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## THE POSTMODERN FEMININE BEAUTY IDEAL IN *SHREK*

*Dear Pamela, I say again, be careful of your master's kindness.  
I think his gift of the stockings is too intimate for a poor girl like you.  
Don't let these compliments about your prettiness make you vain.  
You didn't make yourself.  
Only virtue and goodness make true beauty.  
Remember that, Pamela.*  
(Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*)

This analysis deals with the postmodern feminine beauty ideal in the computer-animated film *Shrek*, and considers the impact this has had on the resultant change of the feminine representation in contemporary film productions and fairy tales. More specifically, the analysis will focus on the representational value of female characters in classic fairy tales, compared with the postmodern revision carried out by gender studies. This approach aims at offering some observations on the changes occurred in the classic framing of feminine roles, considering Fiona, Shrek's wife, as an example of 'contemporary princess'.

### 1. Introduction

*Shrek* is a full-length, 3-D computer-generated film, based on the children's book by William Steig entitled *Shrek*. The film is one of the most famous computer-animated fairy tales ever produced, in that the animation system used to make it is very complex and full of visual effects, and also because the story contains meaningful examples of postmodern revisions of popular culture, filtered by the eye of the computer age. As Lev Manovich states,

[f]ollowing art historian Ervin Panofsky's analysis of linear perspective as a 'symbolic form' of the modern age, we may even call database a new symbolic form of a computer age (or, as philosopher Jean-François Lyotard called it in his famous 1979 book *Postmodern Condition*, 'computerized society', a new way to structure our experience of ourselves and of the world. Indeed, after the death of God (Nietzsche), the end of grand narratives of Enlightenment (Lyotard) and the arrival of the Web (Tim Berners-Lee) the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records [...].

Hence, the introduction of the so-called 'database' in movie productions has led to the creation of a 'new symbolic form', the deconstruction of classic stereotypes, to be used when decoding the contemporary representations of fairy tales. This powerful device highlights the fact that, in contemporary fairy tales, every act and character is open to new interpretations. Indeed, the film is crammed with references to the most famous fairy tales (for example, *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Pinocchio* and others), re-interpreted following a contemporary perspective. For instance, Pinocchio is a wooden puppet that wears loincloths, the three little pigs are blind and Shrek, the protagonist, is an ogre who embarks on a mission to free his swamp from the fairy tale creatures, persecuted by Lord Farquaad, the Lord of Duloc. For this character, but also for all the others, the presentational devices, such as special effects, lighting, camera shots and computer graphics, contribute to a new reading of the traditional fairy tale. For example, in the case of Lord Farquaad, at the beginning of the film, the camera shows parts of his upper body and his feet, suggesting that he is a tall prince, reminding the stereotype of the classic tale. Low angle-shots are also used to portray Lord Farquaad looking down from the castle's balcony during the tournament scene, thus suggesting his power. As the story goes on, Lord Farquaad's real body is shown by the camera: the audience's expectations are disappointed as they realize he is a dwarf. Therefore, this representation undermines the classic stereotype, playing on the physical characteristics of the prince who, *once upon a time*, was supposed to be tall, handsome, brave and loyal, whilst Lord Farquaad embodies the opposite image. Being the prince, Lord Farquaad should be the one who rescues princess Fiona from the tower where she is imprisoned and guarded by a dragon. But also in this case, Lord Farquaad entrusts someone else with the dangerous task, Shrek. His

mission, indeed, has two tasks: to rescue Princess Fiona from the dangerous dragon's keep, so that Lord Farquaad can marry her and become king, and to free his swamp from the fairy tales creatures. Thus, whilst the general frames of the classic tales are still present in the film, the main characters have undergone a process of revision that makes them contemporary and open to new interpretations. Indeed, *Shrek* is an example of crossover text in that, despite being mostly intended for children, it also gestures toward adults. Therefore, on the one hand, *Shrek* as a fairy tale presents traditional characters appealing to children: for instance, the presence of princes, princesses, queens and kings; on the other hand, the film scrambles and deconstructs the features of the stereotypes showing multifarious innuendos and allusions to adult responsibilities, politics, stress, mental health care, drugs, alcohol, and sex, nodding to an older audience. As a matter of fact, *Shrek* is rated PG (parental guidance suggested) for the presence of these adult references that parents may have to find a way to explain. Undoubtedly, the filmmakers are attempting to capitalize on a wider section of the market: the children's parents. Adults likely spend almost just as much time watching children movies as kids do. Furthermore, it is up to parents to take children to the cinema, buy gadgets and, last but not least, decide for the success of the film.

Adapted, revised and bowdlerized, fairy tales continue to have a powerful hold on our culture. Throughout centuries, traditional fairy tales have permeated the collective unconscious particularly for their warnings about female sexuality, indoctrinating male and female children to learn stereotyped roles. More concretely, in the past, by means of these stories beliefs and traditions could be passed on from generation to generation, while illustrating the children the role they had to play in society. Hence, traditional fairy tales were used to sustain common cultural customs that maintained the role of women as subordinate to men, thus supporting a patriarchal government.

To this respect, in contrast with Jean François Lyotard's theories[1], in *Shrek* nothing is absolute. On the contrary, everything is undermined and deconstructed. Indeed, when the film *Shrek* was aired, it did not just present a revision of standard fairy tales, but it gave its audience the possibility to 'read' them according to new perspectives. In this sense, *Shrek* operates the re-union of the most famous fairy tales and creatures of all times into a single film, in which the protagonists are modeled by and made 'real' by animation.

