
'You Can't Say No to the Beauty and the Beast': *Shrek* and Ideology

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In 2002 the Australian Prime Minister John Howard announced that we are living in 'the post-feminist stage of the debate.' As Anne Summers documents in *The End of Equality: Work, Babies and Women's Choices in Twenty-First Century Australia* (2003), Howard cut funding for childcare, for the Office of the Status of Women, and for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. He abolished the Register of Women in the Office of the Status of Women for government appointments, the Women's Statistical Unit in the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and the Women's Bureau in the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs. Special services for women, given the achievement of gender equality, were obviously no longer required.

In not only political but also cultural parlance, feminism appears to have become embarrassingly obsolete. Summers writes: 'We are said by many to be living in a post-feminist world, where women's issues are passé, where "girl power" reigns and "girls can do anything" and where any talk about equality, let alone feminism, is redundant' (p. 259). The recent spate of 'revisionist' children's films, which use new media, manifest a 'postmodern' penchant for the flagrantly parodic,¹ and show women 'kicking butt', are often accepted as evidence of the re-visioned gender space we supposedly inhabit. As Kathryn James suggests, 'subversion has become thoroughly inscribed within mass culture—and, in particular, youth culture—in the last few decades' (2002, p. 25). A recent example is *The Incredibles*. But before that we had *Shrek*—the subject of this essay—and, more recently, *Shrek 2*. *Shrek 3* and *4* are in production.

Shrek, which overtly presents itself as a revisionist fairytale and in opposition to the saccharine tradition of Disney interpretations, has been embraced as a cultural landmark of a new 'humanism'—a term that, unlike feminism, doesn't appear to date. Released in 2001 by DreamWorks studios, the film received the first Academy Award for a feature-length animation and was celebrated by film critics for its 'marvelous slapstick irreverence' (Rainer in Hopkins 2004, p. 33) and 'heart' (Ebert in Hopkins 2004, p. 33). The message of *Shrek*, which stars a green ogre as its hero, a princess/ogress as his love interest and a donkey as his trusty mate, according to the Executive Producer Jeffrey

Katzenberg, is that '[w]hether you're a princess, a donkey, or even a big, green, stinky ogre, you can find love and happiness.' (in Hopkins 2004, p. 33)

However, just as Howard's 'post-feminist' vision of an Australia in which mothers are given a Baby Bonus and pensioned off from the workplace is a patent myth, the perception of films such as *Shrek* as celebratory of a post-feminist 'humanist' ethos is decidedly spurious. Patriarchy remains entrenched throughout the Western world. In Australia, men still dominate powerful occupations and earn more than women. Women are more likely to be victims of sexual and other forms of violence. They are also increasingly confined to their 'natural' role as maternal caregivers. In Howard's population-starved (but immigrant-fussy) Australia, Summers argues, '[e]quality has been usurped by a new doctrine, the breeding creed ... that defines women first and foremost as mothers' (2003, p. 7). She adds that '[w]omen are facing the end of equality while having to listen to political leaders tell them this is as good as it gets' (p. 16).

The humanist rhetoric celebrating *Shrek* as universally liberating is similarly deceptive. In fact, humanism proves once again to be only a synonym for masculinism. What we have in *Shrek*, with its heroic male and Jekyll-and-Hyde female, is another version of the male as normative. *Shrek*, however, in a remarkable sleight-of-hand, presents man not only as the authentic but also as the marginalized. Shrek, the personification of masculinity—patriarchy's apolitical double—lives on the margins in a primordial swamp. He is one of the fairytale 'freaks' that are no longer tolerated in the human world. But while Shrek is no Prince Charming, his version of masculinity is the ascendant one. Masculinity, the movie teaches us, with its carnivalesque emphasis on scatological humour and violent adventure, is simply about being natural and having fun. However, as Robert Hanke puts it, in 'Redesigning men', masculinism is also 'the dominant ideology of patriarchy' (1992, p. 190). *Shrek*, rather than celebrating any liberation from patriarchal traditions, is in fact a response to the colloquial 'crisis in masculinity' and a defense of the primordial ogre of patriarchy.

