular archetypes through visuals, embodiment, choreography, plot, costume, hair, makeup, lyrics, book, and/or music. This definition of "coding" will also address previous scholarly debate, including discussion of "double-coding", and "unintentional coding".

"Stereotype" will refer to character types recurring across popular culture, which display specific combinations of characteristics, behavior, and emotional responses.

While “stereotypical” may refer to common and therefore well-known behavior, it will also refer to recurring imitation of typical action that becomes increasingly overdramatized with each iteration. In particular, this thesis will explore the stereotype of the “Jewish Mother”, within the context of coded Judaism in musical theatre. This stereotype exists explicitly in some cases, such as the musical *Honeymoon in Vegas*, in which the protagonist’s mother is anxious, overbearing, emotionally manipulative—and canonically Jewish. The stereotype reappears when these characteristics are repeated in similar combinations, even though the character exhibiting them may not be canonically Jewish or even a mother. In these cases, the stereotypical elements will be referred to as “coded.”

Since the inception of modern musical theatre, Jewish playwrights, directors, and artists have been encoding their works with subtle hints that indicate to audience members who recognize their codes that this play has Jewish themes concealed within the content. Much of the time, these social cues are employed as a tool to communicate challenges encountered by the Jewish community, such as assimilation or antisemitism, without alienating gentile audiences. Sondheim, who was born to the children of Jewish immigrants, coded Judaism into much of his work, at times writing apparently Jewish characters, or referencing Jewish ritual and tradition. His relationship with Judaism was inconsistent, partially because of the erratic nature of his relationship with his parents, and particularly his mother. “Foxy” Sondheim, Stephen Sondheim’s mother, was the epitome of a stereotypical Jewish mother. She is described as having a difficult personality, demanding attention, and using guilt trips as a tool to get her way, and in this way, she is comparable to some of the mothers in Sondheim’s *Into the Woods*.

The women in *Into the Woods* are examples of how Judaism can be coded into the modern American musical, and whether the inclusion of stereotypical behaviors was purposeful or not, coded Judaism relates to cultural conceptions of what being Jewish looks like in the real world. Sondheim's depiction of the women in *Into the Woods* could be indicative of not only a broader cultural perception of Judaism, but also of mothers and motherhood. The stereotypes and caricatures that are utilized in *Into the Woods* may create a feeling of comfort and familiarity for viewers familiar with popular culture, but they also have the potential to contribute to antisemitic or misogynistic tropes used throughout countless decades to alienate Jewish women. Sondheim's comparatively subtle use of these stereotypes makes them palatable for an audience, allowing for the comfort of recognizable content, but challenges the simplicity of most popular portrayals by infusing multi-dimensional and varied characters with these traits. This usage of commonly known content is echoed in his use of popular and familiar fairy tales, subverted in ways that force the audience to view them in a new light, as investigated by scholars and reviewers alike such as Brian Sutton, James MacKillop, and myriad others mentioned in this thesis. Sondheim and Lapine use the familiarity of common fairy tales to lure an audience in, before twisting the plot in subversive, metatextual, and overtly jarring ways. Plot points such as killing off the narrator partway through act two force audience members to reckon with what they previously believed about the fairy tale structure and challenge them to consider a fresh perspective on familiar elements, that would otherwise be difficult to understand.

In the same way, Sondheim uses stereotypical attributes of a Jewish Mother as a tool to challenge the stereotype's inherent expectations. His characters possess

similarities in personality to each other, while still differing in desires and actions, offering a more diverse perspective on the stereotype. Analyzing the portrayals of motherhood in Sondheim's *Into the Woods* reveals common threads linking many of the women characters to the stereotypical Jewish Mother, and displays how the dexterous use of such a monolithic stereotype can lead to a more nuanced comprehension of Jewish motherhood. This comprehension both embraces commonalities between mothers with similar cultural backgrounds and also emphasizes the differences inherent to the individuality of humanity.

Into the Woods closes with the stirring musical number: "Children Will Listen", sung by the Witch and the company. The Witch explains:

Careful the things you say,
Children will listen.
Careful the things you do,
Children will see
And learn...
Children will look to you
For which way to turn
To learn what to be.
Careful before you say 'listen to me'
Children will listen. (Lapine and Sondheim 135-136)

The Witch's words in this song ring out as though they are the moral of the fairy tale being told, encompassing everything that the musical has shown, inclusive of every fairy tale portrayed in the piece and all the characters who have been seen onstage. She commands the audience, breaking the fourth wall, to be aware of how their words and actions influence those around them, and urges them to realize that this impact has a broad effect on how a person might behave and what they may believe throughout their lives. Throughout the musical, Sondheim's characters even encourage each other (and by extension, the audience) to look beyond the sometimes alarming outside of characters

customarily portrayed as villains, and contemplate their perspectives: why does the Big Bad Wolf do things that we consider immoral? Why would a Giant destroy a kingdom? Why are Witches seen as evil even if they mainly try to keep to themselves? What are the events that have led these seemingly antagonistic characters to act in the ways that they do? These characters, based on archetypes seen in fairy tales, are often misunderstood, and Sondheim urges the audience to reflect on why they do the things that they do.

This thesis contends that Sondheim takes the same approach to his portrayals of motherhood in *Into the Woods* as he does to fairy tales, reflecting the complexities of the Jewish Mother in a way that uses the popular stereotype as a stepping stone to look past the familiar exterior. The result is to build out outwardly familiar characters in a way that further complicates and illuminates the ever-evolving relationship between Judaism, motherhood, stereotype, and musical theatre.

Chapter II.

The Broadway Musical and Judaism

The Broadway musical has an extensive historical relationship with Judaism and coded Judaism. Lyrics, dialogue, plot, and music of numerous Broadway musicals are embedded with Jewish artists, themes, and sounds. The trend is so ubiquitous that Monty Python comedy *Spamalot* explicitly pokes fun at it with a lively musical number called “You Won’t Succeed on Broadway (If You Don’t Have Any Jews)”, which lists myriad ways that one could attempt to entertain a Broadway audience but argues that none of these tactics will be effective without a Jewish touch. The character sings:

But I tell you, you are dead
If you don't have any Jews
They won't care if it's witty
Or everything looks pretty
They'll simply say it's shitty and refuse
Nobody will go, sir
If it's not kosher, then no show, sir
Even goyim won't be dim enough to choose (Du Prez and Idle)

Each line holds reference to Jewish culture, language, or the incredible influence that Jewish contributors have made to musical theatre. And the lyrics, while overdramatic and intentionally humorous, are defensible in their interpretation of the state of Broadway theatre: since its inception, Jews have been integral to the creation and advancement of the Broadway musical. Various scholars have made significant contributions to the exploration of Jews in musical theatre. Among them, Heather S. Nathans, Nathan Hurwitz, Stuart J. Hecht, Jeffrey Melnick, Julius Novick, and more provide some insight into the history of Jews in American musical theatre and the broader implications of their artistic contributions. Nathans describes “how deeply embedded Jews have always been

in American culture, even if they were not always producing explicitly ‘Jewish’ material” (Nathans *Open-Ended Questions...Jewish American Literature* 91). Jews were so critical to the creation of Broadway that Stuart J. Hecht writes that

[f]rom the 1910s on, America’s Broadway musical was developed primarily by Jews. Reflecting their own adjustments to American life, and that of their increasingly Jewish audience, these artists shaped the musical into a form that illustrated their concerns, promoted their values, and, above all, provided a setting for the ongoing discussion of how outsiders might gain access to America and its ‘Dream’ of acceptance and success. (Hecht 1)

In fact, Jewish families, many of whom were new immigrants to the United States fleeing persecution, were concerned about acceptance and success, but antisemitism meant that, though they were permitted into the country, they were not yet tolerated in certain career fields. A livelihood in entertainment was legitimate and had the potential to offer monetary and social success. Hecht continues to explain that for many years, Jews made up a large percentage of audience members and theatre creators. And, as evidenced in the more modern *Spamalot* song, Broadway audiences comprehend humor about Jewish culture, both overt and coded—even if they are not part of that culture themselves.

Jews who were creating musicals in the early 1900’s were not part of popular culture. Many were first generation immigrants who had come through Ellis Island in their own lifetimes, learned English, and endeavored to acclimatize to a culture that was unfamiliar to them. They were not assimilated and were dealing with rampant antisemitism—even as many of them came to America fleeing antisemitism from their place of origin—and their writings served as a way to explore their feelings on assimilation and the struggles that confronted them in their newfound home. As such, this experience of being an outsider became a recognizable form of the classic musical,

though the groups being seen as outside the status quo have shifted and changed throughout the century. Hecht proposes that the Broadway musical was sort of an Ellis Island—musicals, as imagined by the largely Jewish creators that wrote them, provide insight into not just the Jewish experience, but also into other groups that had been historically oppressed. From the literal Ellis Island to the figurative Ellis Island of Broadway, Jewish creators had focused insight into being strangers in a new place. And the United States, while not always the most hospitable place for Jews in terms of tolerance, did prove to be a safe haven that Jews would write about and influence for years to come.

Historically, Jewish cultural values and traditions make for an easy leap into the entertainment world of music and performance. “The Song of Miriam”, a poem that appears in the book of “Exodus” of the Jewish holy book, the Torah, mentions dancing and singing with timbrels at once. In it, the Jewish people cross the Red Sea, escaping from their enslavement in Egypt—another example of immigration to escape persecution—, singing a song of praise and dancing with elation. This poem, according to jewishvirtuallibrary.org “has been cited as containing the rudiments of drama, which began as a combination of song and dance” (<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/theater>)—a mere step away from performance.

But there are copious examples of theatrical performance throughout Jewish history. There is an obvious connection between theatre and the holiday of Purim. Purim commemorates the heroine, Esther, who saves the Jewish people from the evil Haman, the king’s advisor, who vowed to exterminate the Jewish people in the town of Shushan because they would not bow to him. There is a custom on Purim to read aloud the “Book

of Esther”, which describes the full story in detail, and part of the tradition is to retell the story through the performance of a play, or “Purim spiel”. Frequently, these spiels are told with an air of comedy and raucous celebration—another of the customs of the celebration is to drink alcohol—by members of the community. Though retelling stories is imperative in many cultures as a tool to further their traditions, the Purim spiel is a way in which Jewish tradition encourages artistic performance in the specific form of theatre—and it does more than just tell a story. It forces a tale that has been retold many times into modern colloquial understanding and engages viewers with the story in novel ways every time they experience it. Like many of the more contemporary shows written by Jews, the Purim story deals with topics of acceptance and belonging—which make it culturally relevant in every day and age.

In addition to theatrical tradition, the Jewish culture uses song and performance in much of its ritual. Cantors, sometimes called hazzans, are worship leaders in the Jewish faith, primarily tasked with leading prayer through chanting and song. This is crucial to Jewish service, because when reading Torah, the key Jewish holy text, aloud, it must be chanted using ancient tones called trope. In modern religious services, the cantor or other worship leaders may chant and also sing to guide the congregation in prayer. However, according to the Talmud, a central Jewish text, sung ritual practice dates back to before the Siege of Jerusalem and infamous destruction there of the temple, a Jewish space of prayer. At that time, a group called the Levites served as vocalists and musicians for temple services (Arakhin 11a). As is true of much of Jewish history written in the Talmud, there is significant debate about the specifics of their duties, but this much is clear: there were people whose job it was to lead congregational singing—and this role

continues to exist in modern day Jewish culture. And while these early rituals may not have been seen as performance per se, they did set the stage for Jews to have particular affinity and skill for singing in front of a group. It stands to reason that a person surrounded by rituals that include music would have an understanding of music—leading to a greater grasp on the art form of creating or performing music.

In the late 1500's, Jews began showing up in English literature, though there were few Jews in England at the time, leading to portrayal of Jews as cunning, immoral, or evil by non-Jewish actors, playwrights, and writers (see: Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*; Marlowe's *The Jew Of Malta*; and many others). This stereotype persisted into the 19th century (see: Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and his portrayal of Fagan) and longer, though Jews in the United States fared somewhat better (<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/theater>).

It is notable that some important symbols of the United States were created by Jewish artists. Irving Berlin, an immigrant himself along with being a Jewish composer and lyricist, wrote "God Bless America". In an interview, Berlin said "'It's a ballad of home. It's not a song about a flag, or liberty, or something like that. It's a song about home. Instead of the home being a little cottage, it's America'" (Kaskowitz 5). And though Berlin experienced antisemitic and xenophobic backlash to the song (Kaskowitz), the acceptance and prominence that it gained and continues to hold cannot be denied. Though gentiles may have been praying to a different God than the one Berlin wrote about, the sentiments felt universal: America could be a home for anyone and everyone who needed one. This sentiment held exceptionally true for Jewish immigrants trying to find a place in a new country after being rejected by their homeland.

Likewise, the famous words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, “Give me your tired, your poor,/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” (Lazarus) were written by Emma Lazarus, who was also Jewish. So, famous Jewish voices were integral in the patriotism of early 20th century popular American culture.

Many Jewish writers also contributed to popular American culture by writing now-famous Christmas songs including “Let it Snow”, “Santa Baby”, “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer”, “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree”, “A Holly, Jolly Christmas”, and “White Christmas”. Though it is ironic that Jews wrote music for a largely secularized Christian holiday, the songs are catchy, and were exceedingly successful in appealing to the dominant culture in the United States. All of these writers were adjacent to and paved the way for Broadway composers, book writers, and lyricists of the time by embedding Jewish artistic sensibility into popular culture with their own work, making it recognizable to a broader public.

In keeping with their participation in popular artistic culture of the time, Jews also played a significant role in Vaudeville, which was a widespread form of entertainment in the United States from the 1880s to the 1930s. Many Jewish immigrants saw vaudeville as an opportunity to showcase their talents and make a stable living in America. They brought with them a rich musical tradition that was influenced by their Eastern European roots, which they incorporated into their performance styles. Cherry explains that “Jewish immigrants desired the cultural forms that reproduced their nineteenth-century European experience: the quick wit of the *badkhn*; the joy of the Purim festival; and a more open, healthy approach to sexuality” (Cherry 350). Because of their less chaste approach to sexuality, Jews quickly took over the vaudeville scene with acts that were more risqué.

Jon Stratton explains that Jewish performers in early vaudeville were considered to be exotic. In fact, Jeffrey Melnick offers that “by 1910 or so, Jews had more or less taken over blackface entertainment” (Melnick 37), leading to the success of famous performers like Fannie Brice, Sophie Tucker, Al Jolson, and Eddie Cantor. Stratton explains that, at the time, Jews were considered racially equal to black people, and that the use of blackface was a tool to share one race’s burden through the lens of another’s because “being black, being Jewish, being diseased, and being ‘ugly’ come to be inexorably linked” (Stratton 17). Because Jewishness was not always visible on sight but did contribute to the same types of prejudice that blackness did, using blackface was a way to externalize and exemplify the oppression felt by Jews at the time. Though in many cases, Jews had advantages because they were not instantly recognizable as Jewish, they had to either conceal their identity, or face the consequences of being different and part of a disrespected minority group. By performing in blackface, Jews may have sought to clarify how they felt others viewed them: as fundamentally different than white Christian American citizens. It also allowed non-black Jews to perform their own oppression through humor and entertainment, by not engaging with their own social group, and instead performing as a different race. In some ways, the humor intended by many of these performances came at the expense of black people in America. By the time the 1920s rolled around, Jews were no longer thought of as black—nor white—and the blackface of the 1910s was rapidly going out of style.