The story shows, from the beginning on, an evident awareness of the changes occurred to fairy tales, deriving from contemporary critical debates and from their consequent postmodern reinterpretations. Indeed, as Cristina Bacchilega states,

[r]eproduced in a variety of discourses, fairy tales in the second half of the twentieth century have enjoyed an explosive popularity in North America and Western Europe. While many adults may not remember, and many children may have not been exposed to versions of "Snow White" or "Beauty and the Beast" other than Disney's, we nevertheless respond to stereotyped and institutionalized fragments of these narratives sufficiently for them to be good bait in jokes, commercials, songs, cartoons, and other elements of popular and consumer culture (2).

Thus, fairy tales influence various aspects of social life, indeed,

[b]elittled, yet pervasive and institutionalized, fairy tales are [...] produced and consumed to accomplish a variety of social functions in multiple contexts and in more or less explicitly ideological ways. Thinking of the fairy tales predominantly as children's literature, or even as 'literature of childhood', cannot accommodate this proliferation of uses and meanings. The fairy tale 'cannot be defined one-dimensionally', and in any case, 'adults have always read, censored, approved, and distributed the so-called fairy tales for children' (Bacchilega 3).

The success that characterizes fairy tales includes the possibility to re-read, re-write and re-interpret both the narrative content and the speculations about gender. To this respect, Cristina Bacchilega adds that,

[r]ereading is the magic key to rewriting [...], this rewriting need not be simply a stylistic or ideological updating to make the tale more appealing to late twentieth-century adult audiences. [...], it involves substantive though diverse questioning of both narrative construction and assumptions about gender. Postmodern revision is often two-fold, seeking to expose, make visible, the fairy tale's complicity with 'exhausted' narrative and gender ideologies, and, by working from the fairy tales' multiple versions, seeking to expose, bring out, what the institutionalization of such tales for children has forgotten or left unexploited. This kind of rereading does more than interpret anew or shake the genre's ground rules. It

listens for the many 'voices' of fairy tales as well, as part of a historicizing and performance-oriented project (50).

Two of the main psychoanalytic re-readings of fairy tales follow Freud's and Fromm's theories, the former concerning the relationship between psychoanalysis and folklore, the latter focusing on symbolic language. Indeed, Fromm argued that symbolic language is the only universal language ever created by men that has remained identical throughout history, "a language with its own grammar and syntax to be understood if one wants to grasp the meanings of myths, fairy tales and dreams" (11).

Freud stated that the essence of all dreams is the hallucinatory satisfaction of irrational desires that develop during childhood. The same idea is expressed by Bruno Bettelheim, who maintains that fairy tales can represent the dilemmas of human existence in a simple and easy way:

Fairy-tales help children better than anything else in their most difficult and yet most important and satisfying task: achieving a more mature consciousness to civilize the chaotic pressures of their unconscious [...] more can be learned from them about the inner problems of human beings, and of the right solutions to their predicaments in any society, than from any other type of story within a child's comprehension [...] As the stories unfold, they give conscious credence and body to hide pressures and show ways to satisfy these that are in line with ego and superego requirements (5; 6; 23).

The postmodern renovation of fairy tales is also the result of the feminist revolution started during the 1960s, as a consequence of the development of gender-specific roles within contemporary society. As Zipes (1988) argues,

[d]oes the character formation of the various figures in the tales correspond to the gender specific roles that have been developed in bourgeois society? If so, then is it possible that what appears to be a healthy resolution of psychological problems is merely a sexist resolution of power relations that keep certain groups, namely women and other minorities, in a place where males ant to be? (126)

It is after the feminist fights, from 1960 on, that fairy tales started to be used as a means to express a non-sexist vision of the world, thus employing a device that was normally conceived to articulate male points of view. In fact, before the advent of the postmodern reinterpretation quoted above, classic fairy tales were based on a strict patriarchal code, according to which women played a 'secondary role' into the different fields of the past society; as a matter of fact,

[...] the tale, and 'especially the fairy tale, is the vessel of false knowledge, or more bluntly, interested propaganda'. Its imagery, which derives from the unconscious, can only reflect the power relations of patriarchy. Its rigid sexual patterns teach fear and masochism as tenets of femininity, and its symbolic inversions do not undermine established hierarchies (Zipes 1988: 50-51).

These rigid sexual patterns represented and mirrored the society in which they were created and instilled into the children's minds. According to this point, Zipes (2013) maintains,

(...) fairy tales reflect the conditions, ideas, tastes, and values of the societies in which they were created. Due to their symbolism, it is quite often very difficult to see how remarkably they comment on reality. One has to do a lot of scholarly detective work to draw parallels and to interpret their social significance. This is what makes studying fairy tales so challenging and fascinating. Once you begin to grasp the metaphors, the tales become enlightening.

In *Shrek*, as in other postmodern fairy tales, it is still possible to find references to tastes and values of contemporary society, but what matters most is the fact that they juxtapose and replace the classical examples that preceded them. The most striking instance is the change in the representation of femininity, that in *Shrek* is primarily embodied by Princess Fiona but, in general, by all the other female characters. Fiona embodies and mirrors the characteristics of the contemporary woman, in that she is self-reliant and independent; not only, she is the synthesis of feminine and masculine qualities: she fights, belches and refuses to marry Prince Charming, the stereotype of the perfect man, imposed by her father, because she loves an ogre, Shrek. This 'contemporary princess' seems to be lacking the qualities that, once, were fundamental for the good education of a woman, such

as passivity and obedience. As we will see, she reflects the coexistence of the good and evil part in the contemporary times, in that she is beautiful but, at the same time, due to a spell cast on her by the Fairy Godmother, she is also an awful 'ogress'. Moreover, differently from the heroine portrayed in the classic fairy tale, she is free to love and decide for herself. Fiona represents and expresses the fusion of 'opposites' that characterizes our society, together with the various nuances of personality that can be found in a woman.