Masculinist anxieties and their accompanying paranoid delusions are said to be caused by feminist politics,

which are represented in the film by the character of the 'feisty' Fiona, a single, beautiful, stick-figured Charlie's Angel,² who has romantic aspirations, makes demands and possesses martial arts expertise. Significantly, when she 'kicks the butts' of Robin Hood and his Merry Men in the forest, Shrek ends up with an arrow in his backside, to which she must subsequently tend.³ However, Fiona—by night, entombed first within a phallic tower and then within a vaginal cave—takes the form of a matronly and docile ogress; the natural partner of the hero Shrek. Fiona is originally ashamed of her nocturnal (or sexual and maternal) instincts. However, the maternal ogress is the form she assumes permanently at the film's end when she marries Shrek, forsaking the illusions of 'femininity', fairytales, fascism and feminism (all confused under the sign of the letter 'f', the emblem of the anti-hero Lord Farquaad) for 'love's true form'. The film, rather than celebrating Fiona's 'girl power', is a lesson to women about their authentic fate: to surrender themselves to their husbands; to embrace their innate maternity. This sheds some light on the significance of the donkey, the traditional sign of the lecherous, who accompanies the duo and facilitates their union. It also reveals something about the film's message of female metamorphosis, which is, despite appearances, profoundly conservative. With *Shrek*, it seems, we're not so far from what Summers calls Howard's 'breeding creed'.

The illusion of *Shrek* as post-feminist and revisionary derives from three main characteristics: the film's intertextual and parodic play with fairytales; its carnivalesque elements, with their promise of reversing hierarchies; and its representation of an active—and perhaps primarily—ugly and portly heroine. Looking at each of these elements in turn, we will see how the expectation of subversion is circumvented. In fact, the transgressive 'look' of the film provides something of a ruse or a diversion, while the actual elements of fairytale parody, the carnivalesque and female representation are manipulated only to reinforce the patriarchal status quo. Ultimately, the 'radical' gender metamorphoses that the film promises are less genuine transformations of release than cruder revisions of long-held patriarchal myths of masculinity and womanhood.

Fairytales and revisionism

David Ansen views *Shrek* on its own terms when he writes in his review that the film 'sets out to turn the conventions of fairytales—particularly their Hollywood renditions—on their heads' (2001, p. 62). Reviewers of *Shrek* almost unanimously concurred, viewing the film as revisionary and its message as 'politically correct' (Sawyer 2004, p. 46).⁴ While the film is renowned for what John Stephens terms 'intertextual iconoclasm' (1992, p. 88), *Shrek's* challenge to the iconic texts of fairytales is decidedly feeble. Significant work has been done in the discipline of children's literature in demonstrating the patriarchal co-option and ideological transformation of fairytales, based on the recognition that such 'stories are a critical resource through which children learn to constitute themselves as bipolar males or females with the appropriate patterns of power and desire' (Davies 1989, p. 46). *Shrek*, as we argue, does little to offer a fairytale model that challenges these gender patterns.

The desire of reviewers to see *Shrek* as revisionary is presumably engaged in the film's opening scene, in which the film's hero is in the outhouse reading a generic fairytale about a princess locked in a tower awaiting her 'true love's first kiss'. The narrative is cut short when Shrek tears out the penultimate page and uses it as toilet paper. However, while the film suggests it will 'wipe its arse' with traditional fairytales, it is in fact about to re-inscribe this patriarchal narrative. Indeed, it is an irony of the film (not overtly acknowledged) that Shrek is shown rejecting the very story of feminine passivity and masculine rescue that he is about to re-enact. If there are swerves in the generic trajectory, these serve only to underscore the original lessons of gender acculturation in traditional fairytales. For example, when Shrek rejects the princess tale and acts out the prince's tale, the film overrides the feminine story, which is commonly primary, with the masculine narrative, which is often peripheral. The significance of the woman as agent, barely tenable even in existing fairytales, is immediately further reduced. The film, in this further act of masculinist revisionism, also re-enacts the original appropriation of the matriarchal 'fairytale', while continuing to insist that fairytales belong to women.

