Angelina Jolie Embraces Her Inner-Witch, and Inner-Mom

The news that Angelina Jolie's daughter, 4-year-old Vivienne, will appear with her mother in the live-action movie Maleficent, in which Jolie plays the titular sorceress, has already sparked a predictable array of nepotism jokes. And while I'm sure Vivienne got a massive leg-up because of who her parents are, there's also something awfully fun about seeing Jolie play both with her public image as a practitioner of the dark arts, and her private life as a mom.

For more than a decade, Jolie has been saddled with a witchy reputation, one that wasn't based in Hollywood diva behavior but in small acts that assumed great proportions in the public mind. When she married co-star Jonny Lee Miller, Jolie took her vows in a T-shirt emblazoned with his name written in her own blood. And after she and actor Billy Bob Thornton wed, they famously wore matching necklaces with vials of each other's blood. Gossips tutted about a smooch Jolie laid on her brother at the Academy Awards, and the actress ran through the list of tabloid-sating provocations, dating actress Jenny Shimizu, discussing her history of self-mutilation comfortably in public, and talking about BDSM with a fluency that would set E.L. James a-scribbling.

Taken together, all of the above combined to paint a portrait of a powerfully alluring woman with deep uncertainties about herself and her choices. When Brad Pitt divorced Jennifer Anniston to be with Jolie, now his fiancee after seven years and five children together, the romance provided a narrative that seemed to solidify Jolie's public image. In the pages of gossip rags she was an enchantress, a creature of blood and sex, qualities never entirely erased by her eventual transformation into mother of three children by Pitt and three others by adoption.

Which is why it's so awesome that Jolie is starring in a children's movies as a witch, rather than as a princess or a warrior. Witches may bear the weight of public disapproval, but the hero often needs them at the beginning of the journey, and the adventure often involves the hero learning to see the world with some of the wisdom and disappointment that inform the witch's perspective. But even in movies with bad-ass princesses like Brave's Merida, the witch who gets consulted halfway through the story is a wizened old crone with a fondness for whittling. Outside the sympathetic librettos of Stephen Sondheim, witches don't really even get much of a chance to compete for the title of hero.

So I've loved seeing Jolie don horns and fly around in harnesses in set photos from Maleficent. And I'm even more excited that she'll be bringing her daughter to work with her. The movie's a reminder that we should consider sympathizing with the witches a little bit more frequently. And Vivienne's appearance is a joke on all the people—including Jolie's father, Jon Voight— who suggested Jolie was an unfit mother. Witches don't just lock adorable blonde princesses in towers. Sometimes, they give birth to them.