Before starting my analysis on the postmodern representation of female characters, I will track back the evolution of the 'beautiful princess' stereotype, along with its main features and implications.

## 2. Fairy Tales in the Past: the 'Voiceless' and Beautiful Princess

*Beauty has as many meanings as man has moods.*

*Beauty is the symbol of symbols.*

*Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing.*

*(Oscar Wilde, The Critic as Artist)*

*The word presents, in its vowels and its diphthongs, like flesh,*

*and, in its consonants,*

*like a delicate bone structure to be dissected.*

*(Stéphane Mallarmé, Les Mots Anglais)*

Anti-feminist messages and allusions in fairy tales, both in the classic version from the tales of Brothers Grimm, Anderson and Perrault, and in Disney's revised forms, are very frequent. Many are the references in fairy tales that propose misogynist tropes and warnings according to which female beauty and sexuality represent a threat but, at the same time, can be threatened. Hence, in the past, the woman was seen as an object of men's desires, trapped in a patriarchal frame that offered an image of the female character as a subject endowed with the strength of beauty but lacking action. Furthermore, in the past, beauty was mainly associated with kindness, morality and virtues: an example could be the one of *Cinderella*, who married the handsome Prince, whilst her ugly and evil step-sisters remained alone, destined to face their 'unhappy ending'. To this extent, good women had to be silent, passive, without ambitions, beautiful, fertile, and eager to marry, thus showing that it would be immoral and dangerous to have, or desire, something outside their homes. The roles that women had in classic fairy tales also demonstrated and convinced readers that they'd better be obedient and silent so that they could easily fit into a male-dominated society:

They were like tailors [Brothers Grimm], for they kept mending and ironing the tales that they collected so that they would ultimately fit the patriarchal and Christian code of bourgeois reading expectations and their own ideal notion of pure, natural German culture. By tailoring the tales they intervened in their cultural heritage and actually projected their own present and their futuristic hopes onto the past. They anticipated forms of social relations and utopian conditions. And this in a male dominated discourse that has had social and ideological ramifications for the civilizing process in the West (Zipes 1988: 23).

In this context, the heroines of fairy tales had to be beautiful, loyal, passive and, sometimes, a little stupid in that intelligence was considered as a male's prerogative. Therefore, fairy tales associated weakness, passiveness, and emotionality with the female sex.

Together with these features, also the insistence on external qualities, to some extent, degraded women and prevented ugly but intelligent girls from excelling in society, focusing their attention on the 'quest for marriage' considered as the main goal in a woman's life.

Thus, girls were intended to wed and take care of their family in the hope of living 'happily ever after', that is the reason why the great part of fairy tales ended using this formula.

The beauty ideal has remained an essential clue in fairy tales for over 150 years, providing meaningful insights into the synchronic and diachronic relationships amongst the studies on gender and culture, as well as tracing the line that ties the social significance of beauty to women's life from the past to the present times. As Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz suggest, [t]he feminine beauty ideal can be seen as a normative means of social control whereby social control is accomplished through the internalization of values and norms and adopts behaviors that reflect and reinforce their relative powerlessness, making external forces less necessary (712).

Past fairy tales, written during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were dedicated to girls, with the purpose of educating them and teaching them how to become 'respectable women'; on this issue, Zipes (1988) highlights that "[f]airy tales [...] were intended to teach girls and young women how to become domesticated, respectable, and attractive to a marriage partner and to teach boys and girls appropriate gendered values and attitudes" (714). Together with beauty, passivity was another important feature a woman had in fairy tales, in order to be better dominated. Female characters could not save themselves from a dangerous situation; it was up to men to rescue them. Therefore, a woman had to endure the problems and pains of her life, waiting for the knight or prince who would have come to free her. Hence, the duties of a woman did not imply a bettering of her life, on the contrary, she had to keep her passive behavior, ignoring ambitions and desires, no matter what the circumstances were.

The 'classic' princesses who peopled fairy tales lived in realms covered by a veil of magic, but these enchanted worlds often hid conservative ideas related to sexuality, according to which it would be dangerous for a girl to leave her parents' home, due to the threat that adult people could represent. References to the women's sphere are striking as in the case of *Sleeping Beauty*, when the main character pricks her finger and starts bleeding, thus referring to menstruation, or the example of *Little Red Riding Hood* who wears a red cloak[2]. Both heroines need the help of a man or a prince to be saved and rescued. As we have seen, these heroines and female characters are often passive and submissive, to the point of losing their voice during their sleep, as in the case of *Sleeping Beauty* or *Snow White*. In so far, fairy tales were sometimes seen and appreciated by adults to reinforce cultural customs according to which women were subordinate to men, being the majority of fairy tales an overt support to a patriarchal system.