Looking further at the models of masculinity and femininity offered by *Shrek* to its child—and, indeed, adult—viewers, we see that they differ little from the gender ideals promoted in conventional patriarchal fairytales. In fairytales such as *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, as Marcia Lieberman suggests, the heroine endures injustice passively and is duly rewarded for her demure behaviour by a marriage proposal, which constitutes the apex of her life. In fairytales, Lieberman argues, there is a clear link between gender and action:

The boy who sets out to seek his fortune ... is a stock figure and, provided that he has a kind heart, is assured of success. What is praiseworthy in males, however, is rejected in females; the counterpart of the energetic, aspiring boy is the scheming, ambitious woman. Some heroines show a kind of strength in their ability to endure, but they do not actively seek to change their lot.
(1986, p. 197)

Powerful ‘good’ women do exist in fairytales but, as Lieberman points out, they ‘are nearly always fairies, and they are remote’ (p. 197). Powerful real women, such as Cinderella’s stepsisters or the Queen in *Snow White*, whom Lieberman describes as ‘active, ambitious, strong-willed’, are evil and punished. Such fairytales also, of course, suggest the provisional nature of female identity and the absolute necessity of heterosexual attractiveness, which in fairytales—for the woman—is often a matter of life and death. In fact, according to Catharine MacKinnon, adopting a suitable sexual identity constitutes the essential lesson of gender acculturation for women: ‘[g]ender socialization is the process through which women come to identify themselves as sexual beings, as beings that exist for men. It is that process through which women internalize (make their own) a male image of their sexuality as their identity as women.’ (in de Lauretis 1984, p. 166)

When *Shrek* introduces Fiona, she is presented alongside and as an alternative to the traditional fairytale heroines, Snow White and Cinderella. As the movie progresses, it tries to show us that while Fiona may have been locked up in a tower waiting passively for her knight in shining armor, according to fairytale lore, she is not a conventionally submissive fairytale heroine. She struggles against Shrek

when he rescues her. She also defends herself in her encounter with Robin Hood and his Merry Men. However, her assertiveness is a well-orchestrated and contained illusion for, ultimately, Fiona is a woman along for the ride. She enters the narrative when she is chosen by Lord Farquaad from a selection of fairytale girls in a magic mirror. She is then rescued by Shrek, delivered to Farquaad and quickly reclaimed by Shrek.

Here, the film’s primary concern with asserting a dominant version of masculinity is foregrounded. Fiona is little more than contraband in a war of masculinities, for which she is not even the catalyst. (As Shrek says to Robin Hood, ‘That’s my princess. Go find your own.’) The battle between Shrek and Farquaad originates when Farquaad exiles the fairytale creatures into Shrek’s swamp. Shrek agrees to fetch Fiona for Farquaad in return for removing the illegal immigrants from his land. Fiona quickly becomes amenable to being treated as goods for trade—after her rescue from the tower, Shrek places her over his shoulder and she quickly gives up struggling—and she is rewarded for her amiability by being wanted; by being the constant, if peripheral, object of male desire. *Shrek* is remarkably consistent with the structure of homosocial desire that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick delineates in *Between Men*, whereby the triangulated desire of the romance plot (seen in *Shrek* with regard to Shrek, Farquaad and Fiona) renders a bond between men rather than between a man and a woman. Sedgwick’s argument that ‘there is a special relationship between male homosocial (*including* homosexual) desire and the structure for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power’ (1985, p. 25) is continuous with our argument here.

While Fiona’s alter-ego of an ogress is a potentially powerful one, whenever she metamorphoses into this masculine form, she becomes, as we have suggested, against expectation, less powerful. She is matronly, teary-eyed and hand-wringing and, in fact, looks almost bovine in her docility. By contrast, the human Fiona is sprightly, confident and assertive, even if within the confines of patriarchal guardianship, for Fiona is continually supervised or, indeed, imprisoned until she is safely brought under the control of patriarchy through marriage. The single woman is, according to patriarchal lore, dangerous. She becomes

even more dangerous—explicitly and physically so—in the context of patriarchal fears about feminism.

However, the single woman is also—and moreover—in danger: ontological danger. Fiona, as a single woman, is identity-less, uncertain and incomplete. Fiona-as-princess is repeatedly associated with the ghostly images in mirrors: she is first seen as an image in Farquaad's mirror; at the end, before her aborted wedding to Farquaad, she is shown looking doubtfully into a full-length mirror. (In another scene, Fiona-as-ogress looks at her reflection in a pool of water and hits at it with her hand, suggesting her forthcoming condition of ontological security in masculine reality.) Fiona's insistence, upon being rescued by Shrek, that the rescue should follow the generic fairytale line is also illustrative of her incomplete and uncertain identity, since it shows her reliance on preexisting scripts rather than an ability to think for herself. Fiona's fate, spelled out from the beginning of the film, is that her identity crisis will be resolved only by a man. Through marriage she will come to exist in her 'true form'—as a man's wife; as a sexual beast of burden; as a mother. *Shrek*, in its promotion of this idea of female identity as provisional and marriage as the necessary goal of a woman's life, is absolutely consistent with traditional fairytale gender morality. In this purportedly humanist and revisionary film, this fundamental ideology of female subordination remains unchallenged.

