

Ogres Are Like Onions: Subversion of the Disney Narrative in the *Shrek* Franchise

Morgan Kleinberg

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Advising Committee:

Julie Dobrow, Ph. D (Principal Advisor)

Jennifer Burton, Ph. D

Contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Project Significance	5
Literature Review.....	8
Methodology.....	44
Results	46
Discussion.....	70
Limitations of the Research.....	89
Directions for Future Research.....	91
Personal Reflection	94
References	97
Filmography.....	103

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PROJECT SIGNIFICANCE

A story that has earned the title of “fairytale” has a particular power. Fairytales are part of the societal canon, a collection of stories that “everyone knows” that informs our cultural norms. As Jack Zipes remarks in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, it is because of this “mystified power” that we are hesitant to question, to contradict, to criticize this influence the fairytale has over our lives (Zipes, 2006, p. 11). The process of standardizing the fairytale began hundreds of years ago, when classic authors such as Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm gathered and re-wrote folk tales, and authors such as Hans Christian Andersen later added new tales to the canon. Walt Disney further concentrated the power of select stories starting in the 1930s, and his animated, reimagined tales have become the definitive “modern” versions of internationally known tales such as *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. To many in Western society, Disney’s iterations of the tales are the “true” versions, the ones that have stuck as part of the Western canon.

There have been attempts in recent decades to challenge Disney’s hold on these stories, like the *Fractured Fairy Tales* by the *Rocky and Bullwinkle* cartoon series, for instance. However, no film interpretation has made quite the cultural impact as *Shrek* and its ever-expanding franchise. Loosely based on William Steig’s 1990s children’s book *Shrek!*, the movie *Shrek* publicly critiques this “mystified” canon of fairytales with its own original fairytale narrative. For many millennials, and now Generation Z, who never saw *Fractured Fairytales* but grew up in a media household often saturated with Disney content, *Shrek* was something new. It challenged basic ideas about types of characters promoted by Disney. Shrek, the monster, the ogre, is the hero. Fiona, the princess, chooses to break from the path of the traditional Disney heroine. In *Shrek 2* and beyond, Prince Charming and Fairy Godmother, named for characters

who are protagonists in classic fairytales, represent forces of evil. For what is now multiple generations, *Shrek* became the first piece of animated media that challenged Disney's master narrative around gender and morality in a way that children and adults alike could not only understand, but also appreciate.

This is very much the case for myself, personally. *Shrek* opened doors for me, helping me to learn to question and process my role in society, my identity, and even what it means to resonate with certain fiction characters, like an ogre, over the traditional Disney princess. Performing a content analysis of the first three *Shrek* films offered the opportunity to quantify both the subversive and conformist aspects of the films, some of which I noticed when I first saw the film in 2001, others of which required extensive amounts of background research to put into words. My method involved stacking *Shrek* and its main characters against two common fairytales retold by Disney in terms of the role of the male and female, who qualifies as "good" or "evil," and the role of humor (or lack thereof) in telling the story. I hypothesized that *Shrek*, *Shrek 2* and *Shrek the Third* subvert the Disney narrative about heroes and villains, proposing alternative archetypes that instead successfully occupy these roles.

Massive amounts of scholarly research and criticism exist about fairy tales, but little exists specifically on *Shrek* and its subversive qualities. Engaging in this research presents the opportunity to suggest that this film, despite its flatulence jokes and its superficial simplicity as a story, is worthy of critical study. *Shrek* and films that have followed in its wake reflect a shift in society, one that shows we are becoming more critical of the role of fairytales and other stories paraded as representative of master narratives yet curated by a select few. *Shrek* asks of us but one thing, and that is to question whether fairytales, their heroes and princesses, their villains and

side-kicks, must truly occupy the same predictable roles time and time again, or whether there is space for more nuanced, complex, modern characters in the stories we cherish as a society.

This thesis explores the subversive elements of the main characters in the *Shrek* series: Shrek, Fiona, the villains, and their kingdoms. I question the performance of gender and the morality binary in the main characters, as compared to the Disney canon. I also analyze how different production techniques, such as visual effects, editing, voice acting, and music, combined with a satiric brand of humor, serve to highlight the performances of these characters within a conformative story arc.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Shrek and its sequels could only come to fruition because of the importance of fairytale tradition in Western culture, Disney's virtual monopoly over the "modern fairytale" market, and the pervasive power of American pop culture. In this literature review, I will start by exploring certain aspects of French and German fairytale history, as these are the traditions from which the film draws most often. This will be followed by an outline of the "universal fairytale structure," as developed by Soviet folklorist Vladimir Propp, and the "rules" of folklore, supplemented by how dressing this structure with cultural values can change the intent of the story. The overview continues with a section on why self-referential material, particularly in America, is a successful form of humor, which will conclude with the pertinent historical and critical background of *Shrek*, *Shrek 2*, and *Shrek the Third*.