As a consequence, silence was the most blatantly recurrent theme in fairy tales. It was wrong for women to speak up and to demand that their opinions and wishes be heard. In other words, it was not good for a woman to be outwardly verbal. A proper girl in fairy tales does not speak until spoken to or granted permission to speak. The value of silence is strictly connected to the relationship between speech and power in that, in fairy tales, the latter counterbalances authority, a social role performed by an overwhelming majority of men. Of course, there are also female characters who speak, such as witches, but they are not seen as 'virtuous', in that they are considered as negative characters. In respect to silence and women who lose their voice, Adriana Cavarero argues that

[t]he voice is [...] treated as a voice in general, an acoustic emission that is altogether severed from the vocal uniqueness of the subject who is speaking, a phonematic component of language as a signifying system. [...] Besides its twentieth-century acceleration and its complex developments, it is indeed possible to trace the theoretic path that has led modern linguistics to inherit from the statute of metaphysics a programmatic inattention to the uniqueness of voice (15-16)[3].

The uniqueness of the female characters' voices is, in classic fairy tales, voluntarily concealed by male physical strength. Indeed, a voice symbolizes the individual affirmation and freedom that every human being should reach. In a patriarchal society, there was no room for such independence for women. Moreover, in its essence, no voice hides the spoken word, on the contrary, it unmasks its presence, in that "the voice [...] communicates [...] one thing only: the uniqueness of the voice who speaks it" (Cavarero 33).

In affirming the primary role of voice, fairy tales, through their characters, did not let women speak, thus suggesting that they had no right to express themselves in the attempt to keep them under control and forge their minds. In his fairy tale *The Little Mermaid* (1837), Hans Christian Andersen not only left the mermaid without a name, but let her make a deal with the sea witch so that she could have legs in exchange for her voice. At first, the mermaid hesitates and asks the witch "if you take my voice, what will I have left?". This question reveals the fundamental role of voice in that, by becoming voiceless, the little mermaid forever loses the chance to communicate and interact with the other human beings and sea dwelling creatures but, above all, she loses her identity. The mermaid's behavior highlights an awareness that appears almost opposite to the impositions of the patriarchal code that established strong models of feminine passivity, according to which women had to yield to their destiny.

In almost all mythologies, half-human mermaids, together with sirens, appear from sea foam, but it is important to note that mermaids and sirens are not the same creatures. Indeed, sirens were originally creatures that were half-bird and lured fishermen to them, so that they could steal their souls. On the contrary, mermaids protected sea-farers and used their voice to calm them in case of danger. The medieval Christian doctrines later caused the gradual shifting of their meanings, so that the two images melt together and, from the fusion of these figures, the

negative connotation previously associated only with sirens, from that moment on, was also applied to mermaids seen as symbols of sexual temptation too. As Cavarero notes,

[t]he descent of sirens into waters, that is to say their pisciform metamorphosis, is indeed associated with their transformation into beautiful women. This process corresponds, meaningfully, to the affirmation of one of the most stereotypical models of the female gender. It is the known model according to which, in her erotic function of seducer – or, as generally acknowledged, object of men's desires – the woman appears first of all as a body and as inarticulate voice. She must be beautiful, but she must not speak (119).

The confluence of positive and negative connotations in sea creatures has led to the stereotype that associates, especially in the case of mermaids, these creatures with love, intuition, power of the voice, but also with its opposites such as sex, loss of soul, treachery, deceit and alienation. To this respect, T.S. Eliot, in his work *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915), writes "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. I do not think that they will sing to me"<sup>18</sup>, anticipating the theme of human alienation and, at the same time, highlighting the fact that their singing has become auto-referential, in that it cannot be shared and enjoyed by human beings. Not surprisingly, it is the same condition that the Little Mermaid has to experience; in fact, the mermaids' singing has been crystallized into a higher sphere because it is considered dangerous, since female beauty and sensuality embody the temptations that every man should refrain from. In listening to their voices, men would have given in to their call, thus showing moral weakness. These sea creatures are sensual and confuse men's minds, that is the reason why mermaids have to talk to themselves. In making the sirens' voice 'silent', the relationship with the outer world loses its primary aim, that is dialogue. On these premises, Cavarero writes that

[i]n the theatre of conscience, the relation-oriented nature of voice – the acoustic relationship that the word, as voiced word, confirms – is beforehand neutralized to make way to a silent and inner voice that creates a self-referential relationship, an ego-oriented relationship of the self with the self. The cancellation of the physicality of the voice results, first of all, in the elimination of the *other* or, better, of the *others*. [...] The soul, as Plato suggested, can give up its physical *phoné* and be satisfied with its metaphoric one (57).

As a consequence, women's anatomy causes the punishment: while Freud argued "anatomy is destiny", Angela Carter notes "my anatomy is only part of an infinitely complex organization, my self" (5).

Moreover, sirens seduce and amaze but, first of all, frighten in that they are seen as projections of the man's primordial fear of being absorbed by the same force that created them, 'the all-powerful mother', the symbol of the woman who does and gives but, at the same time, amazes and castrates. Therefore, the little mermaid's good attitude towards nature and instincts, instead of freeing her from social constraints, causes her alienation from the human world.

The relevance of these mythical figures is based on their primary function, that is their power to evoke the sound and sensuality of the *logos*: "the principal function of these figures – emblematically feminine – seems to be the overemphasizing of the acoustic, libidinal and pre-semantic physicality of the *logos*" (Cavarero 114).

Within the patriarchal system of the classic fairy tales, a parallel genre, the *conte de fées*, can be considered as one of the first example of social denounce, according to which the imposed marriage was only a social institution invented by a male-controlled world. These *contes*

[...] had specific sociopolitical functions. Informed by female perspectives and featuring female characters, [they] offered their creators opportunities to critique conditions of the day, particularly the social institution of forced marriage and the general lot of women in a predominantly male-controlled world. Thus it was no accident that in the tales ultimate power was held by the female stock character known today as the fairy godmother, who was described as having control not only of her own life but of others' as well. There was also a good reason, though, for these authors to mediate their social commentary through the veil of fantasy. The efforts [...] were necessarily conducted within a wider, markedly patriarchal system, one which advocated the "taming of female desire according to virtues associated with male industriousness". As a result, that system regarded the *contes de fées* as "deeply disturbing and suspect" (Romoer and Bacchilega 11).