With Vaudeville and blackface, came the rise of Jewish women performers like Sophie Tucker and Fannie Brice, who, at the time, were pioneers in the entertainment, in part because of their inability to fit in with the standards of beauty. In 1908, Sophie

Tucker, who was a large woman, went for an audition where she overheard someone stating about her that ““this one’s so big and ugly the crowd out front will razz her. Better get some cork and black her up. She’ll kill them”” (Stratton 17). After that comment, Tucker began performing in blackface. Stratton explains that “Putting Tucker in blackface made clear her Jewish blackface and, in this performance presentation, enabled her size to be read by the audience as part of Tucker’s performance” (Stratton 17). Even as early as vaudeville performances, Tucker performing in blackface enabled her performance to ascend beyond what it might have otherwise because it enabled her to simultaneously distance herself from and embrace her own Jewish experience. Blackface became a way to code Judaism into performances that could not socially be seen as overtly Jewish. Jewish women and especially Jewish women with a unique look were not accepted in society, and the entertainment industry exemplifies the ways in which they were incredibly important, even while their Jewish identities were also being kept somewhat hidden. Though blackface has become controversial—for good reason—it was a tool utilized by Jewish performers of the time to add validity to their performances, made necessary by societal expectations of both women and Jewish people. Tucker’s and Brice’s successes were fundamental to the advancement of Vaudeville acts, and furthered theatre as a whole.

Vaudeville continued to transform, with the help of Jewish businessmen like Oscar Hammerstein—father to Oscar Hammerstein II, who will be mentioned later in connection with Stephen Sondheim. Hammerstein and other European Jews brought open sexuality to Vaudeville with assorted progressive and unconventional acts. Cherry explains that Hammerstein’s “music halls always included a bar and featured provocative

acts, including sensual ‘Oriental dancers’ and ‘Marblesques,’ voluptuous women posing in varying states of classical undress to represent famous paintings” (Cherry 351) and these more risqué appearances were to be commercially popular for an American public emancipating themselves from Victorian influences (Cherry). While Vaudeville went out of style, Jewish creators of art were turning to new forms of expression inspired by the Vaudevillian form: music, dance, acting—and sometimes all three at once. And so, Broadway was born. Famous vaudeville artists like Irving Berlin, Sophie Tucker, Fannie Brice, and Jerome Kern led to Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, George Gershwin, Lorenz Hart, and Ira Gershwin finding success on Broadway with musical theatre—inspired by vaudeville acts.

Due to thinly veiled antisemitism, Judaism was not an overt aspect of modern musical theatre until the latter part of the 20th century. Because of the history of religious freedom associated with the United States, there is a misconception that antisemitism or other forms of religious persecution are nonexistent, or these types of persecution are dismissed as “atypical, momentary, and confined to private realms” (Tevis 256). Antisemitism is explained as discourse or discrimination “typically based on stereotypes that target Jews as a people and their religious beliefs and practices...implicitly depicting them as culturally inferior” (Boddie and Hodge 132). Much of the scholarship surrounding antisemitism relates to large events, such as the implications the Holocaust had on American Jewry, the lynching of Leo Frank, or antisemitic propaganda related to political events, but these events are simply prominent examples of a more prevalent insidious hatred toward Jews. According to David R. Hodge and Stephanie Clintonia Boddie—who quote statistics distributed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation—hate

crimes against Jews spurred by antisemitism including vandalized grave sites, attempted or committed mass shootings, and threats of violence against synagogues, are increasing in the United States. Hodge and Boddie explain that “The prevalence of anti-Semitism typically has a profound effect on members of the Jewish population” (Boddie and Hodge 131) by contributing to feelings of marginalization, poor health, and depressive symptoms. Many factors have led to the perpetuation of antisemitism, including cultural differences, perception of high socioeconomic status, and the fact that Jews have essentially been a minority population in every country they have existed in—apart from the modern state of Israel—for centuries (Boddie and Hodge 132).

While coded Judaism will be touched on later, musicals which deal with overtly Jewish characters like *Fiddler on the Roof*, or William Finn’s *Falsettos* and Marvin trilogy, were eventually written and gained recognition. Julius Novick writes about Jews that are overtly Jewish: characters and themes that are named as such in modern theatre. Novick primarily concentrates on Jewish paradigms: New Yorkers with Eastern European heritage, and the specific issues that face these Jews: “the memory of persecution; the fear of the big Gentile world and the yearning to join it; generational conflict; upward social mobility; pride; shame; ambivalence; the counterpoint of outward success and inward disappointment” (Novick 4) and more. Novick believes that the Jewish experience is written into many of the plays written by Jews, and the problems that they faced might have been broadly relatable to other groups. Though issues of assimilation resonated exceptionally well with groups outside of the cultural majority, they also have significance to anyone who has felt at any point that they did not belong in a certain place—an all-too universal sentiment.

Hurwitz makes mention of Jewish coding in his article by explaining that historically, “Jewish musical theatre creators presented mythic tropes of assimilation that rarely dealt explicitly with Jewish characters—implying Jewish-American assimilation into mainstream American life allegorically” (Hurwitz 34). Hurwitz reasons that the precedent for encoded Judaism is historical and was a crucial part of assimilation: overt Judaism may not have been tolerable, and could have instigated antisemitic reactions, but encoding it made it more generally relevant. This argument could be extended to apply to any musical with themes of acceptance and belonging—though Hurwitz explains that modern musicals can be more overt in naming the groups they concern. In relation to Stephen Sondheim, despite the fact that Judaism is left unnamed in some of his pieces, Sondheim utilizes such themes within his work, thus encoding Jewish sensibilities that could be broadly relatable for a secular audience. Henry Bial’s book, *Acting Jewish: negotiating ethnicity on the American stage and screen*, offers a comprehensive description of his view on double coding Judaism in popular culture, recognizes the lack of scholarship in Jewish popular culture concentrating on a post-WWII era, and grapples with the complex matter of identifying Jewish themes in seemingly secular works. Coding, as defined by Bial, is imbuing a work with themes, characters, or references—intentionally or not—that might be discernible to a Jewish audience but could go undetected by a gentile audience. Bial explains that coded Judaism “is most commonly *supplemental* to the dominant or gentile reading. It offers an alternative story line but one that does not contradict the primary narrative” (Bial 17).

Bial further expands into an argument of double coding: purposefully infusing a work with cultural references that may not be comprehended by the average consumer,

but which may be unearthed by one familiar with said culture. As an example, Bial references the Vulcan salute in the television series, *Star Trek*. Bial quotes Leonard Nimoy, who played Spock, in explaining that he used an Orthodox Jewish hand gesture as inspiration for his Vulcan salute and goes on to describe the three ways in which the salute may be read.

1. A viewer with no understanding of Judaism nor *Star Trek*. This viewer will experience the gesture as unique and new and understand the salute within the context of the show.
2. A viewer with understanding of *Star Trek* culture may immediately identify the Vulcan salute as being culturally specific within the context of the show or film, and “may exchange Vulcan salutes in greeting as a sign of in-group status—the in-group being *Star Trek* fans rather than Vulcans” (Bial 69). Or,
3. A Jewish viewer, who may understand the meaning within context, in addition to the Jewish cultural significance. If the viewer further recognized the intentionality behind Nimoy’s use of the symbol, they may appreciate a deeper connection between Judaism and Nimoy’s character, Spock, who is an outsider among the crew. (Bial 69-70)

Though all three observers experience the gesture uniquely, the third will, perhaps, imbue it with different meaning through their cultural understanding of its significance—even if the way in which they employ the gesture is as a *Star Trek* fan making themselves known to other fans. Bial clarifies, however, that, though in the above case Nimoy’s intent is made evident through his own admission, it is not intention from the creator that makes something Jewish coded, but rather the requisite cultural cues that

read as Jewish—and these codes do not need to be consciously employed by the person using them. In fact, anyone who uses the Vulcan salute is using Jewish coding even if they are oblivious that they are. Bial further explains that

Because of the degree to which the American entertainment industry seeks to imitate its own successes as well as the degree to which other ethnic groups share certain social conventions with American Jews, it is possible (perhaps even likely) for a non-Jewish artist to produce a performance that employs codes that Jewish audiences identify as Jewish (Bial 70).

A gentile actor portraying a character who grew up in New York may use a naturally lilted tone reminiscent of Jewish speech patterns without recognizing that they are doing so. Perhaps they also employ another Jewishly coded action, whether it be the way they are costumed, or their relationship to other characters in the play. In this case, their performance may still read as Jewish to a Jewish audience, despite being entirely unintentionally so. It may also be that wholly different collaborators' work is coalescing to form a Jewish reading, if for example the costume designer is also implicated. None of those collaborators need to have purposefully coded Judaism in their piece. It can still exist. Thus, Jewish coding gains complexity: it need not be done on purpose to apply and, indeed, is often done with little or no intention behind it. One only must be part of the in-group or have seen media about the in-group and emulate it directly or incidentally, to employ the cultural language tools that result in producing Jewish coded work.

Notably, Bial also references the deep cultural roots that Judaism has in New York City, and notes that some things that read as Jewish can be ascribed to New York culture and vice versa. In some ways, the way these identities are read is synonymous. This complicates any reading of Jewish culture that could otherwise be construed as a reading of New York culture. Bial suggests that “Wisecracking, New York accented, and world-weary are all apparently authentic components of acting Jewish” (Bial 77). The

definition of what may be perceived as Jewish onstage is complex and varied, and is not necessarily rooted in Jewish text, but instead is based on audience perception of coded behaviors.

Jill Dolan and Stacy Wolf tackle just this question in their essay, “Performing Jewishness In and Out of the Classroom” and in the class that the essay is based on. These scholars focus on the embodiment of Jewishness in theatre, and how these portrayals can be nuanced—or not. In particular, they reference the use of “the Jewish voice” (Dolan and Wolf 2007) and how complex the utilization of it is in performance. They describe a particular student’s concern about using stereotypes to portray Judaism: “when they used the broad vowels and upward inflections of the commonly quoted New York Jewish accent...For some students...their parents or grandparents actually spoke this way. But...we could not perform or listen to that voice without debating its effect as a signifier of Jewishness” (Dolan and Wolf 2007). This accent, familiar to most popular media consumers, does instantly signify Jewishness to a viewer familiar with the stereotype. In fact, much of embodying Jewish stereotypes seems to live in accents or voice. While there are visual stereotypes such as a prominent nose, curly hair, dark eyes and hair, costume features like a certain type of modest dress, wigs, kippah, payis, tallis, and more, a practical way to tell if a character is Jewish is to ask: do they sound like a Jew? Dolan and Wolf describe the sundry ways that Jewishness was expressed in their classroom, and voice was a major player. Despite this, the Jewish “accent” is nebulous and ill-defined, and other accents could be easily misjudged as Jewish, so, when identifying a Jewish character, voice cannot be the only marker used to identify a character as Jewish, but must be used in conjunction with other indications.

Modern Jewish representation—post the 1950s—became more overt in American musical theatre with the first groundbreaking production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. As described by Julius Novick, a potential producer for the show said “What made you fellows decide to write a musical about a bunch of poor Jews in a Russian village? Who cares?” (Novick 87) but the show's fundamental themes of family, belonging, tradition, and persecution ended up being more widely relatable than that producer had initially believed. Though *Fiddler on the Roof* and the main character, Tevye, are overtly Jewish, some of that Judaism is also coded within more universally relatable themes: Jewish audiences may have more cultural framework and therefore see more facets of Tevye’s Judaism laid out than a gentile audience could.

Tevye personifies the literal experience of so many Jewish immigrants trying to find belonging in the United States, while also representing anyone who goes through comparable experiences as him. Tevye and his family live in the fictional town of Anatevka, a small town in Russia in the 20th century where their lives are in jeopardy due to the rising antisemitism, pogroms, and violence against Jews in their town. Tevye navigates his relationships with his wife, daughters, and their suitors while also trying to survive the pogroms and expulsions happening in Russia. Eventually, the Jewish townspeople are forced to leave towards America to escape persecution and death.

However, throughout the piece, the portrayal of Anatevka has American overtones—not simply themes of global Jewish persecution. Like America, Anatevka is a place where numerous cultures collide, inevitably leading to friction due to dissimilarities in beliefs. Jews are not culturally dominant and are being forced to choose between assimilation and tradition, just as Jewish immigrants to America would be. Even within

the Jewish culture, Tevye symbolizes a generation that is reluctant to change their traditions while his daughters represent a more assimilated culture—people that have different views of what modern Judaism could look like in Anatevka. Though the play takes place in early 20th century Russia, it was written in the late 1900's and the context of the play looks similar to mid-century United States: a place where cultures, traditions, and religions were being turned on their head to make way for new ideas and peoples. As history often seems to repeat, and because musical theatre writers seek to be widely relatable, these themes could also be seen as reminiscent of other time periods and other places as well. So, thematically and culturally, Anatevka appears to be a certain place but offers insight into the experience of immigrants in many others.

Though Tevye, the main character, is ethnically Jewish, living in a town filled with Jews, with a plot that revolves explicitly around their persecution for their religion, the themes that the musical addresses are more widely applicable. Bial explains that “the ability of *Fiddler on the Roof* to walk the fine line between Jewish enough and too Jewish perhaps explains why the Stein-Bock-Harnick musical gained...a significant audience among both Jews and gentiles” (Bial 60). Although the play is inherently and overtly Jewish, the tale of family and assimilation can be broadly understood by people of many different backgrounds.

Bial tells the story of two reviewers, a Jewish reviewer who felt that actor Zero Mostel as Tevye was a pious and observant Jew, and a gentile who felt that Mostel playing Tevye was not pious enough. These two reviewers comment mostly on the performance of the show by Mostel, and not the content of the piece itself—they agree that the piece is inherently piously Jewish. This disagreement between Jew and gentile

reviewers about the level of Judaism in the character, exemplifies Bial's view on coding: for a Jewish viewer, the level of piety is depicted in a certain way that may resonate with a Jewish audience member, but for a gentile audience member, it could appear quite different. Because of the context that a Jewish reviewer may have (an understanding of Jewish references, knowledge of Jewish prayers, awareness of the lilt of speech that sounds Jewish), the smaller or concealed ways in which Tevye appears Jewish may stick out to them. For the Jewish reviewer, Tevye could appear to be the embodiment of Judaism and therefore relatable, whereas for the gentile reviewer, Tevye appears less Jewish and therefore relatable in his eyes as well. The ways in which *Fiddler on the Roof* is coded are much subtler than they would seem. They include ways of speaking and vocal lilting often used by Jews, translations of Hebrew blessings, certain Jewish cultural norms, and more.

These definitions of coding will be the building blocks upon which this thesis is written, investigating covert ways that Sondheim's work is infused with Judaism. Sondheim's work has the "requisite cultural codes" (Bial 20) to alert a Jewish audience to them, where a gentile audience may not notice. These cultural codes are hidden in Sondheim's lyrics, themes, and characterizations.

Chapter III.

Stephen Sondheim, His Life And Times

Of the Jewish artists who perform, compose, and otherwise create theatre, few are as renowned as composer and lyricist, Stephen Sondheim. A powerhouse creator, Sondheim is lauded as a “first rank musical theatre writer” (R. Gordon 198) by scholars and critics alike. Though Sondheim had no formal Jewish education (Secrest 14) his compositions and the characters he writes are influenced by both his upbringing with two Jewish immigrant parents and his close mentee affiliation with Oscar Hammerstein II, one half of the Rodgers and Hammerstein duo (McHugh). Meryl Secrest’s biography of Sondheim is the most comprehensive history of his life written thus far and is therefore a fundamental contextualizing text of Sondheim’s upbringing and life as it is understood by scholars. Secrest’s biography permeates Sondheim scholarship, as it is often quoted in other scholars’ work. This text provides insight into Sondheim’s life, through both scrupulous research and interviews with the artist himself. It synthesizes information about his challenging childhood through his artistically fulfilling adult life more comprehensively than any other text, and therefore must be heavily relied upon when inspecting his early life.