Two other female characters feature in *Shrek*. The first woman we see is the crone who attempts to sell Donkey at the beginning of the movie and who is stereotypically represented, in her role as an active mercantilist, as evil and ugly. The other female character is the dragon. Arguably, Dragon is figured as a fire-breathing feminist, keeping Fiona locked in her tower, unnaturally separating the female from the male. Dragon is a genuinely powerful and dangerous female: she is the true ogress of the film. Dragon is—in a way that is at once both more overt and more covert—a more striking example of female masculinity than Fiona ever is. However, as Judith Halberstam argues, men must be shown to have sole proprietorship of masculinity in patriarchal culture. Assessing a number of adult films, she concludes that female masculinity—defined by associations with the phallic: power and agency—is always positioned as strategically ugly, discouraging identification. She

argues that '[t]he dilemma of the masculine and therefore ugly woman functions as the spectre that haunts feminine identification in order to ensure that few women cathect onto female masculinity through either identification or desire.' (2002, p. 359) In fact, Halberstam suggests that female masculinity is ultimately intolerable in such mainstream films: '[w]hen a serious model of female masculinity does emerge ... the threat deployed by the butch will inevitably be reduced to another form of femininity or else violently eradicated (she will be impregnated or killed or sexually humiliated.)' (p. 350)

In *Shrek*, Dragon—'drag on', the gender imposter, who is ensconced in a phallic tower of female solipsism—as the real representation of female masculinity, as the genuine threat to gender difference and thus to the entire system of patriarchy, is both 'reduced to another form of femininity' and 'sexually humiliated'. To begin with, she is wooed by Donkey's flattery and transformed into a grotesque, eyelash-batting parody of femininity. She is then chained up and humiliated by Shrek. Later, mastered, she becomes Shrek's and Donkey's pet. They put a bridle on her and ride her around. If Fiona is, metaphorically speaking, along for the ride, Dragon is literally ridden.⁵

Control, as Allan Johnson argues in *The Gender Knot: Unravelling Our Patriarchal Legacy*, is central to patriarchy (1997). In *Shrek*, power is insistently placed in men's hands. Even one of the traditional symbols of feminine power in fairytales, the magic mirror, is appropriated in *Shrek* by a man. Whereas the Queen in *Snow White* uses the mirror to gain power over a female enemy, Farquaad uses it to secure a female mate. With this maneuver, *Shrek* shifts women even further away from potential positions of subjectivity and agency. Woman, in the flesh, as we have seen, is an object for patriarchal competition and trade. Woman, in the mirror, is an object for the male gaze and for male fantasy.

Farquaad uses the mirror to select from a line-up of—significantly—semi-conscious or trapped women of fairytale lore, and he uses the mirror to facilitate his masturbatory fantasies. We see him in bed, semi-covered by decadent animal-print sheets, hairy-chested, a cocktail in hand, asking the mirror to show him Fiona again. Farquaad, however, pays a price for his use of the feminine tool of

the mirror by being himself feminized. Behind his bed, a large parody of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* presents him as Venus. More obviously, it is repeatedly suggested that his phallic tool, like his physical form, is undersized. Farquaad's possession of the mirror and his consequent feminization further affirm that *Shrek* is primarily concerned with switching the focus to men (from evil queen to evil, camped-up lord) and promoting a particular version of masculinity at the expense of anything even remotely feminine (not to mention feminist.) *Shrek* is, even more so than traditional fairytales of patriarchy, a story about patriarchal power and female subordination.

As we have argued, while the film presents itself as a revision of the traditional fairytale, it is actually concerned with the re-instatement of the gender lessons of the fairytales 'banished' from the fascistic world of the feminine Farquaad. These fairytales are rewritten only insofar as they need to defend the vigorous version of patriarchy and accompanying vision of masculinity that the film is principally interested in promoting.