As a 'suspect' genre, the *contes* seem to have anticipated the feminist revolution of the late 1970s and 1980s in terms of gender representations, also for another fundamental question, i.e. pornography; in fact

while it was accepted that pornography reflected a sort of distilled essence of the entrenched binaries of patriarchal gender relations, the conflict revolved around the extent to which pornographic representations could be appropriated as a critique of the status quo and as a medium for the speculative imagining of alternatives (Romoer and Bacchilega 37).

Between the passive *koiné* of the female characters presented in the classic fairy tales and the feminist revolution, an intermediate representation of women can be found in Angela Carter's "Bluebeard":

Readers of "The Bloody Chamber", [...], often see the protagonist as doing little, for the most part, to avoid the fate her husband has planned for her [...]. She is not always passive, however, but rather oscillates between being insecure and feeling sure of herself. She is a woman in process, someone who is exploring her subject position and beginning to tell her own story (Romoer and Bacchilega 83).

Furthermore, in this tale, the heroine is identified with Eve, in order to justify her act of disobedience (Romoer and Bacchilega 98):

[...] "The Bloody Chamber", in its simultaneous presentation of traditional and emergent ideologies, invites readers to critique long-held assumptions about the character of women assigned by conventional interpretations of the biblical Eve, thus encouraging an awareness that Eve's disobedience perhaps not motivated by lust, greed, or frivolous curiosity, and that it did not, in fact, bring disaster upon the world. Instead, Eve's action in the garden can be interpreted as an ordeal of initiation resulting in the very first instance of exercise of free will intended to fulfill human beings and set them apart from beasts and plants.

The initial hypothesis according to which the feminine stereotype represented, in its essence, one of the fundamental devices used to impart moral lessons to children, and the frequency with which it is presented in the vast array of fairy tales, demonstrates that, during the nineteenth century, normative social control was more rigid than today. If this is true, in contemporary fairy tales reproductions, variations in the way the feminine stereotype is represented are likely to occur. Thus, in order to offer a detailed and exhaustive description of this phenomenon, the following section will analyze the deconstruction of women's roles in fairy tales.

### 3. Deconstructing the Role of Women in Fairy Tales

*The history of a woman is very different.  
We have always been picturesque protests against  
the mere existence of common sense. We saw its dangers from the first.  
(Oscar Wilde, Mrs Allonby: A Woman of no Importance).*

*Shrek's* story offers a vast array of allusions to other texts and often-contradictory references to gender and sexuality. These allusions are usually presented as a parody of the original, in which the film makers of *Shrek* imitate the style of the parodied fairy tales. It is the use of parody that enables a progression and renewal of this literary genre in that, as stated in the previous section, the characters' roles change their features according to the historical context. Fairy tales are, indeed, the product of a historically determined period that undergoes a process of mythicization. In fact, as Zipes (1988: 148) highlights, "fairy tales are contemporary myths that pervade our daily lives" and "any fairy tale in our society, if it seeks to become natural and eternal, must become myth". Therefore, the deconstruction and re-creation of the hypotexts involve subverting key aspects of the original texts, setting up incongruities between what the audience expects to see and what actually happens. Deconstruction is based on classical frames and characters to challenge the story by using special effects and reversal of stereotypes, together with the presence of inter-textuality and hilarious twists in the plot.

This paragraph focuses on the presence of deconstructive elements related to feminine stereotypes in

contemporary fairy tales reproductions, starting from the classic fairy tale.

The moral messages that permeated nineteenth-century fairy tales are not static, in that they evolve with the passing of time, also due to social changes:

Children's media have been found to be powerfully responsive to social change and not simply in a way that mirrors society. Research by Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie (1997) [...] suggested that children's media both reflect and are shaped by shifting social and power relations among groups (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz: 714).

As such, the main concern of this paragraph focuses on the gendered messages relating to feminine beauty as contained in fairy tales' media and the extent to which this ideal has shifted over time, thanks to the deconstruction it has undergone in contemporary film animation.

In light of changes in women's social status over the last 100 years, the main concern is here finding out all the references in fairy tales to both women's and men's physical traits, appearance and beauty. As Bacchilega argues, "Jack Zipes has relentlessly focused our critical attention on the changing social functions of fairy tales in Europe and the United States, identifying the ideologically narrow and repressive uses the fairy tale has been put to, but also stressing its emancipatory impulses" (6).

To this respect, the contemporary revisions performed by critics and writers to 'modernize' fairy tales can be seen as attempts to investigate the possible new readings of old stereotypes:

As literary texts, cartoons, movies, musicals, or soap operas, postmodern fairy tales reactivate the wonder tale's "magic" or mythopoeic qualities by providing new readings of it, thereby generating unexploited or forgotten possibilities from its repetition. [...] postmodern re-visions of traditional narratives do more than alter our reading of those narratives. [...] they constitute an ideological test for previous interpretations [...](Bacchilega 22).