Secrest’s account of Sondheim’s childhood begins with description of the architecture by which he was surrounded while growing up, as a byproduct of his parents’ nouveau riche status. This newfound middle-class status juxtaposes the upbringings of both of his parents and is rife with an undeniable sense of isolation

particular to children who were principally raised by nurses and teenagers who were banished to boarding schools so that their parents could go about their own lives without needing to concern themselves with their child's wellbeing. From the beginning of the biography, mention is made of Jewish ancestors on Sondheim's maternal and paternal sides fleeing to America in search of religious freedom (Secrest 4). Both of Sondheim's parents were raised religiously in the Jewish faith, with differing levels of observance, but no reference is made by Secrest or other scholars about their continued religiosity. It can be deduced that, because Stephen Sondheim was not raised in a religious household, that Judaism was not prioritized in his parents' later years.

Sondheim's father, Herbert Sondheim, found success by rapidly rising in the ranks of New York's garment district and ultimately becoming a prosperous businessman in the fashion industry—even in the midst of the Great Depression. Sondheim's mother, known to all as "Foxy", was equivalently ambitious and successful (Secrest 7), and Sondheim himself understood that the relationship between his parents may have been developed based upon the desire for mutual gain rather than affection (Secrest 11): in Janet "Foxy" Sondheim, Herbert Sondheim got not only a wife, but also a Parsons-educated fashion designer whose business acumen could benefit his professional progress. Like his parents, Sondheim grew up to be high-achieving and determined, persistently striving towards more distinguished achievements. Sondheim's father was an exceptional pianist who performed at assorted venues such as the New York and Brooklyn Federation of Jewish Philanthropies and entertained company often, many times playing piano with friends, and having his son play duets with him for visitors. Herbert Sondheim was also close with the renowned Jewish lyricist, Dorothy Fields, who

was a staple in the Sondheim house throughout Stephen's childhood. Herbert was surrounded by musicians, and by extension the younger Sondheim was introduced to a world of musical creativity and distinction.

And so, Sondheim developed a deep love of music throughout his childhood. He was an extraordinarily gifted pianist, and played with his father as a child, both at home and in concerts. Despite his aptitude, concert playing was not something he enjoyed, and his curiosities began to tend more toward composing. At college-preparatory school, he commenced his lifelong exploration in theatre, beginning in minor acting roles and proceeding into larger parts before endeavoring to write and compose a musical in his senior year, called “By George”. His musical was a triumph at school, but was torn apart by his close mentor Oscar Hammerstein II, who used the piece to demonstrate to Sondheim how to be methodical and thorough in writing lyrics. Hammerstein taught Sondheim that his lyrics must be sincere, simple, and singable (Secrest 52), a conversation that stuck with Sondheim into his own work. Sondheim’s early works in particular shared a deep association to the events in his lived experience: “By George” was written about the preparatory school that he attended, George School. His work as a young artist paved the way for his subsequent artistic achievements, and the depth of detail and specificity in these pieces seems to have been facilitated by inspiration from his real-life experiences.

Though Sondheim was not raised religious (and did not even enter a synagogue until age 19!), both of his parents were brought up by religious Jewish immigrants. His mother was raised in a Hasidic household, by a mother who “wore a wig like other Hasidic women, speaking in Yiddish or heavily accented English” (Secrest 8). Sondheim

was surrounded by Jews and Judaism as a child, with his Saturdays spent at “Group”, a gathering of “mostly Jewish kids”, and his summers spent at a summer camp called Androscoggin, which was notably utilized by New York Jews (Secrest 14). He also attended a college preparatory school known to be frequented by Jewish families hoping to evade discrimination in Newton, Philadelphia (Secrest 48). Sondheim was, however, removed enough from his religion that he pledged a fraternity in college, in a time when Jews were not permitted to join. In order to have joined, he must have lied or otherwise concealed his religious background (Secrest 66). Despite his acceptance into the fraternity, Sondheim also pronounced the hazing he experienced as ““the only anti-Semitism I encountered”” (Secrest 67).

Sondheim was also considered Jewish by many of his peers. A telegram from Jerry Bock to Sondheim on opening night of *Gypsy* reads: “THE WISHES WISHED ARE OUR SINCEREST TO SUCH A TALENTED JEWISH LYRIST SUCCESS” (Sondheim *Finishing the hat...anecdotes* 57). The mention of Judaism in this telegram demonstrates an emphasis on this aspect of Sondheim’s identity: this was one of few descriptive words offered by Bock in the short note and may have been a fundamental aspect of their relationship. Many of Sondheim’s mentors and collaborators were Jewish, with some of the closest to him being Oscar Hammerstein II, Hal Prince (who produced *Fiddler on the Roof*), Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein, and Jerome Robbins (who choreographed *Fiddler on the Roof*)—all Jewish.

Sondheim’s collaborations and mentorships stemmed in some cases from his tumultuous childhood experiences. When Stephen was ten years old, his father had an affair and left, leaving Stephen alone in the house with a wounded and vindictive Foxy.

Though they had never been close, Sondheim's relationship with Foxy transformed radically, with him becoming a stand-in for his father for both her emotional and sexual needs. Secrest effectively outlines the effects that such a relationship conversion could have on an adolescent boy, and states that this relationship had "psychic damage" that caused Sondheim to have strained interactions with women for the remainder of his life (Secrest).

So, Sondheim's relationship with his mother was complex, with Sondheim feeling both neglected and mistreated, particularly in his later childhood years, while concurrently being obsessed over. His relationship with his mother was fraught, partially because "Sondheim claimed his mother expressed regret at having given birth to him" (Tonguettes 2). This sentiment was a defining feature of their relationship that persisted throughout the remainder of her life. As for his early childhood years, Sondheim asserted he had no recollection of his mother being present with him at all. Stephen explains: "I don't think she cared. I think my father wanted to share things with me; I think my mother did not. I have no memory of my mother doing anything with me" (Secrest 21). This memory of his mother—or lack thereof—was standard in the Sondheim home, and, where his parents had been avid entertainers of company, Sondheim grew up to be a largely solitary individual. Whether because his difficult relationship with his mother caused him to avoid social obligation, or personal preference, he was known for being fairly isolated and socially unusual.

Foxy was often described by friends of the family in harsher terms. Secrest depicts Foxy as "a sprawling personality who escaped ordinary definitions, the kind of person who came crashing into your life and left some kind of mark—usually a scar—

before she crashed out again” (Secret 7), a testament to how she was perceived by many she encountered. Sondheim himself conveyed that her moods were mercurial at best, and the way she interacted with others was challenging to handle due to her inconsistency.

Like many Jewish immigrants, Foxy grew up in the Jewish neighborhood of Harlem and in many ways, she embodied the stereotypes often attributed to a “Jewish Mother”. She is described as a “pretentious, self-centered, narcissistic...rough, gutsy character full of life and high spirits” (Secret 9) as well as “domineering, controlling, and over possessive” (Secret 31). Sondheim said of Foxy, “It’s every Jewish mother’s thing—the blackmail of ‘if you don’t take care of me I’ll die’” (Secret 60). Sondheim was, indeed, often made to feel anxious for his mother’s health, and this stereotype portrayed Foxy quite effectively. Later in Sondheim’s life, however, Foxy is described by some who knew her as being a “nagging, demanding mother, rather than a hateful one... and writer Stephen Birmingham agreed: ‘she was full of Jewish-motherly pride’” (Secret 64).

These feelings which Foxy evoked in Sondheim contributed inspiration to some of his artistic endeavors. Foxy’s traits are echoed in some of the characters written by Sondheim post childhood. Sondheim writes about the character of Rose in *Gypsy* that she was a “showbiz Oedipus” (Sondheim *Finishing the hat...anecdotes* 56). Like Rose, Foxy reveled in her son’s victories—and Sondheim’s Oedipal reference offers some insight into how her reactions to his showbiz success may have felt to him. If Foxy expressed pride in her son to others, it was seldom or never communicated in those terms to him.

But, while traits of hers made their way into some of Sondheim’s works with indirect comparisons, Sondheim was also expressly influenced artistically by his mother

and his relationship with her. In college, he wrote what is thought to be a partially autobiographical short story called “The Brass Goddess” with a character called “Foxy” who begins the story basically ignoring her child (Secrest 45). Ellen, “Foxy’s” daughter, attempts to tell a story about the lost love between mother and daughter. By going as far as naming the mother character “Foxy” and imbuing her with similar characteristics to his own Foxy, Sondheim scarcely endeavors to veil the autobiographical nature of the story, with one of the chief differences being the gender change of the character “Foxy’s” daughter. Though the short story remained unpublished, Secrest writes that

After they have quarreled, Ellen allows herself to be persuaded that Foxy really loves her and wants to be reconciled. Her mother, who is feeling ill—her asthma is troubling her—is in the bedroom. As Ellen goes up the stairs she starts to run, ‘longing to get in her mother’s arms, to hug her, to kiss her, to make her happy.’ But when she arrives in the bedroom her mother’s response is hostile. Foxy uses Ellen’s sense of guilt to make her apologize, and Ellen, while despising herself for capitulating, has no choice. Emotionally, she is paralyzed (Secrest 59)

In this instant, Ellen’s reaction to her mother’s pain is strikingly dissimilar to Sondheim’s responses to his mother’s ailments in later life. Perhaps at the time of writing the story, he too wished that he could reconcile with his mother but felt that her hostility was too potent for him to do so. Later in life, perhaps he’d forsaken the thought of ever having a meaningfully loving relationship with her. Though Ellen enters the room with an intention to make up, her mother ruins the potential moment of reconciliation with guilting and unpleasantness. As may have been the case between Sondheim and his own mother, Ellen is the one who ends up apologizing. The story ends with a medical crisis, centered around the asthma attacks, in which “Foxy” ultimately dies and Ellen wants to “feel vindictive triumph...But all she can feel is ‘a sick, empty, lonely feeling’” (Secrest 59). The real-life Foxy also had asthma, and she also used her illness to shame Sondheim

into caring for her, prompting him to call out her behavior as typical of “a Jewish Mother”. Perhaps Sondheim’s conflicting feelings about his mother were exemplified in Ellen’s description of the complex feelings that “Foxy” and her fictional death caused in her. Throughout Sondheim’s life, his mother was plagued with health issues which, in many cases, he accused her of faking to get attention.

In his adult years, Sondheim recalls going home and discovering his mother in a neck brace. After expressing his concern, he learned unquestionably that she was faking, prompting him to remark about the whole affair that “she’d gone through this elaborate charade because it was one of those days when she wanted to make me feel guilty” (Secrest 222). Foxy, it seemed, often tried to make her son and those she was close to give her attention in any way she could.

Some years after the neck-brace incident, Foxy took a full bottle of sleeping pills given to her by a doctor with whom she had a romance. As the doctor was aware of her destructive personality, when preparing the prescription, he filled the bottle with some real pills, but mostly placebos. Foxy woke up the subsequent morning disoriented but not permanently harmed. Sondheim labels this event as an endeavor to “make him feel guilty...and fly to her side, but her inability to stage a convincing scene had frustrated her efforts”. This episode was indicative of her capacity to cause powerful feelings of unhappiness in others, without ultimately harming herself. When Sondheim first saw her after the event, the words she uttered inspired the song “Sorry-Grateful” in *Company* (Secrest 224). He was so struck by her practiced apology—which she was unable to effectively deliver—that he describes rushing away from her to begin writing the lyrics as inspired by her fumbling words. Later, when her health began deteriorating

and she needed a pacemaker placed, Foxy wrote Sondheim a harsh letter insisting that she was having “open heart surgery” and incorporated a line stating ““the only regret I have in life is giving you birth”” (Secrest 270). For Sondheim, this letter was the final straw, and it was at this point that he terminated his relationship with his mother until much later in life. Though his analyst pointed out that ““not all nice Jewish boys support their mothers”” (Secrest 270), Sondheim financially supported her through their estrangement—evidence of his continued care or sense of responsibility for her despite their challenges. He resumed a guarded relationship with her some years after the letter incident, but never had an overly loving connection with her. As for her eventual funeral, Sondheim did not attend.

Undoubtedly, proximity and his strained relationship with his mother urged Sondheim towards a substitute parental figure, mentee Oscar Hammerstein II. Hammerstein had an astonishing influence on him and his artistic style. Of his first meetings with Hammerstein, Sondheim writes “I didn’t know him well, but he saved my life” (Sondheim *Getting To Know Him* Foreword). Indeed, their connection was one of the most meaningful relationships at that point in Sondheim’s young life, contributing to his future profession—and it started with Sondheim’s camaraderie with Hammerstein’s son.

Sondheim became fast friends with Jamie Hammerstein, the son of Oscar Hammerstein II, and quickly became a staple in their home. Sondheim depicts himself as “infiltrating the house” (Secrest 33) and becoming practically like family to the Hammersteins. When Foxy moved them closer in proximity to the Hammerstein family, Sondheim became an even more permanent fixture in their home, spending as much time

there—which was also away from his mother—as he was able. Sondheim and the elder Hammerstein bonded over vicious senses of humor: both were quick-witted and ruthless (Secrest 37), even notorious for upsetting those around them with their jokes. And, Sondheim was significantly influenced by Hammerstein’s guidance, following in his theatrical footsteps:

Hammerstein's mentorship, which continued until his death in 1960, was evident in Sondheim's earliest Broadway work. These shows, solidly within existing traditions of musical theater, bore the fingerprints of others: *West Side Story* (1957), with music by Leonard Bernstein, seemed to build on Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* in concerning itself with timely social issues. *Gypsy* (1959), with music by Jule Styne, was in the genre of "backstage musicals." *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), an adaptation of Plautus for which Sondheim provided lyrics and music, was tuneful in a way his future work rarely sought to be. (Tonguette)

As Tonguette writes, Sondheim’s works continued to be inspired by Hammerstein’s guidance. Famously, Hammerstein gave Sondheim a list of four musicals which he should write before really committing to becoming a professional writer. These four practice pieces would prepare him for future projects that he may work on. Sondheim attempted and began to write each of the prescribed pieces but did not complete them. Regardless, Hammerstein’s influence is apparent even in his published works.

Hammerstein, who also had Jewish heritage, was similarly raised with little formal Jewish education. However, many of Hammerstein’s friends and collaborators—including Rodgers, who also later collaborated with Sondheim—were actively Jewish, and a recent publication of Hammerstein’s letters to friends (*The Letters of Oscar Hammerstein II*) illustrates how Hammerstein was captivated with Jewish themes and stories. Hammerstein did not complete any of the projects based on Jewish folklore that

he started, including an adaptation of “The Dybbuk” and a different adaptation of the same story that inspired “Fiddler on the Roof”. Perhaps this lack of completion stemmed not from his scarcity of interest, but instead, a notion that for him these themes were extraordinarily important to portray accurately. Hammerstein wrote to his uncle that taking on these projects would mean “to cast aside all other plays, study up on Jewish lore and tradition, saturate ourselves with the atmosphere of the thing and leave nothing undone to make it perfect” (Hammerstein and Horowitz). Though these pieces remain incomplete, Hammerstein’s nephew asserts that Hammerstein carries on the traditions of Judaism in a different way. Hammerstein’s nephew says: “Judaism is remarkable because it appeals to the singer and the storyteller. Oscar is in some way carrying out a very Jewish tradition of sung story” (Gluck). In addition to their use of storytelling through song, the themes of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s legacy of works often relate to xenophobia, isolation, cultural differences, and religious matters. Despite not including overt Judaism, these themes would have resonated powerfully with Jewish audiences endeavoring to assimilate into American culture. Jules Chometzky writes that Rodgers and Hammerstein’s works like *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, and *Oklahoma!* deal with issues of interracial marriage, and belonging, and he emphasizes that “for many Jewish Americans, these themes hit close to home” (Chometzky 967). So, Hammerstein’s Jewish inspirations, both cultural and collaborative, permeated his work and, in turn, likely influenced his mentee, Stephen.