What *Shrek* ultimately argues is that a real man does not need to fulfill his role as a prissy gentleman in a fairytale romance, which is niftily presented as a feminine delusion, guarded with feminist energy. Instead, woman must join man in his authenticity, accepting her sexual nature as a wife and a mother. Shrek, living in the primordial swamp, basking in the excretions of his body, is the film's hero. As in the adult films that Halberstam analyses—including another Academy Award winner, *As Good As It Gets*—'heterosexual white male masculinity appears as naturally attractive and desirable despite any socially repulsive behaviours that may accompany it.' (2002, p. 348)

Farquaad, who inhabits the pristine world of feminine fascism, is presented as disempowered and inauthentic—he, too, is associated with mirrors. As Halberstam argues, since the patriarchal model of human sexuality 'takes the male subject as normative and understands the female body as the terrain for neurotic symptoms ... then male failure will always be received as the presence of femininity' (p. 354). In his failure to comply with the film's representation of 'normal' masculinity, Farquaad is not only feminized but also depicted as a sexual pervert. Similarly, the other gender-bender, Dragon, even subdued, is presented as

sexually degraded, wearing a dog-collar and chain. Fiona, too, is a sexual pervert until she comes out of the closet about her maternal nature and takes on the authentic form of the matron.

The final message of *Shrek*, when it comes to gender relations, is that for 'love and happiness' men don't have to change; women do. Masculinity isn't the problem; femininity (and its paradoxical shadow of feminism) is. Ultimately, what we have in the film is a masculinist inversion rather than a feminist revision of the fairytale of *Beauty and the Beast*. In *Shrek*, the beast of masculinity is rendered beautiful, while the feminist and even feminine are portrayed as beastly.

Carnavalesque Inversions

One of the key ways in which *Shrek* figures itself as subversive—especially of fairytales and their Disney renditions—is in its carnivalesque emphasis on the body, bodily excretions and comic violence. As Bakhtin points out, in carnivalesque texts 'images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life, play a predominant role' (1994, p. 204). In children's texts this is usually transformed, according to Stephens, into an emphasis on 'getting dirty' and 'questions of undress' (1992, p. 122). *Shrek*, as a children's film, is notably uninterested in making such transformations with regard to carnivalesque expression. The opening sequences make pronounced and comic references to Shrek's body, his food, drink and defecation. Sexual play is present, too, in Donkey's ribald sleep-talk and references to Shrek and Fiona as 'digging on each other'. As he says, 'I'm an animal and I got instincts.'

Subversion is central to Bakhtin's theory of carnival, which is based on the folk culture and literature that used the carnival to momentarily overturn the accepted order. The carnivalesque is marked by its polyphony of voices, spontaneity and laughter. Such a discourse offers a space of freedom beyond the dominant ideology. Carnival and related forms, according to Bakhtin, 'offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom' (1994, p. 197).

Inversion and the celebration of the beast are primary traits of the carnivalesque. As Umberto Eco states, carnival is the site of overturning the usual hierarchies: ‘Carnival is the natural theater in which animals and animal-like beings take over the power and become the masters’ (1984, p. 3). This is the narrative of *Shrek*, in which an animal and an animal-like being end triumphant, with the repressive power-figure having been overthrown. The film appears to be carnivalesque—and therefore subversive—not only in its bodily references and bestial inversions, but also because it appears to offer a world that is extrapolitical and beyond the dominant ideology. The social marginality of Donkey and Shrek, as well as their bestial and quasi-bestial statuses, gesture towards a ‘space of freedom’.

However, here, as with the film’s putatively revisionist status, there are reasons for not accepting the film on its own terms. To begin with, there is a conspicuous lack of heterogeneity when it comes to voices. As we have argued, the female voice is either one of inauthentic repetition (Fiona reciting how the story ‘should go’ according to generic convention) or silence (Dragon). Donkey, the film’s most potentially liberating and comic force, is allowed a voice only in as much as it is tolerated by Shrek or is in Shrek’s service.⁶

Notably, the film’s carnivalesque ‘inversion’ takes on a decidedly masculine flavour. In fact, the film’s carnivalesque is little more than an orgiastic celebration of masculinity. The bodily references centre on Shrek, and the ‘discourse of laughter’ conspicuously belongs to Shrek and Donkey. The celebration of masculinity is most clearly seen in the carnivalesque Shrek/Donkey relationship, which is more emphatically delineated than the romantic Shrek/Fiona relationship. Some of the key scenes are of Shrek and Donkey bonding on their journey to give Fiona over to Farquaad. (And Donkey’s camp humour—‘in the morning I’m making waffles’—verges on the homoerotic). The slippage between carnivalesque and an emphasis on masculinity is also seen in the representation of Shrek’s swamp home as inviolable and therefore a domestic realm that is able to be masculine and free of feminine influence. In addition, the carnivalesque emphasis on bodily functions and generally ‘behaving badly’ is clearly a way of figuring masculinity in popular culture and this is also seen in the

interplay between Shrek and Donkey. Such behaviour is, of course, *de rigueur* in the action genre, which is the carnivalesque metamorphosis the film enacts on the fairytale, transforming it into overtly masculinist genres: buddy movie, road movie and action movie.