Thus, the postmodern transformations of fairy tales can operate to different degrees, generating a vast array of new solutions to be used when interpreting and de-coding their contents (Cavarero 23):

Multiple permutations produce postmodern transformations of fairy tales because their simultaneously affirming and questioning strategies re-double in a variety of critically self-reflexive moves. [...] some postmodern revisions may question and remake the classic fairy tale's production of gender only to re-inscribe it within some unquestioned model of subjectivity or narrativity.

Furthermore, in postmodern revisions of fairy tales, the concept of 'presence' gains a primary role in that, as in the case of Fiona, Shrek's wife, the female character is provided with her own personality, thus showing her proper and unique features, and, above all, she does speak.

Feminist cultural theories have continued to embrace the retelling and transformations of fairy tales as part of a ritual for contending with the myths and tropes of patriarchy. As shown in the previous paragraph, originally these stories were meant to warn girls against the repercussions for disobedience and self-assertion, in that it was not justifiable for a woman to 'steal' the active role of the man. Hence, the personality of the woman was dominated by the male, by keeping her passive and unwilling to 'actively' affirm herself.

Nowadays, fairy tales have been re-visited employing the deconstruction theory, in the light of a complicate world of social relationships and stereotypes. As Jacques Derrida argued, this theory describes the process by which the features and context to be found behind and beyond a fairy tale can be explored and, sometimes, taken to the point of reconstructing the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic structure of the tale. At the same time, it goes through the story, re-interpreting symbols and implications to show that, actually, there can be more than one interpretation of the text under scrutiny.

In *Shrek's* tale, the first example of postmodern deconstruction can be found in the opening lines of the film. The story begins, like any other fairy tale, with the formula 'once upon a time' told by the main character, Shrek the ogre; the camera shows a close up on a book that tells the audience the classic story of the princess:

Once upon a time there was a lovely princess. But she had an enchantment upon her of a fearful sort which could only be broken by love's first kiss. She was locked away in a castle guarded by a terrible



fire-breathing dragon. Many brave knights had attempted to free her from this dreadful prison, but none prevailed. She waited in the dragon's keep in the highest room of the tallest tower for her true love's first kiss.

By using this device, the film director manages to lead the audience to believe that the story that is going to be narrated is a traditional fairy tale. As soon as the voiceover stops, the audience's thoughts are deviated by a large chubby green hand that rips a page out of the book saying "Like that's ever gonna happen. What a load of..." (S1)[4]. In the meanwhile, there is a new scene that shows a small hut, which is Shrek's toilet. For the first time in the film, as a long shot, Shrek opens the toilet's door and appears in his unconventional role: an ogre as the protagonist of the fairy tale. The setting, that is a toilet, together with the pages of the book used as toilet paper, convey the irony through which the film director manages to adapt the classic fairy tale to the contemporary audience's expectations.

*Shrek*, from the beginning on, presents striking examples of 'acts of deconstruction', as in the case of Lord Farquaad, the ruler of DuLoc. Wishing to become a king, Lord Farquaad is told by the magical mirror to marry a princess to make his dream come true but, unlike the classic fairy tales, he does not embark on the mission personally and forces Shrek to go and rescue Princess Fiona. The same presentation of the princesses made by the mirror represents an act of deconstruction:

So, just sit back and relax, my lord, because it's time for you to meet today's eligible bachelorettes. And here they are! Bachelorette number one is a mentally abused shut-in from a kingdom far, far away. She likes sushi and hot tubbing anytime. Her hobbies include cooking and cleaning for her two evil sisters. Please welcome Cinderella. Bachelorette number two is a cape-wearing girl from the land of fancy. Although she lives with seven other men, she's not easy. Just kiss her dead, frozen lips and find out what a live wire she is. Come on. Give it up for Snow White! And last, but certainly not least, bachelorette number three is a fiery redhead from a dragon-guarded castle surrounded by hot boiling lava! But don't let that cool you off. She's a loaded pistol who likes piña colodas and getting caught in the rain. Yours for the rescuing, Princess Fiona! So will it be bachelorette number one, bachelorette number two or bachelorette number three? (S1).

The hilarious introduction of the princesses evokes some changes in the way a woman is portrayed that, not surprisingly, operate within the frame of the conventional structure of the text. Specifically, the first princess is a reference to the character of Cinderella, described as a 'mentally abused shut-in woman' thus, to some extent, reflecting the feminine passive stereotype but, at the same time, the audience is given an unexpected element, that is a hint at her 'modern' likes, such as eating sushi and taking long, hot baths. This representation is contemporary also for the definition given by the mirror, 'mentally abused', which refers to a psychological/psychiatric description of people; hence, this hint cannot be considered as a typical characteristic of traditional fairy tales.

The same can be said for the other princesses; the character of Snow White is here immediately deconstructed as the magical mirror moves the perspective on the fact that even though she lives with seven dwarves, she cannot be considered as an 'easy girl'. Whilst the last princess, Fiona, is depicted as a 'fiery redhead', and compared to a 'loaded pistol', both references alluding to the sexual sphere. The other two main female characters, the Queen and the Fairy Godmother, represent two opposite kinds of adult woman. Fiona's mother, the Queen, physically represents the traditional fairy-tale queen in that she is blond, white, polite, mannered and, first of all, wife and mother. The Queen helps her husband when he loses control and, at the same time, supports Fiona when she tells her father that the man she wishes to marry is an ogre. The Queen's presence serves to 'adjust' the diverse representations of femininity within the film: she is an example for Fiona to successfully express femininity and to re-insert the traditional stereotype of heterosexual family as a symbol of normal life and safety. On the contrary, Fairy Godmother embodies a negative stereotype. She is the overbearing and power hungry woman whose aim is to arrange a good marriage for her 'beloved' son who, in his turn, represents the opposite characterization of Prince Charming. Her role in the film reveals features that are far from the traditional fairy godmother as she is a dieter obsessed by food, she does not help Fiona to make her dream come true and spends her time trying to find a way to kill Shrek.