Sondheim states that the Hammersteins “gave me an outlet; they opened up all the worlds of creative possibilities” (Secrest 51) making it no revelation that Sondheim decided to follow in Hammerstein’s vocational footsteps. In fact, Sondheim knowingly

emulated his mentor in his work, even stating about his earlier pieces that they were “in traditional Rodgers and Hammerstein form” (Sondheim *Finishing The Hat...anecdotes* 4). Though his later works stray away from mimicry of form and figure, like Hammerstein, Sondheim writes on themes which could be widely significant to a broad range of people. Themes of parenthood and family, loneliness, art, and belief systems would have held specific value to assimilating Jews.

An article explains that, along with being Jewish, Sondheim’s sexuality contributed to the reasons he wrote on certain themes: “...the composer and lyricist has taken his personal experience of persecution and racism as a Jewish gay man...and adapted it for the Broadway stage. Sondheim's characters live in a constant search to escape the expectations of the ‘American way of life’” (“Stephen Sondheim brought...to Broadway”). This author explains that Sondheim’s characters are prone to want to escape their circumstance, and this is unmistakable in quite a few of his characters: Bobby from *Company* is sung about in *You Could Drive a Person Crazy* as being disinclined to settle with any of the options of women he has in front of him. Bobby himself shows his yearning for freedom explicitly with “Keep a tender distance/so we'll both be free./That's the way it ought to be” (“Marry Me A Little”, *Company*), voicing his confusion between wanting both to be in a committed relationship—a desire for intimacy and attachment—while also having the ability to maintain his autonomy—distance. Bobby even exemplifies this desire with his plaintive if perplexing cry of “Hurry/Wait for me/Hurry/Wait for me/Hurry/Wait” (“Someone is Waiting”, *Company*). Though it is clear throughout the piece that Bobby does not know what kind of love it is he does want (even when he makes assertions about the type of partner he wants, they are unrealistic

and have conflicting expectations), it is clear what he does not want: he does not want to be bound, or rushed, or changed. Despite wanting to escape his loneliness, he is reluctant to compromise or make a decision in love, paralyzing him into inaction. Though Bobby is singing about romantic love in this song, the sentiments can ring true for familial love as well. One might draw parallels from Bobby and his longings to Stephen Sondheim and his relationship with Foxy—and how convoluted his feelings of wanting to be emotionally close with her but still maintain distance for his own sake remained throughout her entire life.

Tony from *West Side Story* also wants to escape his circumstances and sings the ballad “Somewhere” with the lyrics “There’s a place for us/Somewhere a place for us” (“Somewhere”, *West Side Story*), for people like Sondheim, his character Bobby, and many Jews trying to assimilate in the United States, this plea for a place of belonging rings all the more true. And, in one of his lesser-known pieces, Ella, from *Evening Primrose*, sings “Take me to the world that’s real/... Take me to a world where I can be alive” (“Take Me To The World”, *Evening Primrose*). Like Tony and Bobby, Ella’s world feels too small or unsuitable for her, and she wants out. Examples like these are abundant in Sondheim’s work: characters trying to escape their current circumstances towards a better life in some unspecified elsewhere, much like assimilating Jews working towards acceptance in America.

Though Sondheim did not often write exclusively or explicitly on Jewish themes, *West Side Story* (originally titled *East Side Story*) had undoubtedly Jewish roots. As explained by Jules Chametzky in his book about Jewish American literature, *West Side Story* originally sought to explore the culture clash between Irish and Jewish families on

the Lower East Side, with one of the two main lovers being Irish-Catholic and the other being Jewish. Chametzky argues that “Bernstein and Sondheim also hesitated to call attention to their Jewish heritage” (Chametzky 967). This, and the fact that unrest between Irish and Jewish populations was no longer a noteworthy issue, led Bernstein and Sondheim to abandon these original cultural choices, and transition into the published *West Side Story* story. Regardless of which ethnic group was being written about, the themes in *West Side Story* were linked inextricably to the Jewish-American experience.

Few sources list Sondheim’s full oeuvre of work as comprehensively as Steve Swayne’s “Chronology of Sondheim’s Career” in his book *How Sondheim Found His Sound*. Swayne begins with “By George”, the amateur workings of Sondheim as a high school student, and even includes abandoned works, such as a *Mary Poppins* project which was never completed. The list of works runs the gamut: some, like *West Side Story*, *Gypsy*, and *Sweeney Todd* are readily recognizable, while others like *The Jet-Propelled Couch*, *The Frogs*, and *Bounce*, are equal parts unfamiliar and odd.

Sondheim’s oeuvre is diverse thematically and stylistically, though there are themes that he frequently returns to throughout his writings. Chief among these themes: belonging—or, more often, alienation; creation—particularly as related to artistic endeavors; philosophical explorations of justice and morality; and family or community.

There is a dearth of scholastic review of the Jewish themes present in Sondheim’s works, both the overt use of Jewish characters and the subtler and coded use of Jewish themes, whether intentionally or unintentionally used by Sondheim. Several blog posts and online articles address Jewish themes in some of his individual musicals, but this

subject has not been extensively written about or published about by scholars. In fact, in a pop culture article written for Arts and Entertainment, Lisa Traiger claims that few of Sondheim's themes or characters are Jewish. Further, Traiger quotes an unnamed "Sondheim specialist" who supposes that Sondheim would have been "put off by a close reading of the Jewishness of his shows" (Traiger). Traiger also quotes Danny Burstein, who was mentored by Sondheim, who proposes that Sondheim's Jewish roots are a vital part of what makes his work so exceptional. During his years as Sondheim's mentee, Burstein even called him "Rabbi" which Burstein claims that "he seemed to love" (Traiger).

Though Traiger suggests the possibility that Sondheim might not have personally viewed his musicals through a Jewish lens, scholar Ted Merwin does just that in a chapter of "The Sondheim Review" volume 12, issue 4. Merwin's chapter is so brief, that ample textual analysis is not supplied to support his points—though one could extrapolate to provide evidence if familiar with the source material. Merwin's most fleshed out argument states that "[Sweeney] Todd's metaphoric Jewishness resides simply in his being oppressed and demonized" (Merwin). Though oppression and demonization does not a Jew make, his argument that Sweeney Todd embodies 19th century antisemitic caricatures through his appearance and capitalist traits is compelling. Merwin seems to be the only published scholar who has written on the subject of Judaism within Sondheim's musicals, and he only discusses *Sweeney Todd*.

Though few have written about Judaism explicitly, many scholars have found significance within Sondheim's writings. Robert Gordon writes that although only few of Sondheim's works "achieved commercial success, his critical reputation soared. The

progressive increase in revivals...in the last 25 years perhaps reflects the high esteem in which scholarly critics have held these musicals since the mid-1990s” (R. Gordon 198). Critics and scholars like Jules Chametzky, Stacy Wolf, Jill Dolan, Mark K Fulk, Robert Gluck, K.P. Goffard, Mark Eden Horowitz, Trystan Loustau, Ted Merwin, Dominic McHugh, Ethan Mordden, Paul Puccio, Donald Gagnon, Steve Swayne, Peter Tonguette, Foster Hirsch, Joanne Gordon, and many, many, more have engaged with his language, characters, the staged productions of his shows, with innumerable different readings, focuses, and lenses. Sondheim’s works, while not always box office successes, continue to find improbable success in the amount of scholarship they inspire.

Of that scholarship, much is written about women in Sondheim's work, from a multitude of lenses and sources. Puccio and Gagnon effectively describe an overarching sense in Sondheim’s oeuvre of male characters finding interest only in women who are unavailable. These scholars reflect on the fact that in Sondheim’s work, the “love of a woman frequently involves the love of the idea of a woman” (Gagnon and Puccio 30). Though their argument focuses on romantic or sexual love, it could reasonably be extended to familial relationships, as well as romantic relationships as they pertain to mothers and their respective partners.

Sondheim was writing most prolifically at a time when women characters in theatre were in service to the male characters, and readily available to them. Musicals like *Bye, Bye, Birdie*, *Oliver!*, *How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying*, *Funny Girl*, *Grease*, *Les Miserables*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Nine*, *Singin’ In The Rain*, *The Phantom Of The Opera*, and *Jane Eyre* were contemporary to Sondheim’s works, but portray women as doting, caring, and maternal—in many cases to their own detriment. In

contrast, in Sondheim's works, Puccio and Gagnon also propose that in many ways the women characters are not conscribed to the roles they are assigned by the men they share scenes with—they defy these expectations. Though this is observably true for some of the characters, who unquestionably go their own way in a story that does not necessarily account for such transgression, some do stay within the expectations laid out for them. Puccio and Gagnon's description of the emotionally unavailable nature of so many of the women in Sondheim's work is accurate and can be exemplified by maternal unavailability, which is present in some of Sondheim's works.

Trystan Loustau's article, "'Back to child, back to husband': Containing transgressive mothers in *Into the Woods*" is in conversation with Puccio and Gagnon's idea that women characters in Sondheim's musicals break out of the classic role that American theatre has placed them into. Loustau agrees with this assessment—with some caveats—but suggests that the women, and, more precisely, the mothers, in *Into the Woods* are narratively punished for what Loustau describes as their "transgressions". Loustau says that musical theatre productions "commonly depict each step a mother takes beyond the confines of domesticity as a step in the wrong direction, worsening rather than enhancing her role as a mother...[and] often find themselves punished for their mistakes and remoulded by the end of the production, contained back within traditional forms" (Loustau 332). Though this article suggests that the mothers in *Into the Woods* are being penalized for their actions outside of the domestic realm, it may be that the "transgressions" made by these characters are not necessarily related to general domesticity, and are instead linked to their status and apparent failures as mothers. Loustau closes this article with a firm condemnation of Lapine and Sondheim's original

work, which suggests to a reader that Loustau's opinion misses crucial points within the story. Mark K. Fulk explains some of the complexities of morality that are absent in Loustau's argument, discussing act two's fourth wall break in which all characters are forced to confront their own ideas of morality, and how that subversion affects the objectives of each character. In his book, Sondheim explains in a note about *Into the Woods* that he and some collaborators have "been accused of misogyny many times—especially since it's the women who keep getting killed off". He does not refute this claim of misogyny, though his mention of it is nestled in a paragraph that implies he does not agree with the comments. K.P. Goffard's piece offers a robust breadth of study on feminism within Sondheim's musicals. Goffard makes a claim that death, and particularly the deaths in *Into the Woods* should not be seen as "punishment", but rather as "a release from a society that is often too strict and dictated" (Goffard 43). So often in Sondheim's works, the characters are searching for such societal emancipation, and the women are no exception to this rule.

Chapter IV.

The Jewish Mother

The Jewish Mother as a stereotype has been commented on by several scholars, as it is one that has become familiar when it appears in film, television, theatre, or literature. In her book, “You Never Call! You Never Write!: A History of the Jewish Mother”, Joyce Antler describes the aspects of this stereotype as domineering, anxious, and manipulative. Antler argues that the stereotype of the Jewish mother came to be because it was a convenient tool for comedians: concentrating on the obsessive and dominating facets of the character made for funny jokes. Though the Jewish Mother is seen as nagging and larger than life, Antler urges a reader to consider that “the flawed outer shell of the Jewish mother is seen to hold within it a sympathetic, even noble, character”. Be this as it may, this nuance and nobility can be challenging to unearth in these stereotypical characters, particularly when portrayed in the over-the-top fashion they often are.

Antler explains that the stereotype “became a universally recognized metaphor for nagging, whining, guilt-producing maternal intrusiveness. Excessive, overprotective, neurotically anxious and ever present, the Jewish mother was a convenient scapegoat for ambivalent and hostile sentiments regarding assimilation in a new society, changing family dynamics and shifting gender roles” (Antler 2), and that these negative traits stemmed from both a love for her family, and the need to fiercely safeguard their loved ones and their culture from being hurt or killed—protection that the Jewish people, from

slavery in Egypt, to pogroms, to the Holocaust, and beyond, have needed in order to survive. In some ways, it is all the traits that are overdramatized and seen as negative that have been crucial to the survival of the Jewish people: where one might see the Jewish mother as anxious, her perception is that the world is dangerous and she is pointing out those dangers; where one might see her as guilting, she might believe that she is trying to set her child on a course that will lead to success in a world filled with antisemitism. Of course, these overdramatizations of character may have been exacerbated by the very events that real life Jewish mothers were trying to combat. Historical events leading up to World War II, and the rise of antisemitism during this time may have contributed to the rise of undesirable portrayals of Jewish mothers—though the modern stereotype did not crystalize until after the war with the rise of Jewish affluence in the United States.

Post World War II, Jews settling in America began to take on a new batch of stereotypes. “The Jewish American Princess” and “The Jewish Mother” became part of popular culture. And with them came silent father figures, eclipsed by their wives, or timid sons who would not or could not stand up to their mothers. According to Riv-Ellen Prell, The Jewish Mother stereotype “was not the Yiddishe Mama of the Old World, to whom immigrants longingly turned with sentimental songs...Rather, this representation of New World prosperity was an American-born Jewish Mother who pushed, wheedled, demanded, constrained, and was insatiable in her expectations and wants” (Prell 143). Where Jewish mothers in the “Old World” seemed flush with maternal instinct, the new American Jewish mothers were clawing their way into middle class—and bringing their families with them. As the concept of Jewish motherhood evolved in America in the 1960s, there also came an idea that perhaps the Jewish mothers were ruining the

traditional patriarchy, and taking too much power for themselves, destroying family dynamics. Ravits asks: “What better strategy for dealing with prejudice than to deflect it into misogyny? The outward features of Otherness—old World backwardness, loudness, vulgarity, clannishness, ignorance, and materialism—were heaped onto the Mother.” (Ravits 6). Novick explains that “Feminist scholars maintain that the Jewish Mother was merely a scapegoat for the anxieties that came with the increased prosperity and increased contact with the Gentile world of the postwar years” (Novick 76).

Prell describes the three main aspects of the stereotypical Jewish mother: First, she was giving—in excess. This Jewish mother would force a meal upon anyone in her home or outside of it, and never desire anything in return. Or so she said: perhaps her generosity serves as a means to manipulate the receiver of her excessive gifts. Second, guilt. In return for her care and giving, the Jewish mother expects complete loyalty from those in her life, and if she does not perceive that she has it, she will attempt to elicit feelings of guilt from them. This aspect also relates to the controlling nature of the Jewish mother: she uses guilt to get her way and ultimately make the decisions of the household. And, third, Prell describes her as “naive, stupid, or hopelessly out of touch with the world of her children” (Prell 145).

In “A History of Jewish Mothers on Television: Decoding the Tenacious Stereotype,” Myrna Hant explains that despite all of these worries, the child does give something back to their parents. Hant asserts that “The major obligation of the child is to bring *nakhes* (joy) to his mother, and, of course, to his father. *Nakhes fun kinder* (joy from the children) is the epitome of life’s goodness” (Hant 5) and that the way to bring

this joy is to bring success—whether through scholarship, marriage, occupation, or bringing children of their own into the world. As Hant explains,

[t]he perpetuation of the Jewish mother on TV personifies an ongoing conundrum as to what a woman/mother should be... women are too strong; they're not strong enough. Women want to be mothers; they don't want to be solely mothers. Women yearn for power; they don't want power outside of the domestic realm. Children are traumatized by their mothers; children are nurtured and beloved by their mothers...By ridiculing her we can laugh at all women's attempts to gain power. At the same time that she has power over her children, she is most typically unable to wield power in the public world. (Hant 15)

Hant suggests that maybe the stereotype of a Jewish mother grows out of the desire to gain influence, and that the complications of the stereotype are related to the obstacles inherent with being a parent, particularly a parent who lacks societal power. Parenting is often imperfect, and Jewish mothers, deficient of power and trying to keep their family safe, make mistakes. Further, Hant explains that mothers, in particular throughout history, are habitually blamed for challenging moments in their children's lives, simply because they are present for them, and sometimes unable to offer assistance. In the case of the Jewish mother stereotype, she inserts herself into moments that do not necessarily concern her, and is therefore seen as meddling, but in doing so, also sometimes puts herself into situations that make her seem like she is the reason the challenging thing happened, instead of the solution.