When Fiona is presented as admirable (or, as Donkey puts it to Shrek, shows that ‘she’s as nasty as you are’), it is when she forgoes stereotypically feminine behaviour: for example, when she commits acts of physical violence, burps, makes fairy floss out of spider webs and flies, and (parodying Disney’s celebration of fairytale femininity in *Snow White*) sings to a bird in an increasingly shrill fashion until the bird explodes, allowing Fiona to get Shrek and Donkey their breakfast (thanks to the eggs left in the dead bird’s nest). The stereotypically feminine behaviour she displays, represented by her longing to be beautiful and to be saved by a prince, is derided by Shrek when he kidnaps her from the tower.

The carnivalesque in *Shrek* turns out, then, not to overturn but to reinforce official masculinist values. In keeping with this principle ruse, the counter gender elements promised by the carnivalesque appearance of the film, like its challenge to fairytales, proves illusory. The carnivalesque, as Bakhtin suggests, messes up what is deemed to be a dominant world order in favor of a more ‘natural’ way. *Shrek* begins with the lie that masculinity is counter-hegemonic (personified by the marginalized figure of Shrek), which renders the sense of carnival, especially in relation to the gender hierarchy, empty of force. Only if we read the film in terms of a challenge to a patrician, soft and ‘feminine’ version of masculinity do the carnivalesque characteristics make sense. For, ultimately, *Shrek* is about promoting a working-class,⁷ rigorous form of masculinity, a form of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ which, as Hanke describes, ‘operates on the terrain of common sense and conventional morality that defines “what it means to be a man”’ (1992, p. 190).

What appears initially as carnivalesque inversion of official hierarchies turns out to be inversion in the service of patriarchy, which strategically presents itself as under threat. In an ultimate irony—and inversion—women are represented as the agents of patriarchal ideology. It is a woman, Fiona, who thinks it is important to be beautiful and who longs to be rescued by a prince, and it is Shrek,

a man, who saves Fiona from her patriarchal delusions. One of this film's greatest carnivalesque inversions is the suggestion that not only are women not victims of patriarchy, but they have perpetrated patriarchy; they have victimized each other. The fairytales (Fiona's fantasies) are feminine, and a female guards Fiona in her tower. In addition, a witch cast the original spell on Fiona that causes her nightly transformations. In this film men are the victims. As Shrek says: 'I'm not the one with the problem, okay; it's the world that seems to have a problem with me.'

Beauty and ugliness

One of the most apparently radical aspects of *Shrek* is its rejection of the discourse of beauty found in fairytales. According to Lieberman, the significance of beauty is a primary lesson of fairytales. Through fairytales, girls are taught that being beautiful, being an attractive object for the male gaze, is a woman's most valuable asset. Beauty is also a source of power: it's what women in fairytales fight about. In *Shrek*, even this form of power—which makes sense only in a patriarchal context—is taken away from Fiona. Nevertheless, given that the discourse of beauty in fairytales serves to oppressively define female subjectivity, Fiona's ugliness would appear to be the most liberatingly subversive feature of the film. Fiona is 'allowed' to be ugly. The carnivalesque inversion of the fairytale message of beauty, however, is more accurately part of the rigorous defense of masculinity, which we have argued is the primary agenda of this film.

To begin with, if *Shrek*, unlike traditional fairytales, seems to be promoting the idea that beauty is unimportant, it is again associated with a masculinist complaint rather than with feminist revisionism. In the film, we see that the oppressive discourse of beauty applies primarily to Shrek rather than Fiona. Shrek complains that people make assumptions about his personality on the basis of his appearance: 'They judge me before they even know me. That's why I'm better off alone'. In doing so, he appropriates the moral force of Fiona's observation that 'maybe you shouldn't judge people before you get to know them'. Shrek's key speech to Donkey about ogres having layers (like onions) promotes the revolutionary idea that beauty is more than skin deep, once again only because masculinity is presented as under threat. Indeed, the desire

for beauty, which is identified with Farquaad, is associated with cruelty, ugliness, inauthenticity and femininity. The desire for beauty is a feminine delusion out of which Fiona has to be educated.