Let us now take into account the specific deconstructive role of Fiona within the plot of the filmic representation.

As mentioned above, Fiona can be considered as the most striking example of deconstruction in contemporary fairy tales. Fiona, psychologically caught in a patriarchal mire and physically secluded in a castle, wishes to put an end to her curse and gain freedom. Trapped in the highest tower of the castle since she was a girl, to her the fairy tale itself has become her reality, and when things appear different from what she had expected, she is understandably confused, as when Shrek reaches the castle and rescues her:

FIONA: You did it! You rescued me! You're amazing. You're - - You're wonderful. You're... a little unorthodox I'll admit. But thy deed is great, and thy heart is pure. I am eternally in your debt. And where would a brave knight be without his noble steed?

DONKEY: I hope you heard that. She called me a noble steed. She thinks I'm a steed.

FIONA: The battle is won. You may remove your helmet, good Sir Knight.

SHREK: Uh, no.

FIONA: Why not?

SHREK: I have helmet hair.

FIONA: Please. I would't look upon the face of my rescuer.

SHREK: No, no, you wouldn't - - 'st.

FIONA: But how will you kiss me?

SHREK: What? (to Donkey) That wasn't in the job description.

DONKEY: Maybe it's a perk.

FIONA: No, it's destiny. Oh, you must know how it goes. A princess locked in a tower and beset by a dragon is rescued by a brave knight, and then they share true love's first kiss.

DONKEY: Hmm? With Shrek? You think- - Wait. Wait. You think that Shrek is your true love?

FIONA: Well, yes.

(Both Donkey and Shrek burst out laughing)

DONKEY: You think Shrek is your true love!

FIONA: What is so funny?

SHREK: Let's just say I'm not your type, okay?

FIONA: Of course, you are. You're my rescuer. Now - - Now remove your helmet.

SHREK: Look. I really don't think this is a good idea.

FIONA: Just take off the helmet.

SHREK: I'm not going to.

FIONA: Take it off.

SHREK: No!

FIONA: Now!

SHREK: Okay! Easy. As you command. Your Highness. (takes off his helmet)

FIONA: You- - You're a- - an ogre.

SHREK: Oh, you were expecting Prince Charming.

FIONA: Well, yes, actually. Oh, no. This is all wrong. You're not supposed to be an ogre.

SHREK: Princess, I was sent to rescue you by Lord Farquaad, okay? He is the one who wants to marry you.

FIONA: Then why didn't he come rescue me?

SHREK: Good question. You should ask him that when we get there.

FIONA: But I have to be rescued by my true love, not by some ogre and his- - his pet.

DONKEY: Well, so much for noble steed.

SHREK: You're not making my job any easier.

FIONA: I'm sorry, but your job is not my problem. You can tell Lord Farquaad that if he wants to rescue me properly, I'll be waiting for him right here".

(S1)

In reading the film script one can immediately notice all the classic stereotypes ironically evoked by Princess Fiona and Shrek: "But, how will you kiss me?", "Oh you must know how it goes. A princess locked in a tower and beset by a dragon is rescued by a brave knight, and they share true love's first kiss", "He is the one who wants to marry you".

Throughout the film, her 'unconventional' features are revealed as when she burps after having eaten rats with Shrek, or when she does not mind pulling an arrow out of Shrek's bottom. There is another innovative device to highlight the direct use of moral messages, as in the following extract:

FIONA: Well, eat up. We've got a big day ahead of us.  
(They are once again on their way. They are walking through the forest. Shrek belches)  
DONKEY: Shrek!  
SHREK: What? It's a compliment. Better out than in, I always say. (laughs)  
DONKEY: Well, it's no way to behave in front of a princess.  
FIONA: Thanks.  
DONKEY: She's as nasty as you are.  
SHREK: You know, you're not exactly what I expected.  
FIONA: Well, maybe you shouldn't judge people before you get to know them.  
(S1)

The last sentence can be seen as having a moral function that the old classic messages in fairy tales did not explicitly mention, in that it invites listeners not to judge people before having known them.

Amongst the unconventional behaviors related to Fiona, one of the most hilarious is related to the scene in the forest, where she fights against Robin Hood and his fellows. In this scene, she shows her skills in martial arts that, together with other characteristics, make her abandon the established notions of feminine desirability.

Along the way to DuLoc, Fiona and Shrek find out that they have much in common and their feelings start to emerge as they approach Lord Farquaard's castle.