The Jewish mother stereotype also grew out of the cultural differences between many Ashkenazi Jews' lives in Eastern Europe and their attempt to assimilate into American culture. Ravits explains that "In the shtetls of Eastern Europe, Jewish women had served their families by conducting business in the marketplace so that their men were free to spend time in study and prayer" (Ravits 9). However, in America at the time,

upper class women were more consigned to the home, with little involvement in businesses or commerce. The Western role of a woman and a mother was more conservative than was typical in Eastern Europe at the time, and assimilation was a necessary tool for survival in the face of antisemitism.

Though the Jewish mother can be seen as “protecting her children or demanding their loyalty, she is seen as exceeding prescribed boundaries, as being excessive. Her claims to affection, her voicing of opinions, her expressions of maternal worry are perceived as threatening in part because she acts as a free agent, not as a subordinate female according to mainstream cultural ideals” (Ravits 4) and so the Jewish Mother is seen as outside of the social norm of the time. In order to assimilate, and particularly in the view of their American born children, Jewish women who were too business-oriented were regarded as being outside of their sphere: though their business acumen had been a great help to their families in Eastern Europe, women with those proficiencies were not given the same opportunities in America, instead using those learned skills to run their households. The women who kept “old attitudes and attempted to take control of financial matters were seen, at least in literature, as domineering and emasculating – or as laughable” (Baum et al. 193). While they were kept largely away from the business world for fear of overstepping social norms, Jewish women, like their male counterparts in America, were advancing in other industries, such as theatre, television and radio.

Ravits explains that “In the decades after World War II in the United States, satirical portrayal of the Jewish mother became an accepted outlet for Jews' feelings of pride about their gains through assimilation and also for self-doubts about the resulting erosion of group identity and cohesiveness” (Ravits 9). Through these portrayals, Jewish

artists parody their own culture, while also mourning the loss of community that often comes with assimilation. In naming the stereotype they could feel connected to other Jews with similar life experiences, but in many cases, they failed to acknowledge that this humor was often being used to “chide the mother for the very values that were keys to their success: the drive for education, aggressiveness, and social ambition” (Ravits 14), increasing prejudice against them. Ravits explains that,

Jewish writers and film-makers used the figure of the Jewish Mother for the purposes of self-mockery, which was meant to ease the anxiety connected with their rapid social advancement. Representatives of stand-up comedy, such as Irwin Corey, the so-called Jewish Borscht Belt Comedians working in the Catskill Mountains resorts, Mel Brooks, Jerry Lewis, Milton Berle, and later filmmakers, such as Woody Allen, exploited and perpetuated the image, translating their anguish into humor. Due to the popularity of their comedy routines, they entered the mainstream culture, becoming a vital, vibrant part of it. In consequence, the figure of the domineering mother in America came to be labeled specifically as a ‘Jewish mother’ in the public consciousness. (Ravits 4)

These comedians were so entrenched in popular culture that so, too, became the stereotype of the Jewish Mother, becoming synonymous with many of the negative traits accompanying the stereotype. Ravits makes a cogent point that the stereotype of Jewish Mother gained popularity in part because of the success of these comedians and artists, and the success of these comedians and artists is in turn in part due to the mothering styles of their very own Jewish mothers.

The Jewish Mother stereotype, frequently seen as negative, also captures many of the positive qualities that contributed to the advancement of Jews in creative endeavors. Because of their close relationships to their mothers, “Jewish children are less likely to depend on peer group support and approval, and therefore tend to be less conforming and more original—at least intellectually” (Baum et al. 243) making them primely positioned to excel in creative fields. Baum implies that because they strive for the approval of their

mother before their peers, Jewish creators have more flexibility to create art that strays from the beaten path, with less apprehension about the views of society. This leads to more originality by lessening the concern for acceptance from the broader world but focuses all social acceptance on one person—one who is impossible to satisfy.

Koltun explains that the “literature on the Jewish Mother is practically unanimous in painting her as the ‘supermother’, especially vulnerable to being severely affected if her children fail to meet her needs...the children are viewed as at the same time helpless without the mother’s directives and as powerful, being able to kill the mother with aggravation” (Koltun 77): though the Jewish Mother goes above and beyond to supply for her children and serve their needs above her own, this is in part because she views them as incapable of caring for themselves. Because of their desire to be accepted by their mother, and her reluctance to see them as capable, a Jewish Mother’s children are left in an unmanageable position, unable to succeed in the eyes of a mother who has gone to extreme lengths to care for them and is not afraid to tell them that. Despite the impossible standards set by her, “it is this type of mothering, some social scientists assert, that is responsible for the fact that Jews have a lower rate of impairing mental illness (psychosis) than Protestants or Catholics, although they do have a higher rate of nondebilitating illness (neurosis)” (Baum et al. 243). One can imagine the standup comedy routine written based on this assertion.

So, the Jewish Mother, despite the negative stereotypes surrounding her identity, could be part of the reason that Jews succeeded in creative fields, both due to her overbearing nature which allowed them to need less social support from peers, and due to the fact that her type of mothering led to less debilitating mental illness. Plus, planting a

little neurosis in her children and her suggestion that they would never be good enough for her may have also contributed to their own personal attempts at greatness, ultimately leading to success.

Modern examples of Jewish motherhood appear in musicals such as *Honeymoon in Vegas* by Andrew Bergman, with music and lyrics by Jason Robert Brown, both Jewish. In *Honeymoon in Vegas*, Brown features characters who are not explicitly Jewish, but are coded to be read as Jewish, including a domineering Jewish mother. In the first song sung by protagonist, Jack, he proclaims “I’m a schmuck but Betsy loves me” (“I Love Betsy”, *Honeymoon in Vegas*). Though the use of the yiddish word “schmuck” does not necessarily equate Judaism, this is a clear signal to the audience of Jack’s knowledge of Jewish-adjacent phrases, especially when employed by two Jewish creators. His mother, dead by the time the show opens, embodies the stereotype of Jewish motherhood. In the first scene of the show, Jack enters a department store, searching for a ring for his girlfriend, Betsy. He is immediately haunted by memories of his mother, in the form of a flashback. She sings to him “If you love me Jack/then make me a promise/...never get married...no other woman could love you/like your mommy does/you can just toss me in the Hudson/I’ll be food for the fish/but don’t ignore a mother’s dying wish” (“Never Get Married”, *Honeymoon in Vegas*). In this number, and in every moment she is seen onstage, she is nagging and demanding, endeavoring to emasculate her son in order to preserve his love for herself. She is the quintessence of a Jewish mother, requiring her son’s complete and unmitigated devotion to her—with no regard for his own aspirations. Her self-proclaimed dying wish overshadows the remainder of the musical, culminating in a journey to "The Garden of Disappointed

Mothers" where Jack is finally able to break the curse of his implicitly Jewish mother by proving himself as a man. Though they are not explicitly Jewish, Jack and his mother read as Jewish through the implicit clues present in the script.

In comparison, an example of overt Judaism in a modern musical is William Finn's opening number to *Falsetto*'s: "Four Jews In a Room Bitching", which dexterously utilizes comedy to convey several Jewish tropes. The apt title of the number suggests the content, which spans from the beginning lines of "I'm bitching. He's bitching/They're bitching. We're bitching/Bitch bitch bitch bitch/Funny funny funny funny/Bitch bitch/Bitch bitch bitch bitch/All the Time" ("Four Jews In a Room Bitching", *Falsettoland*) to a repetitive melody of the word "slavery", to mention of Egypt and Pharoah, to crossing the Red Sea. The song seems to endeavor to encapsulate what it means to be Jewish, and the bridge of the song exemplifies their idea of what Judaism means: "In case of smoke please call our mothers on the phone/And say their sons are all on fire/We are manipulating people and we need to know/Our worst sides aren't ignored/The guilt invested will, in time, pay wisely" ("Four Jews In a Room Bitching", *Falsettoland*). By saying this, they turn the guilt typically inflicted by the Jewish Mother back around onto the Jewish Mother, overexaggerating the danger so that she will fly to their aid.

Many modern musicals, such as *Company* (the character Paul), *Dear Evan Hansen* (the character Jared Kleinman), *Little Shop of Horrors* (the character Mr. Mushnik), *Rent* (Mark Cohen), and many more practice the same treatment utilized in *Honeymoon in Vegas* to code Judaism without overtly discussing Jewishness as a main subject of the production as is done in *Falsettos*. The utilization of the stereotypical

Jewish Mother and other stereotypes simplify the coding by offering characterizations that are more recognizable to a wider audience while still requiring prior cultural knowledge. While someone from the United States may recognize the stereotypical Jewish mother from other media they consume and be able to identify her when she is not overtly identified, someone from a different country might not recognize her as part of their cultural norm.

Chapter V.

Case Studies on Coded Jewish Mothers in *Into the Woods*

Into the Woods, with music and lyrics written by Stephen Sondheim, the libretto written by James Lapine and originally directed by James Lapine, premiered on Broadway in 1986 after several workshops and a tryout at The Old Globe in San Diego. It was one of Sondheim's only lucrative projects, as well as being admired by both critics and the general public (Jubin). *Into the Woods* tells the story of several classic fairy tales, putting a postmodern twist on them by intertwining them with each other.

Plot Summary

Into the Woods combines the stories of Little Red Riding Hood, Jack and the Beanstalk, Cinderella, and Rapunzel, with a story mostly invented by Lapine and Sondheim of a Baker and his Wife struggling to have a child.

The show begins abruptly, with a voice declaring "Once upon a time!" A Narrator delivers a twelve to fifteen minute prologue, introducing several storylines based on traditional fairy-tales. During that prologue, each of the show's heroes articulates an explicit wish, setting the proverbial and literal stage for their journey through the play. Cinderella wishes to attend a ball, Jack wishes his cow would produce milk, Jack's Mother wishes Jack would be less foolish (among other things), Little Red Riding Hood wishes for treats to bring to her grandmother, and the Baker and the Baker's Wife wish for a child.

At the prologue's climax, a Witch enters the bakery. Long ago, the Witch tells the Baker and his Wife, she caught Baker's father stealing vegetables and beans from her

garden. As punishment, she cursed the Baker's family to be unable to bear children. The Witch also reveals that the Baker had a sister, Rapunzel, whom the Witch stole and raised as her own child.

The Witch agrees to lift the curse if the Baker and his wife can find and bring her four items within three days: 1. A cow as white as milk, 2. A cape as red as blood, 3. Hair as yellow as corn, and 4. A slipper as pure as gold—a seemingly tall order, but one easily achieved when dealing with fairy tale characters who just so happen to each have one of those items.

By the end of the prologue, each character is venturing into the woods separately to complete their own personal goals, including the Baker searching for the items, and his wife who surreptitiously follows him after being told to stay home.

With the prologue complete, the show begins in earnest. Cinderella goes to her mother's grave lamenting the terrible treatment she is receiving from her stepmother and stepsisters. Her mother delivers a message from beyond the grave, gifting Cinderella with a beautiful dress and golden slippers. Now Cinderella can attend the ball in style. She triumphantly runs off to get her wish.

Meanwhile, Jack is on his way to market to sell his cow, aptly named "Milky White." He runs into the Mysterious Man who makes fun of Jack and plants the idea that Jack should exchange Milky White for beans.

Next, the audience sees The Baker and his Wife, who collide in the woods. The Baker's Wife insists that she only followed him to bring him his scarf. Reunited, the Baker and his Wife meet Jack and offer him a trade: they'll take Milky White in exchange for four beans, which the Baker finds in his father's jacket—they keep one

bean for themselves. The Baker and his Wife persuade Jack that the beans are magic—despite both of them believing this to be a lie. The Baker struggles to justify lying to Jack, but his Wife assures him that “if the end is right, it justifies the beans”. Jack makes the trade and heads home.

When Jack offers the beans to his mother, she rejects them, throwing them outside their home, where they grow into a giant beanstalk.

Elsewhere, Little Red meets the Wolf, who suggests a longer detour for her to get to her Granny’s house. She decides to take it, giving the Wolf time to get to Granny’s house first.

The Baker sees Little Red wearing a red cape—the next item on his list. By the time he catches up with her, she and her grandmother have been eaten by the Wolf. The Baker stabs the Wolf and frees them from his stomach. Little Red rewards the Baker with her cape, commenting on how much she’s learned from the horrific experience.

The Baker and his Wife now have two of their four items: the white cow and the red cape. They still need yellow hair and gold slippers. Enter Rapunzel and Cinderella.

The Witch goes to visit Rapunzel, whom she has locked away in a tower. On her journey, the Witch just misses a prince, who spots Rapunzel and is instantly smitten.

Concurrently, Cinderella attends the King’s ball and falls in love with a different prince. Not ready to commit to a royal life, she runs away. In the woods, Cinderella meets The Baker’s Wife, who helps her hide, and questions her longingly about her night with the prince. During their conversation, Milky White escapes from the Baker’s Wife and runs off. This marks the stroke of midnight.

At that very same stroke of midnight, Jack, who has been up the beanstalk, returns with gold coins, which he offers to the Baker, hoping to buy back Milky White. The Baker, tempted by sudden riches, hesitates. Jack, mistaking the Baker's hesitation for bargaining, runs off to retrieve more money. While he's gone, the Mysterious Man steals the gold from the Baker.

Back to the princes. Cinderella's Prince and Rapunzel's Prince turn out to be brothers. They lament that their love interests are out of reach. The Baker's Wife overhears them and learns that Rapunzel has yellow hair. Thrilled, the Baker's Wife heads to Rapunzel's tower and pulls a strand.

The Mysterious Man returns Milky White to the Baker for mysterious reasons. When the Baker and his Wife rediscover each other, they realize that they now have three of the four items. All that's left is the golden slipper.

Unfortunately, their triumph is short-lived. Just as Jack returns with more money to buy back Milky White, the cow emits her final moo and dies. Jack is heartbroken and the Baker and his Wife are another item down. This marks the end of the second night.

Rapunzel has been seeing her Prince between scenes. For this, the Witch punishes Rapunzel, banishing her to a remote desert and blinding her Prince.

After that brief interruption, the play returns to the Baker and his Wife, who are in need of a cow and a slipper. With Milky White dead, the Mysterious Man returns and offers the Baker money for a new cow. The Baker accepts, and promptly purchases a new cow as white as milk (though the cow looks wrong somehow).

Meanwhile, The Baker's Wife tackles the slipper issue by trading shoes with Cinderella. Cinderella is hesitant but ultimately glad to make the exchange because she

only has one shoe: she left the other slipper behind at the ball. Finally, all items seem to be acquired.

Jack and Little Red meet. Little Red dares him to return to the kingdom of the giants and steal more from them. He does, and returns with more loot, but not without leaving a trail. Shortly after, his horrified mother reports that a dead giant has fallen in her yard.

Back to the Baker. Now that all the items have been acquired, the Witch returns to lift the curse. But she finds that the new cow has been covered in flour and is not actually white. She brings Milky White back to life and feeds the other three items to the cow. Then she milks the cow, dubs the milk a “potion,” and drinks it. The potion fails, with Rapunzel’s yellow hair identified as the culprit: the Witch was not supposed to have touched any of the ingredients.

The Mysterious Man, who is now revealed to be the Baker’s presumed-dead father, enters and offers hair from an ear of corn, which they feed to Milky White. The Witch milks the cow again, and drinks. This time it works. The curse on the Baker’s family is lifted, and the Witch is transformed into a beautiful young woman—losing her magical powers in the process.