The film, however, is contradictory in its critique of superficial judgement, since it lampoons Farquaad precisely for what he looks like. Farquaad is height challenged and, the film suggests on a number of occasions, phallically challenged. As Donkey says to Fiona upon their reaching Duloc (notable for its phallic appearance), 'Shrek thinks Lord Farquaad's compensating for something.' The incoherence regarding this aspect of the film is most apparent when Fiona—having not yet met Farquaad—defends Farquaad from the jokes of Shrek and Donkey (thereby again showing herself to be in thrall to ideology and illusory authority). She tells Shrek, 'You're just jealous that you can never measure up to a great ruler like Lord Farquaad', to which Shrek replies, 'Yeah, well maybe you're right, Princess, but I'll let you do the "measuring" when you see him tomorrow.' This contradiction can be accounted for if we consider the film's interest in asserting a hegemonic masculinity. Shrek is to be upheld—at the expense of any failure in logic—as the more desirable of the two versions of masculinity presented in the film.

Fiona's ugliness is presented as, and indeed is, the most revolutionary *looking* aspect of this film. As Halberstam writes, 'female masculinity has been cast historically as a completely abject, aesthetically displeasing, and uninhabitable position ... The discourse of ugliness ... locates masculinity in females as abhorrent, repulsive, and unsustainable' (2002, p. 358). Fiona's ugliness, however, as we have argued, is figured as distinctly unthreatening and, indeed, homely. Associated with the night and with a matronly form and demeanour, Fiona's ogress alter-ego is presented as her true self; her instinctual, sexual self. Fiona-as-princess, feminine and feminist, feels ashamed of her natural calling. It is Shrek, the personification of the natural, who reconciles her to it; who ends her schizophrenic existence. When Fiona assumes the persona of the ogress at the end of the film, she gives up her inauthentic and dangerous status as a feminine and feminist woman and takes on the identity given to her by patriarchy: as a wife and a mother; a beast of burden. She literalizes the convention

of marriage in taking on not only her husband's name but her husband's identity and docilely coming under the arm of the patriarch.

Ultimately, Fiona is allowed to be an ogre because her husband is; because the discourse of patriarchy the film is interested in defending promotes a hegemonic version of 'macho' masculinity. If *Shrek* doesn't care about looks, it's because the new masculinity doesn't care about appearances; it cares solely about power. It is consistent, then, that the maternal power of the female body is allowed to be on show in its true, monstrous form (imaged by the figure of Fiona-as-ogress) only when it becomes clear that Fiona's true love (and therefore her true form) is Shrek. The source of her ugliness is her 'masculine' sexuality (which, paradoxically, is her maternal potential). This is shown as something to be embraced if it is contained within a patriarchal framework, and thereby rendered normative and safe.

It is significant that the issue of ugliness should revolve around the trope of carnivalesque metamorphosis. Fiona's metamorphosis illustrates the centrality of the feminine to narratives of metamorphosis generally. As Bruce Clarke argues in *Allegories of Writing*, 'Metamorphic allegories in patriarchal culture are bound up with representations of the feminine, primarily because of the ideological status of the female as daemonic supplement, her systematic assignment to an ambivalent secondary position'. Female sexuality has traditionally been associated with metamorphosis, most obviously in its relationship to maternity. *Shrek*, interestingly, shows an ambivalent concern with metamorphoses, especially those to do with an uncanny enclosure of one thing within another: a woman in a glass coffin; a boy in the body of a puppet; a wolf in a nightie; a man in a dragon's stomach; a theme park in a fairytale world; an ogress in a princess. Such tropes, as well as the emphasis on Fiona's metamorphosis, illustrate not simply the 'slipperiness of human identity' (Clarke, 1995, p. 63) but also patriarchal anxiety about the changeability of female identity.

Amid this anxiety about metamorphosis, it is no surprise that the transformation of Fiona is far less subversive when it is viewed in generic terms. Laura Mulvey writes of the traditional trajectory in the romance movie:

The film opens with the woman as object of the combined gaze of spectator and all the male protagonists in the film. She is isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualized. But as the narrative progresses she falls in love with the main male protagonist and becomes his property, losing her outward glamorous characteristics, her generalized sexuality, her show-girl connotations; her eroticism is subjected to the male star alone. (In de Lauretis 1984, p. 139)

Shrek definitively follows this narrative structure, showing that the putative breaking of generic conventions, once again, is a cover for the film's profoundly generic status.