After a series of misunderstandings, the peak of the story is reached when, in the church, Fiona shows her transformation openly, demonstrating her great inner strength, taking the risk of being unloved by both, Shrek and the people. This extreme act of self-revelation is an overt subversion of the role women had in fairy tales, and encourages people to embrace one's unconventional and hidden aspects, and not only the good ones. Shrek, after Fiona's transformation, does not change his mind and declares his love to the princess:

SHREK: Fiona? Fiona. Are you all right?  
FIONA: (standing up, she's still an ogre) Well, yes. But I don't understand. I'm supposed to be beautiful.  
SHREK: But you ARE beautiful.  
(S1)

The same act of determination is shown when, in *Shrek 2*, the two protagonists go to visit Fiona's parents and Shrek did not get along with the King. Fiona tells Shrek that she had made a 'great change' for him:

SHREK: What? I told you coming here was a bad idea.  
FIONA: You could've at least tried to get along with my father.  
SHREK: I don't think I was going to get Daddy's blessing, even if I did want it.  
FIONA: Do you think it might be nice if somebody asked me what I wanted?  
SHREK: Sure. Do you want me to pack for you?  
FIONA: You're unbelievable! You're behaving like a...  
SHREK: Go on! Say it!  
FIONA: Like an ogre!  
SHREK: Here's a news flash for you! Whether your parents like it or not... I am an ogre! And guess what, Princess? That's not about to change.  
FIONA: I've made changes for you, Shrek. Think about that.  
(S2)

As regards Shrek, he is forced to go on the quest to save Fiona, in order to win back his swamp, where Lord Farquaad had banished the fairy tale creatures. Unwillingly, the green ogre who, differently from the stereotype of Prince Charming, prefers his calm life of solitude in the swamp, embarks on a quest that, as the story develops, reveals its double perspective; firstly, the quest will bring him his solitude back and, secondly, it will lead him to his

true love, Fiona, the ogress/princess. This quest involves a radical change in Shrek's life in that, together with true love, he will discover other values, such as friendship and self-confidence but, first of all, he will understand that appearances can be deceiving:

SHREK: Why are you following me?

DONKEY: 'll tell you why. (singing) 'Cause I'm all alone, There's no one here beside me, My problems have all gone, There's no one to deride me, But you gotta have friends...

SHREK: top singing! It's no wonder you don't have any friends.

DONKEY: Wow. Only a true friend would be that cruelly honest.

SHREK: Listen, little donkey. Take a look at me. What am I?

DONKEY: (looks all the way up at Shrek) Uh ...really tall?

SHREK: No! I'm an ogre! You know. "Grab your torch and pitchforks". Doesn't that bother you?

DONKEY: Nope.

SHREK: Really?

DONKEY: Really, really.

SHREK: Oh.

DONKEY: Man, I like you. What's your name?

SHREK: Uh, Shrek.

(S1)

In the same way, the presence of innovative and classic elements in *Shrek* can be considered as a means through which fairy tales survive in contemporary times. Thus, in this attempt to keep past and present in touch, the fairy tale (Bacchilega 5)

[...] also magically grants writers/tellers and readers/listeners access to the collective, if fictionalized past of social communing, an access that allows for an apparently limitless, highly idiosyncratic re-creation of that 'once there was'. Though it calls up old-time wisdom, the fairy tale grants individuals the freedom to play with this gift, to dismiss it as children's fantasy. And for girls and women, in particular, the fairy tale magic has assumed the contradictory form of being both a spiritual enclave supported by old wives' wisdom and an exquisitely glittery feminine kingdom.

The contemporary recurrent interest in fairy tales highlights the fact that, beneath the magical surface of a story, with its castles, magical creatures and princesses, often, lurk the dangers of growing up and leaving home, the difficult relationships between children and parents, and the threat that adult strangers can represent. Not surprisingly, these 'conservative' references about female sexuality become, in contemporary fairy tales, one of the reasons why they continue to get retold and deconstructed.

Unlike the past, Fiona tries to 'grasp' her future, in order to develop her identity and build her role within society, finding the fulfillment of her needs, first of all, in herself. In this sense, as stated in the previous section, Fiona expresses the denial of Freud's assertion "anatomy is destiny", in that

[...] gender and sexuality are not fixed according to anatomy or essences. In her "Polemical Preface" to *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter begins by voicing rejection of Freud's assertion that "anatomy is destiny": "My anatomy is only part of an infinitely complex organization, my self. The anatomical reductionism [...] extracts all the evidence of me from myself and leaves behind only a single aspect of my life as a mammal. It enlarges this aspect, simplifies it and then presents it as the most significant aspect of my entire humanity" (Roemer and Bacchilega 192).

Many fairy tales have been passed down from generation to generation, recording customs and values of different cultures. They can bind past and future together, but they can also teach children meaningful lessons about good and evil, and what is moral and immoral. This notwithstanding, they are also doomed to mirror all the prejudices that a society has and keeps in itself, also because it is unavoidable to prevent all forms of discrimination, racism and sexism in fairy tales, because they are constantly being revised to fit the changing of times. Thus, as they are retold, every person enriches the story with his or her beliefs and stereotypes, making the tale evolve and morph to adapt to contemporary society and to its values. This notwithstanding, these stories represented, and still do

represent, a means through which people taught and teach children social norms and behaviors; they were, and still are, memorized and learnt by heart in order to pass on traditions and codes of conduct and learn the roles everyone should play in society, adapting them to the present times. In the same way, fairy tales represent a means through which long-term changes in society can be analyzed, offering new historical approaches to the reproduction of the beauty ideal. They can also provide a critical insight into ways in which children's literature has been shaped by political and social forces over time, writing another 'happy ending', aiming at the mutual respect for both sexes.

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## Filmography

*Shrek*. Andrew Adamson, Vicky Jenson. 2001.

*Shrek 2*. Andrew Adamson, Kelly Asbury, Conrad Vernon. 2005.

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[1]He put forth his theories in the field of meta-narrative. For him the biggest concern with the modern thought was related to the fact that certain fairy tales claimed their absolute truth, remaining unquestioned.

[2]The red cloak, in France, was the symbol associated to prostitutes.

[3]This and the following translations from Cavarero are mine.

[4] In this and in the following occurrences, the abbreviation S1 refers to lines spoken in *Shrek*.

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