The now-beautiful Witch attempts to reconcile with Rapunzel and her Prince—who has regained his sight—but is rejected by them and is powerless to control them without her magic. Simultaneously, Cinderella’s Prince searches the kingdom and finds her.

Apart from Cinderella's stepsisters who have been blinded, and the Witch who has lost her powers, most characters in the show seem ready to live happily ever after. But, of course, this is only the end of Act One.

Act Two opens with a reprise of the prologue. Each character declares a new wish, but everyone seems generally happy with life now that their original wishes have been granted. Cinderella lives in the palace with her new husband, Jack and his mother are rich, and the Baker and his Wife have a child.

Their general contentment is interrupted by a mysterious rumbling and crashing that destroys the Baker's home, the Witch's garden, and half the town. The Witch, on her way into the woods, tells the Baker that she believes the destruction was caused by a giant (though many believe that the rumors of a giant in the kingdom are false).

Everyone returns to the woods for their own personal reasons. The princes meet in the woods, each complaining about their wives—Cinderella, who has lost the prince's interest, and Rapunzel, who has returned to the kingdom but has given birth to twins and gone mad. Now the princes pine after new lovers who are again, "just out of reach".

Cinderella's stepmother, stepsisters, father, and the royal steward come upon the ragtag group of the Baker, the Baker's Wife, their baby, and Little Red, informing them that the castle has been destroyed by a giant: the royal retinue are leaving town to save themselves. The Witch enters, confirming that the town has been destroyed by the giant.

Finally, the Giant herself arrives, seeking revenge for the death of her husband (the giant who was killed by Jack in the first act). She hopes to find and kill Jack. The characters, unsure of what to do—and not sure where Jack is—ponder their dilemma

while begging the Giant not to move. Each of the Giant's steps is brutally destructive to their surroundings, and her eyesight is not very good.

Eventually, the characters notice the Narrator, blissfully outside of the story, and offer him to the Giant. She picks him up, notices he is not Jack, and drops him, killing him. Jack's Mother speaks up, explaining that they will never give the Giant what she wants. Attempting to silence Jack's mother, the king's Steward kills her.

The Giant leaves, trampling and killing Rapunzel, who steps into her path. The Witch mourns the loss of her child and swears that she will find Jack and bring him to the Giant for retribution.

As Cinderella's family flees, the others split up to find Jack before the Witch does. Little Red is left with the Baker's infant child, and the Baker and his Wife promise to return to them soon. The Baker comes upon Cinderella, distraught that her mother's grave has been crushed by the giant. He encourages Cinderella to join him and his group to stay safer.

The Baker's Wife, meanwhile, meets Cinderella's Prince in the woods, and they share some sexually intimate moments before parting ways. The Baker's Wife decides to return to the group but is crushed by the Giant as she tries to find her way back.

Cinderella, Little Red, the Baker, and the infant wait for the Baker's Wife to return and are found by the Witch who has captured Jack. The group argues, and ultimately turns the blame for the situation on the Witch, who throws the remainder of her mother's beans at the group and begs her mother to take her away. She magically disappears.

The Baker, emotionally unstable after the loss of his wife, leaves the group, but returns and helps the group make a plan to kill the Giant. As they plan, Jack is told that his mother was killed, and Little Red finds out that her grandmother was trampled by the Giant. Both are told to come to terms with their grief and move on despite the pain. Working together, the group kills the Giant.

In the play's final moments, the Baker begins to tell his baby son the story of what happened, encouraged by the ghosts of his Wife and the Witch. The story, complex and winding, ends with an apt warning: "children will listen".

Background

This closing number encompasses a principal refrain of the show. As stated by Stephen Holden in a New York Times article, the main themes of the show revolve around "parent-child relationships and the individual's responsibility to the community" (Holden). Further, Holden explains through interviews with the artists involved that many of them are parents themselves, unraveling how to navigate parenting. Olaf Jubin writes in his book "Sondheim and Lapine's *Into the Woods*" that one of the major themes and organizing factors in the musical is that "in the often volatile relationship between parents and children, the best intentions may lead to consequences that are both unexpected and unwanted" (Jubin 12). And, Sondheim himself pronounces that *Into the Woods* is about parenthood: "Among the characters in *Woods* are a father uncomfortable with babies, who Sondheim admits is his father, and a mother who regrets having had children, who Sondheim says is his mother. In almost all his shows at least one character stands apart from the world and comments, and that is Sondheim himself" (Henry). In *Into the Woods*, the character standing to the side and representing Sondheim could be the Narrator

objectively commentating on the stories until he is forced to become part of them himself, the Mysterious Man (often played by the same actor as the Narrator), who stays on the sidelines of his own cursed story, or maybe even the Witch, who remains objective over emotional, even in the face of major loss and when handling gigantic tragedies.

The character names given to women in *Into the Woods* also shed light onto their utility within the play. Many of them are only named for their relationship to the men in their lives. For example, as per the fairy tale norm, the Baker is known only by his job description. He is a person who owns a bakery, and bakes bread for a living. The Baker's Wife, however, whose key purpose in the play is to conceive a child with her husband, is categorized only as his "wife". In this way, the Baker is given a personality trait beyond his hope to conceive a child: he is given an occupation, a purpose, and the implication of backstory beyond the play itself. The suggestion that the Baker is defined by his occupation signifies that he is contributing skill and indispensable goods to society, though the action throughout the play (and exemplified in the prologue) suggests that the Baker's Wife is the one with business acumen.

In the original Broadway cast production of *Into the Woods*, Little Red is shown pilfering sweets from the bakery, and the Baker's Wife rather than the Baker takes action to get them back. First, she emboldens the Baker to remove the dish from which Little Red is swiping goodies, and later, she herself removes stolen confections from Little Red's basket just as quickly as Little Red can put them in. Despite happening in the background during character introductions, these actions themselves expose essential character information.

For the Baker, it is clear that his Wife commonly tells him what to do. He evades conflict by seemingly permitting Little Red to steal from them, but when his Wife offers him a solution to the problem, he is quick to take it. The Baker is exposed here as submissive to his Wife, but also as compliant to Little Red, frustratedly allowing her to swindle him. When faced with women who seem overbearing to him, the Baker instantly submits. Little Red proves in this scene to be selfish and glib, stealing goodies while also offhandedly and unfeelingly suggesting that her grandmother might be dead. In this way, Little Red is introduced as someone who will take what she wants, without concern for others' feelings. The Baker says only one line to Little Red, urging her to be careful on her way. So, though she has terrorized his shop, he offers empathy and concern for her well-being.

Finally, the Baker's Wife is practical, asking questions that express logistical concerns for Little Red's safety, but also giving the command to "save some of those sweets for Granny" ("Prologue", *Into the Woods* 9). Unlike her husband, in this interaction the Baker's Wife seems less empathic and more business inclined. In fact, her husband's ineptitude seems to frustrate her so much that she does whatever she needs done herself. She is the person to open the door for Little Red at the top of the scene; she is the one to get back some of the stolen goods; and she is certainly the person keeping the business running—yet, despite all of this, her seemingly tongue-in-cheek title is that of a Wife rather than her profession.

Similarly, looking at other characters such as Cinderella's Mother, Cinderella's Stepmother, and Jack's Mother the characteristics that they are defined by is their relationship to their child in the show. Their status as mothers trumps any other attribute

they may have. These character names also indicate that the importance of these mothers does not originate within themselves, but rather within their children, since their status as mothers is noted, while their individuality in the form of character names or other descriptors is not obvious.

It is significant to note that some of the character names are appropriated directly from the fairy tale that they exist in, but, as in the case of Cinderella (based closely on the Brothers Grimm's Aschenputtel), the mother is never named. Cinderella's Mother in *Into the Woods*, who is typically played by an actor that doubles as Little Red's Grandmother and the Giant, is not a major character, and seems to be in the story solely to advance Cinderella's plot, just like in the original fairy tale. Though the Brothers Grimm never named her in their story, they used character relationships as the descriptors by which they called their characters. It seems to be in the same spirit that Sondheim and Lapine name their characters in *Into the Woods*.

The Baker's Wife

As previously asserted, the Baker's Wife is introduced and named as an accessory of the Baker. In his introduction to the character, the Narrator describes the Baker as "a childless baker" ("Prologue", *Into the Woods* 3). The emphasis placed on their childlessness is evocative of a stereotypical Jewish mother's refrain that having children is of the utmost importance in a marriage. The Baker's Wife spends the first act frantically endeavoring to have a baby, whether for her own sake, the sake of continuing their family tree, or the sake of her husband. Her character's introductory "I wish" statement is different than all the others. Typically, after each "I wish" statement the character pauses contemplatively, repeats several times how much they want the thing

they have not yet said, and then proceeds to explain their desire. Often, there are lines spoken by the narrator during these pauses. In contrast, the Baker's Wife begins with "I wish..." but quickly follows with "I want a child". In changing from "wish" to "want", the Baker's Wife increases the line from a passive hope to a more tangible appeal. Her tone changes from fairy tale whimsy to demanding.

Gasztold explains that "as the father figure is virtually transparent and yields no formal control or authority, the Jewish mother stereotype testifies to the failure of traditional patriarchy in American Jewish acculturated families" (Gasztold 170). The relationship between the Baker and his Wife is a prime example of the matriarch wielding all authority within a relationship, and the husband going along with her wishes. In the rare moments that the Baker does stand his ground, he seems almost childlike in his refusal, and is admonished by his Wife. Though he is occasionally able to get his way in the short term, his Wife often manipulates circumstances so that ultimately, hers is the path taken in the long term. For example, after speaking with the Witch, the Baker's Wife contends that she will join the Baker on his journey into the woods. Their sung dispute offers insight into their relationship:

Baker: No! You are not coming.

Baker's Wife: I know you are fearful of the woods at night.

Baker: The spell is on MY house. Only I can lift the spell, The spell is on MY house.

Baker's Wife (*over*): No, no, the spell is on OUR house. We must lift the spell together, The spell is on OUR house.

Baker (*over*): No. You are not to come and that is final. Now, what am I to return with?

Baker's Wife: (*Annoyed*) You don't remember? ("Prologue", *Into the Woods* 16-17)

She proceeds to demonstrate her superior handle on the situation.

The exchange can be broken down line by line. First, the Baker explains that she will not be coming with him, taking a stance on how he wishes to proceed. Though he has insisted that he is going alone, his Wife insults his bravery, and brings up his fear of the woods. In this way, and by suggesting that he needs her to support him in his moments of fear, she attempts to manipulate him to get her way. Her next line cuts him off, speaking over him while continuing to try and make her point heard which exerts her dominance over him. When he puts his foot down and makes the final proclamation that she will not join him to source the items in the woods, she lets her exasperation at his ineptitude show, as demonstrated by the stage direction and her frustrated quip back at him. Throughout the exchange, she tries to manipulate him into agreeing that she should come and when she does not succeed, she switches tactics by displaying her disappointment in him. The interaction also insinuates the influence that she attempts to have on him, in spite of his disagreement. Later in the play, she does end up joining him in the woods, and he concedes that she'd been right all along to want to come. Though her tactics do not initially work, she persists until she obtains the outcome that she feels is in her best interest.

In many ways, the Baker's Wife seems willing to do whatever it takes to attain their mutual objective. She rationalizes to her husband, after tricking Jack into selling her his cow that "If you know what you want/Then you go and you find it/And you get it/Do we want a child, or not?/and you give and you take/And you bid and you bargain/Or you live to regret it" ("Maybe They're Magic", *Into the Woods* 29). In this song she alleges that "If the end is right, it justifies the means!", playing on the famous Machiavellian quote. She indicates that she would do whatever it takes to reach her goal with

little concern for how her actions affect those around her. The Baker's Wife is single-minded in her attempts to get her desire, actively prioritizing her needs above those around her. Like Machiavelli, she intimates that if the outcome is her preferred one, that anything can and should be done in order to get to that point.

The story of the Baker and his Wife is also reminiscent of the story of Abraham and Sarah (also sometimes known as Abram and Sarai), as told in the Torah, the main Jewish biblical text: Sarah, at age ninety, has not succeeded in bearing children to Abraham. God comes to Abraham and explains that Sarah will give him a son, even at her advanced age. Before Sarah becomes pregnant, Abraham endures several hardships of his own, stands up to God to protest the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and encourages God to save those who deserved saving. Abraham's moral dilemma in these moments is not dissimilar to the moral dilemmas faced by the Baker in *Into the Woods*. While trying to lift the curse on his house, the Baker must choose whether his morality will be corrupted in order to realize his objective. In most cases, like Abraham, he chooses the morally upstanding path—for example, when he has an occasion to steal a red cape from Little Red, he feels obligated to return it once she starts crying. He gives it back to her, losing both the object and his relationship with her in a moment. When he later cuts open the Wolf's stomach and finds her and the cape inside, she gifts it to him, narratively rewarding his morally honorable behavior. Sarah, on the other hand, laughs and responds sarcastically when told she will bear a child:

Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, which was behind him...And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?' Then the Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?' Is anything too wondrous for the Lord? I will return to you at the same season next year, and Sarah shall have a son.' Sarah lied, saying, 'I

did not laugh,’ for she was frightened. But He replied, ‘You did laugh.’
(Genesis 18 10-15)

Sarah’s laughter and disbelief is echoed in the Baker’s Wife’s wry sarcasm throughout the show in her interactions with other characters, but also in the facial expressions, body language, and vocal reactions performed by Joanna Gleason in the original Broadway cast. In many scenes, even when not the focal point onstage, Gleason can be seen huffing or rolling her eyes in the background, particularly in response to her husband’s actions. She does not believe her husband’s ability to achieve his goals, and she also is constant in her practicality. In the Act II opening number, the Baker’s Wife explains that she never thought that they’d be able to have a baby: like Sarah, she is incredulous toward the supernatural forces that promised her a child.

Also in the biblical story of Abraham and Sarah, Sarah is given to King Abimelech as a romantic interest, though they are not intimate. God explains that if Abimelech had been intimate with Sarah, he would die for the sin. This biblical story is reminiscent of the moment in *Into the Woods* where the Baker’s Wife shares a romantic scene with Cinderella’s Prince—the ending, however, differs. In *Into the Woods*, there is some intimacy between the Baker’s Wife and the Prince—and intercourse is implied. Shortly after the scene ends, the Baker’s Wife dies, stepped on by the Giant: a decidedly biblical punishment. In the Torah, Sarah is given a child, and dies in the next verse she appears in.

Though the Baker’s Wife is dead before the end of the musical, the character endures in the form of a ghost for the remainder of the piece. Once she is gone, the Baker realizes how little autonomy he really has. He tries to abandon the group (including his baby, which he leaves with Cinderella), exclaiming “You don’t understand. My wife was

the one who really helped. I depended on her for everything” (Lapine and Sondheim 122). His admittance of how much she did for him also illustrates the ways in which he accepted and even may have valued her overbearing behavior.

But being an overbearing wife to a husband is also typical behavior from the Jewish Mother. Baum explains that “The stereotypical Jewish mother overdoes her job...preventing [her children] from achieving autonomy by interfering, cajoling, advising, and manipulating...Her domination extends over her husband as well” (Baum et al. 236). This type of manipulation is evident in the relationship between the Baker and his wife, until she has died. After her death, she offers him her last quibble and instructions:

Baker: Maybe I just wasn't meant to have children--

Wife (*enters behind him*): Don't say that! Of course you were meant to have children..

Baker: But how will I go about being a father
With no one to mother my child?

(*Baby cries.*)

Wife: Just calm the child.