Conclusion

If the emphasis in our argument on the necessity of Fiona's transformation for the good of Shrek's embattled masculinity seems excessive, it is worth noting that *Shrek 2* simply reprises this narrative: Fiona is required once again to choose (in line with Shrek's desires) the form of an ogress over an otherwise more attractive form. The popular success of *Shrek* makes the unambiguous expression of this narrative all the more significant. As well as accepting *Shrek* as a revisionist and 'politically correct' work, commentators of the film (and the franchise) almost routinely advert to the astronomical financial success of the film. Critics, not surprisingly, tend not to link the ideological condition of the film with its status in a commodity market. There is, however, a strange moment in Miranda Sawyer's review of *Shrek 2* in which, unhappy with a product placement in that film, she writes:

I know that Shrek is made by Dream Works, that it's voiced by superstars, that it's made of money to make more money. But I want to love Shrek. I don't want to see the corporation behind the fantasy, the man pulling the Wizard of Oz levers. We all know he's there; but for an hour and a half, in a fairy-tale world, it's nice to pretend that he's not.' (2004, p. 46)

Sawyer suggests here the limits of a 'compliant' reading of *Shrek* (and one that assumes there is a man 'pulling...the levers'). Her response illustrates the link between accepting the film's 'message' and ignoring the construction of that message. One might go so far as to say that she is akin

to Fiona in her desire to 'believe' (a talismanic word in children's films made in Hollywood).

Clearly, it is no accident that *Shrek* tries so hard to allow us to pretend that there is no corporation behind the fantasy. The work's value as a commodity partly depends on its ability to give us something new, to transform old stories and make them seem attractively up to date (and therefore consumable). At the same time, working within patriarchy, the film works hard to present a model of masculinity that is embattled and itself in need of transformation. *Shrek* illustrates how in a 'post-feminist' world much of the revisionist energy that is apparently engaged in the service of women (especially girls and young women) is in fact a continuation of patriarchal ideology in the guise of a more acceptable masculinism. It appears that women are being told that they've never had it so good in cinemas as well in press releases from politicians. In a sense this shouldn't be surprising, since such maneuvers are characteristic of ideology, especially the ideology of consumerism, which is based on ambivalent metamorphoses in the form of updated goods. Fairytales, too, have within them a powerful logic that seems resistant to revision. Myths of gender and identity in a patriarchal culture are particularly intransigent, and expressions of them appear in diverse areas of popular culture. As David Bowie puts it in his 1977 song 'Beauty and the Beast' (which he once described as 'of somewhat schizophrenic nature'): 'You can't say no / To the Beauty and the Beast' (1991). As we have been arguing, the force of *Shrek*'s inverted form of Beauty and the Beast is made all the more problematic by its apparent absence.



NOTES

1. *Shrek*—the film under discussion here—is especially parodic of other movies. There are parodic allusions to numerous films, including *Taxi Driver*, *Jurassic Park*, *Star Wars*, *Babe*, *Snow White*, and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.
2. Cameron Diaz, who provided the voice for Fiona, went on to star as one of the *Charlie's Angels* in the 2002 film, offered as another example of 'girl power'.

3. Later (in the karaoke party which acts as a coda to the film), in a strange contradiction given their earlier violent heterosexual proclivities, and in a move that serves to undermine Fiona's 'single' strength, 'Monsieur Hood' and his Merry Men are presented as gay.
4. Interestingly, one of those critics who didn't agree, Margot Mifflin, resists the film's 'traditional values', seeing instead William Steig's original picture book as the more subversive text. There are compelling reasons for this. Fiona, for instance, is only ever an ogre and Shrek does not feel threatened by people's response to his appearance (indeed, he revels in it).
5. Dragon, through her pairing off with the character of Donkey, voiced by Eddy Murphy, and his ode to her 'big butt' (again, in the karaoke scene), appears to be a substitute for an Afro-American woman. This can be considered in the context of Heather Neff's argument (1996) that children's films are concerned with making the racial 'other' harmless.
6. Alternatively it is comically histrionic, and therefore ignorable, as when he recites his imagined ailments.
7. This is made more overt in *Shrek 2* when Shrek meets Fiona's regal parents in a parody of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (which further presents masculinity as a marginalized or minority identity).



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