Baker (*attempting to do so*): Yes, calm the child. (Lapine and Sondheim 134)

As is her wont, the Baker's Wife's first line interrupts the Baker, telling him that he's incorrect in what his perception is. Even in death, she is not willing to concur with what he initially asserts. However, her disagreement in this moment doubles as encouragement that his insecurity in being a parent should not deter him from caring for his child. She uses her dominance to tell him exactly what he should do, but her final line to him is one of trust: she believes that he can care for the child without her, even if he does not believe in himself. As is characteristic for a stereotypical Jewish Mother, she wants her loved ones to find success, but acts as though she does not believe in her

husband by commanding him to follow very explicit instructions. The tragic ending given to the Baker's Wife offers a conjecture: perhaps the only way to escape the day-to-day manipulation of a Jewish Mother is for her to die—though as evidenced by both *Honeymoon in Vegas* and the Baker's Wife in *Into the Woods*, her expectations could still continue to haunt those she loves even after her death. Upon her death those around her may discover that not only were they capable all along, but that she always knew and believed that they were.

Cinderella's Mother, Granny, and The Giant

Cinderella's Mother exemplifies the Jewish American ideal of success as opposed to the ideals of success set forward in shtetl life. As Cantor explains, "The shtetl defined success in terms of Jewish values: that she or he became a mensch, and a good Jew. In America success meant the son's material achievement and status and the daughter's 'good marriage'" (Cantor 209). Cinderella's Mother embodies the ideal of hoping for a good marriage for her daughter. Not only does she provide Cinderella with a dress and shoes to attend the ball, but she also alerts the Prince to the falseness of the Stepsisters, thus securing Cinderella's status as his wife. Though going to the ball fulfills Cinderella's wish, her mother does not stop there. By ensuring that the Stepsisters' falsification is discovered by the Prince, Cinderella's Mother inserts herself into the situation to ensure a high-class marriage for her daughter: a marriage that ultimately leads Cinderella to an unhappy life in the palace, with a husband who is unfaithful. Cinderella and her Mother also have a more constant relationship than some of the other mother/child couples in the show.

Unlike the relationship between a typical Jewish Mother and her son, “The daughter’s rejection of maternal authority was more ambivalent, and less common, because of the same gender, which creates a strong familial bond, and societal expectations that targeted women regardless of their age” (Gasztold 168). Cinderella’s adherence to her Mother’s wishes indicate her acceptance of maternal guidance, an obvious exception to what other characters in the show exhibit. The show portrays several occasions in which daughters discover that their mother had known best all along, including Little Red’s solo number, “I Know Things Now”. On the other hand, the mother/son relationships seem significantly more fraught with disagreement, argument, and tension (the obvious exception being Rapunzel and the Witch). Though some of these plot points are taken straightforwardly from the original fairy tales, Sondheim’s characters and story are more detailed, and allow for a deeper look into the relationships they have with each other. Where a fairy tale may have offered a jumping off place for plot, Sondheim fills *Into the Woods* with further exploration. Cinderella’s Mother, only shown in the first act, is only briefly seen onstage. Her absence from the second act is even commented on multiple times throughout, such as when it is revealed by Cinderella that her tree has been destroyed, and during the stirring musical number “No One Is Alone”, which mentions that she is no longer present. Because the part is so briefly onstage in the first act, and not seen in the second, the actor in the original and Broadway casts had multiple roles, doubling as Little Red’s Grandmother and, in the second act of the show, the Giant.

Like Little Red, Little Red’s Grandmother, known as Granny, seems to live in isolation from society. She is violent, eccentric, and unusual, as demonstrated by the

Baker's cringing and obvious physical discomfort when in her presence and Little Red's scolding upon hearing of her suggestions of violence against the Wolf. Since Little Red lives in the village, she has assimilated to 'modern' society more than her Granny, who is quite literally an outsider. As she is incapable or indisposed to assimilation, Granny also demonstrates certain elements of the stereotypical Jewish Mother, such as a firmness in her traditions and reluctance to bend to societal demands.

And of course, the Giant in Act Two is a woman (which tends to come as a surprise to the audience and the characters onstage) who literally takes up space and forces those around her to give her their attention. Her colossal size and demanding nature exemplify and exaggerate some of the core qualities of a stereotypical Jewish Mother, despite the Giant never being explicitly named as a mother. She is demanding, guilt-tripping, fiercely defensive of her family, hugely disruptive to those around her, and out of place in the dominant culture of the world she enters. She shows up in the woods because her husband was killed and is therefore also a representation of someone who is forced to flee violence and enter a strange world.

The Giant and her husband are first introduced at the end of the first act, during Jack's song "Giants in the Sky" when Jack describes the massive world above them in the sky. His descriptions of the giantess seem maternal and nurturing, including his description of her embracing him close to her breast, and she even feeds him a meal—both seeming to be warmer displays of affection than he seems to receive from his own mother. After a brief visit, Jack flees from her angry husband, a male giant, who is killed when Jack protects himself by cutting down the beanstalk upon which the male giant is climbing in pursuit.

When the Giant arrives, she is hungry for revenge, and desperately seeking to exact it upon Jack. She exclaims “And who destroyed my house? That boy asked for shelter, and then he stole our gold, our hen, and our harp. Then he killed my husband” (Lapine and Sondheim 100). The other characters onstage do not take her side, instead prioritizing their own safety while in her intimidating company. To them, her view and actions are unreasonable, perhaps because they see her as an outsider, and her actions go against their culture (not killing people and ruining homes by accidentally stepping on them). Because the Giant looks and acts differently than those around her, they are more easily able to ignore her feelings and see her desire for justice as nothing more than a murderous rampage.

Like Granny, the Giant is an outsider in their society, but unlike Granny, her inability comes along with significant perceived harm caused to those around her. Because she is a threat to mainstream life, she is ultimately killed. Although the nature of the threat the Giant poses is apparent, Little Red naively asks if they are doing the right thing:

Little Red: ...here I am about to kill somebody.

Cinderella: Not somebody. A giant who has been doing harm.

Little Red: But the giant's a person. Aren't we to show forgiveness?

Mother would be very unhappy with these circumstances. (Lapine and Sondheim 128)

The childlike concern that Little Red shows is not entirely unreasonable: simply because someone has different customs does not mean that their feelings are unjustified.

In many ways, *Into the Woods* asks the question: is assimilation necessary for people that are foreign or have alien customs? Though murder and destruction are generally frowned upon, Jack's murder of the Giant's husband and destruction of their

home are readily accepted by the group, whereas the Giant's rampage of their town is not. Though their actions had the same results, Jack, as a member of the "in-crowd" is not seen as a villain by most of the other characters. The Giant, who is an outsider, is. At the very least, the group attempts to reason with Jack and understand his perspective, a luxury not afforded to the Giant, except by the Witch, though the group is cognizant that the Giant is intelligent and able to reason. Like the Jewish Mother, her inability to assimilate creates distance between her and society around her, requiring her to demand the things that she needs, and in the end, these cultural disparities and her quest for what she believes is justice are what lead the other characters to kill her under the guise of saving themselves.

Cinderella

There are several women in *Into the Woods* that do not have children at all. Despite the fact that they are not mothers, some of them share resemblances in personality with the stereotypical Jewish Mother. These similarities often materialize as a character being nagging or demanding and guilting others—particularly men—into doing things her way. All of the characters who have these characteristics, whether they are mothers or not, are given a gruesome ending, ultimately dying or disappearing in the second act.

Cinderella, unlike many of the other women in *Into the Woods*, does not share many qualities with the stereotypical Jewish Mother. Instead, she takes on more of the role of the assimilated American housewife who "weren't *really* expected to be equal, independent beings, but rather to serve as ornaments, displaying their cultivated tastes to enhance the status of their mates" (Baum et al. 73). As told in the original fairy tale,

before her marriage, Cinderella serves as a domestic servant in her own household for her cruel stepmother and stepsisters. In her role, she is expected to cook, clean, and dress her stepfamily, and it is clear that her skillset in the domestic realm is fully developed. The only thing holding her back from greater things is her lack of fancy attire. Once she is given access to that, she is whisked away to the palace to marry the prince: the perfect specimen of an assimilated and domestic woman. She is ornamental in the palace, with no decision-making power, and serves as a picturesque symbol for her husband. But the original fairy tale ends at this point, and the Cinderella of *Into the Woods* still has plenty more to do.

Before her marriage to her prince, Sondheim's Cinderella expresses her indecision towards the marriage, something that the original fairy tale version of Cinderella never seems to question. In her song "On The Steps of the Palace", Cinderella grapples with choosing whether she wants to marry the Prince or not—a decision that a stereotypical Jewish Mother would likely have no trouble making. Instead of actively making this choice, Cinderella decides "not to decide" ("On The Steps of the Palace", *Into the Woods* 64), leaving the decision in his hands, and by doing so removes any responsibility of choosing from herself. This unwillingness to decide what she wants is the antithesis of the decisiveness that leads to the manipulative nature and bossiness of the Jewish Mother.

Even in the second act of the show, Cinderella is absent for much of the debate over how to stop the Giant, and when she does appear, she does not offer an opinion on what the group's next course of action should be. She simply goes along with what the group decides. Cinderella is the only adult woman who survives act two, and also the

person with the least direction at the end of the play. Her survival of the play shows that, narratively, Cinderella is rewarded for her good-nature and willingness to follow the wishes of those around her with her life. She agrees to go home with the Baker, Jack, and Little Red, not because she suggests it, but because Jack insists that she will. Her willingness to let others make decisions for her serves her well. The ways in which she does not adhere to the stereotyped role of the Jewish Mother are the reasons that she survives the play, by allowing others to make decisions for her, and not making a fuss when action in the play does not go the way that she hopes.

Jack's Mother

Jack's Mother offers an ideal example of the stereotypical Jewish Mother in relationship to her son. Gasztold explains that "The Jewish mother is decried for her fixation on her son, for whom no woman is good enough. She infantilizes her son no matter how old he is, and sees him as somebody who is in constant need of motherly attention." (Gasztold 168). Though Jack is not seen attempting to find romantic partnership in *Into the Woods*, presumably because he is too young, Jack's Mother expresses her dismay at even his choice of friendship, complaining that his cow, Milky White, is not a pet. She comments on Milky White's inability to give milk as one might comment on a wife's inability to cook or bear children, and is obviously disapproving of his care for her, almost as though she is blaming her son for his cow's shortcomings. Jack's Mother obsesses over her son, offering him constant reproof and harsh advice—often for what she believes is his own good. He is infantilized by her throughout the play, notably demonstrated by her first line to him in the opening number: "You foolish child! What in heaven's name are you doing with the cow inside the house?" ("Prologue", *Into*

the Woods 6). By calling him a child, she draws attention to his youth, and proceeds to scold him. Throughout the play, she habitually and directly comments about her son, whether he is present or not, calling him a "dolt" and decrying his lack of common sense (which, to be fair, seems accurate). Though she is the one character in the opening number with a litany of wishes, the initial wish that she makes in the Prologue is "I wish my son were not a fool" ("Prologue", *Into the Woods* 5), signifying her obsession with his perceived inability to function without her. Her multitude of wishes also seems to relate to the stereotypical Jewish Mother, who is often portrayed as having multiple crises at one time and needing help with all of them.

Throughout the first act of the show, Jack's Mother spends much of her time caring for her son by guaranteeing that he makes life choices that she agrees with. When they disagree, such as on the subject of selling Milky White, Jack's Mother gains the upper hand by forcing Jack to do as she wishes, disregarding his feelings and interest. She even resorts to using the age-old Jewish Mother's manipulation tactic of telling Jack "your mother's getting older" ("Prologue", *Into the Woods* 8) in order to get him out of his head.

By the time the second act begins, Jack's Mother leaps to Jack's defense more readily, when she thinks he is being accused of misbehaving, but her confidence in him does not seem to have improved. Despite his contributions to the house (the items stolen from the giants brought them incredible wealth), Jack's Mother still treats him as a child when there is danger about, exclaiming "You're still a little boy in your mother's eyes. I want you to promise. (*Pause; she smacks him*) Promise!" (Lapine and Sondheim 92).

Though Jack has achieved material success at this point, his mother continues to view him as incapable and keeps him (albeit somewhat willingly) under her command.

Regardless, once the second act begins, Jack's Mother demonstrates a change in behavior towards her son, from feeling he is a burden, to being incredibly protective. Perhaps this is related to his sudden riches: a common indicator of success in many cultures. Characteristics of his that had been vexing to her become commendable to her—or at least are accepted by her. Still, she continues to act overbearing, to protect him, not allowing him to leave home despite his protest that he is an adult now.

It is in defense of her son that Jack's Mother is killed—she stands up for him to the point of causing additional danger for herself and others, and the steward, in a violent response that he views as defending the group of characters that they are with, kills her to quiet her. This moment seems to be narrative retribution for a character who is acting in a way that is bossy, brash, and nagging: she is killed because those around her believe that she is provoking the Giant with her words and tone.

In this scene, she attempts to protect her child, in the best way that she knows how. “The Jewish mother put her children's needs first” (Baum et al. 161) explain Baum, Hyman and Michel, and Jack's Mother does indeed put the needs of her child before hers in a monumental way, and is killed while endeavoring to defend him. Though she does save him from death, the fact that she herself dies means that she is powerless to continue shielding and protecting him. Like the Baker's Wife, her death is the only way in which Jack is able to take ownership of his own destiny empowering him to have and execute his own worthy ideas. It is in her death that he becomes capable.

Upon hearing about his Mother's death, Jack vows vengeance on the Steward, but is dissuaded from following through with it by the Baker. This grudging decision establishes his growing maturity in the wake of his mother's death. In the concluding moments of the play, we hear Jack lament that he no longer has a mother, distressed that he has no one to take care of him. But when a solution is offered by Little Red for her to act as his "new mother", he declines, opting instead for a friendship with her. With his Mother dead, Jack is able to gain some autonomy, and begin to grow up—something she would not have tolerated while she was still alive.

The Witch

James Lapine once remarked that "The role of the witch was one of the most difficult to put our finger on, what interested Steve and me was that the most unpleasant person would have the truest things to say and that the nicer people would be less honest" (Holden). As put by Lapine, the Witch is truly the most "unpleasant" character in the show, and the Witch appears to align quite well with the stereotype of the Jewish Mother. She opens the show with no apparent wish of her own, instead agreeing to support the Baker and his Wife in the achievement of their desire. However, there are immediate clues that her motivation may not be altruistic, and this turns out to be true: she describes how the Baker's father stole her own mother's beans from her garden, and as a result her mother cursed her with old age and ugliness. By reclaiming them, she would regain her youth and beauty. The Witch's relationship with her own mother sheds light onto her treatment of her adopted daughter, Rapunzel. Though she is not a character in the play, it is implied that the Witch's mother was also manipulative, bossy, and required that things be done by her methods. And so, taking after her mother, the Witch

controls Rapunzel, guarding her high up in a tower, locked away from civilization, convincing her that it is for her own safety.

Jubin explains that the song “Our Little World” “exposes [the Witch] as an overanxious parent...whose solution to any potential danger her daughter may face is to keep her locked up where she is always under her mother’s control” (Jubin 17). So, like a stereotypical Jewish Mother, not only is the Witch controlling, but she also refuses to permit her daughter to assimilate to (or even participate in) society. By keeping her locked away, she guarantees that Rapunzel will have exclusively her mother to look to for her social needs including support, comfort, and education. In so doing, the Witch constructs a scenario in which the only social approval that Rapunzel could need comes from her, which is analogous to the typical relationships between the stereotypical Jewish Mother and her children. She also uses Rapunzel’s imposed naivety as a tool to influence and control her.

As explained by Ravits, “the manipulative Jewish mother is a complex formulation, ranging from affectionate to hostile” (Ravits 4) and this description applies perfectly to the Witch. When the Witch is with her daughter, she can transform in a moment from affirming and loving to terrifying and violent. This occurs throughout the show but is acutely discernable in the song “Our Little World” (which was added after the Broadway opening and is only occasionally incorporated in subsequent productions). This song is illustrative of the opinion that a Jewish mother is “an excessive giver, she never wanted or received anything directly, but she was highly manipulative. Her name was synonymous with guilt...her demands were impossible to meet because she wanted what usually seemed impossible to give—total loyalty” (Prell 145). Indeed, it is

Rapunzel's love, loyalty, and full attention that the Witch seems to seek throughout the song and the show. The Witch sings:

Witch: Children are a blessing
If you know where they are
Nothing's so distressing, though
As when they keep you guessing
So be sure you don't leave any doors ajar
Make a little world...
...Children need protection
Just the way they need affection
Or they wonder and they wander and they run ("Our Little World", *Into the Woods* 31)

The Witch emphasizes the "blessing" that it is to have children, which relates directly to the stereotypical Jewish Mother's desire to have children, the fulfillment that comes along with that, and the emphasis on reproduction itself that is essential in the stereotypical Jewish Mother's life. Like the Jewish Mother, she desires celibacy for her child, but unlike her, this obligation does not dissipate upon marriage—in fact, it seems clear that she hopes (and expects) that her daughter will stay with her forever and never marry. For the stereotypical Jewish Mother, reproduction equates to continuation of her own bloodline and of the Jewish faith. Because Rapunzel is adopted, any children she bears (and she eventually does) would not be blood relatives of the Witch. Nor could Rapunzel—or any theoretical progeny she might have—carry on the Witch's spiritual (witchcraft) practices. In these stanzas, the Witch presents why Rapunzel's isolation is important to her: she wants to keep Rapunzel innocent and shielded from the harsh world. She reports that if children aren't cared for and safeguarded, they could take it upon themselves to abandon home, and, like the stereotypical Jewish Mother, one of her fears is that her child will forsake her and find someone else to love. Ultimately, Rapunzel does.

The Jewish son “seeks as a love object the non-Jewish woman or shikse, a woman who is the antithesis of the mother in appearance, culture, and mental attitudes” (Ravits 17), and likewise, Rapunzel finds her Prince, who is handsome (unlike the Witch who is old and ugly), who is princely (unlike the Witch who is shunned by society), and who very quickly abandons Rapunzel for the next beautiful girl that crosses his path (unlike the Witch, who would never dream of abandoning Rapunzel). The brief relationship that Rapunzel enjoys with her Prince is in many ways the antithesis of the relationship that she has with her mother. Theirs is insecure and based primarily on Rapunzel's superficial beauty, while the prince brings his own vastly dissimilar set of values than the Witch does. By joining with the Prince, Rapunzel is deserting her mother with the first and only option that has come across her path, but she is also eloping with a person who has ideas that stand in contrast to the culture that she was raised with. This only adds to the Witch's revulsion for the Prince as a partner to her Rapunzel.

Her distaste for the Prince also goes beyond the differences of values between them. The Witch's choices, status as a willful woman, and cultural traditions threaten the monarchical and patriarchal forces in the play, something that Jewish Mothers are often accused of. Gasztold explains of the Jewish Mother stereotype that “the female character, both aggressive and selfish, threatens to emasculate male authority and questions gender roles, which are prescribed and sustained by the dominant patriarchy” (Gasztold 172) and the Witch is no exception. Evidence of the Witch undermining traditional monarchy and patriarchal roles emerges prominently during the second act once her instinct for self-preservation has activated. Upon seeing that the royal family has also escaped the Giant into the forest, the Baker is upset that they did not solve the problem, despite his warning

to them. The Witch scoffs at him, declaring: “And I warned you that you can't count on a royal family to solve your problems” (Lapine and Sondheim 100) indicating her cynicism for the ability of the figureheads in their community to legitimately protect their constituents. Rapunzel’s Prince is one of these figureheads. When Rapunzel leaves with the Prince, it is conceivable that the Witch sees her departure as a threat to her own culture, an acceptance of the monarchy which the Witch sees as having little value, and a sign of Rapunzel’s assimilation to the outside world, or at least rejection of her mother’s cultural values.

Once the Witch realizes that Rapunzel has been meeting the Prince behind her back, her tone and attitude change significantly, fluctuating between tender, aggressive, self-deprecating, and guilting. In the song “Stay With Me”, she tries to coax Rapunzel to remain loyal to her and only her, discarding her relationship with the Prince. The song serves as a guilt trip employing numerous different tactics. She starts by explaining that Rapunzel disobeyed her, declaring that “children should listen” (“Stay With Me”, *Into the Woods* 59) to their parents, a recurring refrain throughout the show. The final instance of this is at the very end of the show, sung by the Witch, now dead, who appears as an apparition visible to the other characters and who, like the Baker’s Wife, exerts an influence even beyond her lifetime. She then employs self-deprecating language to disparage her own age and looks, suggesting that perhaps she is embarrassing to Rapunzel. Rapunzel assures her that this is not her reason for leaving, an indication that the Witch’s guilt trip is working.

Guilt is a core principle of stereotypical Jewish Motherhood: “Dan Greenburg’s best-selling satire, *How to be a Jewish Mother*, refers to guilt as the mother’s main

method of social control” (Koltun 76) and the Witch does indeed use guilt as a tactic to maintain control over Rapunzel. And finally, she threatens Rapunzel with both the perils of the world, and with the idea that no one will ever love and care for Rapunzel as much as she can. This seems like an endeavor to frighten Rapunzel into submission by suggesting that fleeing their "little world" can only result in disaster. When she ultimately does throw her daughter out, she exclaims “I will not share you, but I will show you a world you’ve never seen” (Lapine and Sondheim 61), sending Rapunzel deep into the desert, which she assumes can only be a worse experience than imprisonment in a tower. She also removes the Prince from the equation by blinding him. Eventually after Rapunzel comes back to the kingdom, having gone mad, borne twins, and reunited with her Prince, the Witch continues to try to protect her from the Giant, and return to her daughter’s good graces. When confronted with all the ways Rapunzel felt mistreated by her, the Witch retorts “I was just trying to be a good mother!” (Lapine and Sondheim 95) indicating that her intensely overbearing nature, along with the harm she caused Rapunzel throughout their lives together were, at least in her mind, for Rapunzel’s own benefit.

Throughout the show, the Witch sows chaos and adds an element of magic to the world around her wherever she goes. Even amid this chaos, her main goal is self-preservation, and preservation of the things and person that she cares about. Once Rapunzel dies, the Witch feels justified in her protection of her daughter, explaining that the reason that Rapunzel is dead is because she defied her mother and went out into the world. Had she remained in her tower when the Giant arrived, she may have been kept safe from harm. Perhaps this was always a self-fulfilling prophecy: because Rapunzel

was not taught about the outside world, she had even less of a chance to survive and succeed in it. A stereotypical Jewish Mother teaches her children the rituals of Judaism and keeps her children inside the community and familial unit. And, in turn, her children protest against their traditions, just like Rapunzel rebels against her mother's wishes for her. The Witch's line, "Children can only grow from something you love to something you lose" ("Witch's Lament", *Into the Woods* 106) is certainly one of the most telling in the show, emphasized by the crescendo and swelling orchestration behind it. In this moment, the Witch is expressing a quintessential stereotypical Jewish Mother's idea, while underlining another point: being a mother means losing a child, whether through the death of the parent, physical or emotional distance, marriage that draws them away from their parents, the death of the child, or in the Witch's case, a combination of several of these options.

The Witch's greatest desire is revealed at the end of Act 1: she aches to reclaim her youth and beauty. When this goal is achieved, she is punished by having her magic powers taken away from her. In her lust for higher achievement, she loses something more valuable to her than what she stands to gain.

Like the Witch, the Jewish mother is known for excessive consumption, "associated aggressively with wanting and demanding" (Prell 145). And, when the Witch loses her magical powers, she does not lose her boldness. Instead, she doubles down, takes charge of the group, and demands that they follow her preferred path forward. The Jewish mother "seems to possess unlimited strength and boldness. There are no matters on which she does not presume expertise, no affairs in which she does not claim the prerogative to meddle" (Baum et al. 237), and the Witch is no exception. When the Giant

begins demolishing the town, the Witch appears at the bakery, and asserts herself as the apparent authority on the matter:

Baker: Who could do such a thing?

Witch: Anything that leaves a footprint that large is no 'who.'

Baker: Do you think it was a bear?

Witch: A bear? Bears are sweet. Besides, you ever see a bear with forty-foot feet?

Wife: Dragon?

Witch (*shakes her head*): No scorch marks--usually they're linked.

Baker: Manticore?

Witch: Imaginary.

Wife, Baker: Griffin?

Witch: Extinct.

Baker: Giant?

Witch: Possible. Very, very possible... (Lapine and Sondheim 89)

While her presumptions turn out to be true, her quick retorts are rife with disdain, and she answers each suggestion quickly and haughtily to belittle the Baker and his Wife. Each answer that she gives is terser than the last, punctuated by a rhythmic delivery of the lines until her final comeback, where the number of syllables jumps back up, and the music peters out. Though her retorts are short and callous, they also provide the characters onstage and the audience fundamental insight into these creatures that a human may not know about. She seems fed up with the Baker and his Wife for offering ideas, not for their cluelessness around Giants and other mythical beasts, which is a topic more aligned with her own traditions and culture than with theirs.

It can be surmised from the plot of the show that there are traditions and cultures passed generationally between witches, just as Judaism is passed on matrilineally. The Witch alludes to her maternal relationship several times throughout the show, and how her mother's influence was essential for the play to occur. The garden that she maintains and the beans that are stolen from her were both inherited from her mother, and her age

and ugliness is likewise bestowed by her mother. One may begin to see the garden and beans as a metaphor for traditions passed down from a mother to child. When the Witch does not follow the rules set forth by her mother, thus halting the traditions that are in place, she is brutally penalized. The Witch is unable to conform to dominant culture, but she also makes choices that seem to be the antithesis of her own culture by offering pity to the humans who stole from her, and by losing important relics that her mother told her to keep safe. During her final song with the company, “Last Midnight”, the Witch, seeming to momentarily lose control of her emotions, exclaiming “Alright, Mother, when? Lost the beans again! Punish me the way you did then! Give me claws and a hunch, just away from this bunch” (“Last Midnight”, *Into the Woods* 122). The Witch turns back to the familiarity of her upbringing by deliberately subverting her mother’s wishes, with the understanding that this subversion will lead to punishment. She also forcibly transfers the obligation of tending her garden to the other characters onstage, and with it what was passed to her by her mother: not only the garden itself but also all the complex traditions that come along with it. The responsibility of the garden and the beans within it are substantial burdens for her to impart on people who have little or no prior understanding of magic, but who know that they must keep the garden secure in order to keep the kingdom safe from giants and whatever other magic exists within the walls of the garden, including the apparent harm that can befall someone (as it did the Witch) who does not care for it appropriately after being told that they must. As she flings the beans down to the ground, the threat of their magic causes the humans onstage to scramble on the ground to retrieve each handful. She explains that she can never be part of this group,

because her outlook on life is so dissimilar to theirs. In one final chaotic moment, smoke surrounds her onstage and she screams. When the smoke clears, she is gone.

She is not seen again until the Finale of the show, when she joins the Baker's Wife as a ghostly form—presumably, she is dead. Though her disappearance is shrouded in mystery, one thing is clear: her inability to assimilate to dominant culture and be part of the in-group, the fact that she cannot continue her own magical traditions without her powers, and the heartbreaking loss of her daughter have pushed her to her breaking point. Perhaps her disappearance is the final punishment inflicted on her by her mother, as she suggests in lines before she vanishes, or perhaps there is another explanation, but her words indicate that she recognizes and is prepared to accept the consequences of losing the beans a second time.

Like any of the fairy tales on which it is based, *Into the Woods* offers a moral to viewers that urges them to contemplate the ways in which the story has altered their perspective. In the closing number, "Children Will Listen" the familiar refrain is sung, wherein the characters describe how and why they will go "into the woods". In this final reprise, however, Sondheim takes care to change the now-familiar lyrics, urging different forms of respect towards the characters that were excluded from the dominant culture in the play: "Into the Woods but not to stray/or tempt the wolf/or steal from the giant" ("Finale/Children Will Listen", *Into the Woods* 136) which then turns into "Into the woods to mind the wolf/to heed the witch/to honor the giant" ("Finale/Children Will Listen", *Into the Woods* 136). These lines clarify that other perspectives must be considered with respect, even when it is challenging to understand them.

The audience is advised to see those around them as whole and valuable, even if they are not part of the dominant culture or appear antagonistic at first glance. Sondheim expresses to an audience that often, the truth is not black and white, but rather lies in the gray area between two extremes—and people or actions that seem “good” or “bad” are not always what they appear. Though the stereotype of the Jewish Mother often portrays her in a negative light, many of the characteristics that she exhibits are, even in her least attractive portrayals, her way of demonstrating love—even when they appear harmful.

Chapter VI.

Conclusion

The moral of the story is illuminated in the concluding number of *Into the Woods*, “Children Will Listen”: everything that a child is taught will impact how they behave and what they believe. These teachings are not limited to formal education—in fact, even something as simple as a musical theatre show can be enlightening. One will take in everything around them: what they are told, what they observe, and what they intuit, and form their own conclusions based on the information they receive through these different avenues. “Careful the tale you tell” urges the Witch, “that is the spell. Children will listen...” (“Finale/Children Will Listen”, *Into the Woods* 136). Sondheim’s *Into the Woods* tells a different tale than what audiences may have seen before, particularly in regard to characters who are not part of the dominant majority in the piece. *Into the Woods* encourages audience members through language and action, realism and magic, that sometimes perception is not reality, and that one must sometimes look beyond preconceptions and stereotypes in order to find the oft obscured truth.

Stephen Sondheim’s *Into the Woods* provides a lens into the truths of both motherhood and Judaism, utilizing stereotypes to simultaneously offer familiarity while challenging preconceived notions, creating a more nuanced view of the familiar character of the Jewish Mother. His more nuanced portrayals have broader implications for the portrayal of both motherhood and Judaism in American musical theatre and beyond by

expanding the understanding of what each of those titles could mean and what they look like in action. Like many of the characters in *Into the Woods*, Sondheim's multi-dimensional mother characters are not always the best at following the path set out for them. Though they share stereotypical qualities, their differences individualize them, beginning to deconstruct the monolithic view of the stereotypical Jewish Mother they themselves embody. Sondheim's own complex relationship with Judaism and his own mother afford him a unique perspective, which is evident, if sometimes coded, in his work, and especially *Into the Woods*.

There is a lack of scholastic review of Jewish themes in Sondheim's works, involving the overt use of Jewish characters and the subtler and coded use of Jewish themes utilized by Sondheim within his cannon of works. Though some articles and websites do mention Jewish themes in some of his individual musicals, the subject has not been examined broadly or closely by scholars. This thesis opens the conversation for others to join scholastically. There is potential to continue to explore these Jewish themes, and determine if, and how Sondheim's other works contain them—whether intentionally or unintentionally. There is significant research and textual analysis yet to do on the topic of Judaism in Sondheim's broader oeuvre, and this thesis only skims the surface of what little information is available, beginning to build a foundation for continued study in the field.

Theatre has historically served as both a mirror of modern culture and a platform for social commentary, and Sondheim's body of work provides us with richly layered characters and plots allowing for extensive exploration of the relationship between Judaism and theatre. In *Into the Woods*, Sondheim builds effective characters that

encourage an audience to question their expectations and biases about others. In a world rife with misunderstanding and evolving representation, this thesis also offers insight into the complex issues of Judaism and motherhood as separate entities and adds to the already existing discourse on these subjects within the realm of American musical theatre. Theatre aims to both entertain and foster empathy, and Sondheim crafts his characters to both conform to and defy stereotypes, often simultaneously, potentially influencing understanding from audiences who would not otherwise have an in with a culture that is removed from their own. His use of coding enhances representation in a way that both validates and challenges an often-harmful stereotype, a step leading toward cultural change through increased empathy towards different groups of people—onstage and beyond.

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