I. An Abridged History of the Fairytale

The overarching gag in each of the *Shrek* movies only works because we understand an enduring legacy of fairytale lore and also how Disney had taken these tales and given them its own spin. The gag is successful because we find joy in subverting the very serious tradition Disney developed, building on the work of the prominent male writers of fairytale literature.¹

It is of utmost importance first to define what makes a story a fairytale, or a "wonder tale." Some scholars believe a broader English term should be used for these stories, since some do not include fairies specifically, and so some use the term "wonder tale," from the German *wundermarchen*. Propp (1984) argues that any tale that lends itself to the following plot structure falls into the category of a wonder tale. First, someone is harmed or has a desire to have

¹ It should be noted that contemporary scholars of fairy tales often stress the importance played by female storytellers in the early establishment of the tradition, i.e. Harries (2001, pp. 6-7).

something, and this character goes forth on a journey out of their familiar sphere, where the character encounters a “donor” who provides a “magical agent” to find the desired element. The tale often climaxes in fighting with the main antagonist of the story, leading to the return home (Propp, 1984, p. 102). The “donor,” in Propp’s own terminology, who provides the magical agent, is the tie that binds the essence of all the stories addressed in the context of this paper and fairytale literature at large. The length and method of transmission of the tale is irrelevant, but the presence and interaction with magical worlds or magical realism is the crux of what defines a fairytale.

Fairytales do not begin and end with Disney, not in the least. What we consider the Western fairytale canon is, at its core, a compilation of stories, myths, and legends that come from all corners of the earth. Stories may vary by region, like in tales such as *Cinderella*. Michael Eisner, in his introduction to Roger and Hammerstein’s *Cinderella* starring Whitney Houston, comments, “*Cinderella* is the oldest, most famous folktale in the world. The story was told for hundreds of years before it was ever written down. That was in China, over a thousand years ago. Almost every culture in the world has its own version of *Cinderella*” (1997). Even between cultures that seemingly have had no trade connections or common linguistic elements, scholars time and time again find very similar tales being told, and “the explanation for these internationally shared tales may be that they are rooted in general human experience” (Larrington, 2019).

Eisner asserts that *Cinderella* is the oldest and most famous fairytale in the world. While it may be the most famous, it is not likely the oldest. Hansen argues that the oldest known version of *Cinderella* is the Egyptian tale “The Girl with the Rose-red Slippers” from the last century BC (2017, pp. 86-87). However, written tales like those in the *Panchatantra* were

originally published in Sanskrit as early as 200 BC. These Indian tales were meant to relay certain moral codes and wisdom to rising politicians and rulers through situations involved anthropomorphic animals as well as humans. They were republished, translated, and rewritten time and time again. The stories developed regional variances, like *Cinderella*, as they were distributed across the world (Marzolph, 2015). The *Panchatantra* is only one example of the immeasurable amount of fairy tale literature that exists outside of the Western canon.

Originally, fairytales were created for an adult audience. They were oral tales linked to a common culture, including rituals, beliefs, and relations with other communities. These tales often instill a sense of hope by suggesting that magic could lead us into a better version of ourselves. (Zipes, 1999, p. 2). The oral fairytale came from a desire to strengthen a community, to teach others, and to keep tradition alive. Once the fairytale became codified in writing, it became more difficult for alternate versions to be accepted by readers going forward. A print version thus became the “true version” of the story.

It is essential to keep in mind that “folklore had existed before the emergence of the peasantry. From a historical perspective, the entire creative output of peoples is folklore” (Propp, 1984, p. 4). The “colonization” of this narrative, as Zipes labels it, is what concerns us most in Disney’s journey to the forefront of the realm. As we move forward in history, through feudal system, the monarchy, and colonization, more privileged members of European societies began to usurp the narratives. Zipes, in support of Larrington’s commentary, agrees that these stories rely on universal ideas that may have been adapted, consciously or otherwise, from other cultures (Zipes, 2006, p. 41). Equally, he recognizes how they began as tales that “address common instinctual drives and social problems that arise from the human attempts to ‘civilize’ these drives,” but evolved as the elites took the narrative from the people (Zipes, 2006, p. 42).

Western fairytales function in the oral tradition in several ways, encompassing tales of caution and local tradition in equilibrium with tales of natural human development and everyday woes. It is important to recognize the oral origins of the fairytale, born of communities that were, more often than not, unable to read or write. “Folklore is, first and foremost, the art of the oppressed classes, both peasants and workers, but also of the intermediate strata that gravitate toward the lower social classes” (Propp, 1984, pp. 4-5). In France particularly, beginning in the late seventeenth century, women writers were the powerhouses behind the contemporary fairytale literature, inventing now well-known stories in *salons*, with some publishing stories (Harries, 2001, p. 5). The *conteuses* (story tellers, the French word *contour* in the feminine form) published stories that failed to align with the bourgeois ideal of a quiet, dutiful housewife, and were widely ignored in favor of Perrault’s “clean” version of events (Harries, 2001, p. 5)

Depending on who is controlling the narrative, a fairytale can, according to Harries, be divided into one of two camps: the Compact tale and the Complex tale. “‘Compact’ fairytales are usually presented at foundation or original, literally as stories that tell us of origins, as stories that do not seem to depend on other stories but come to us as unmediated expressions of the folk and its desires... ‘complex’ tales...work to reveal the stories behind other stories, the unvoiced possibilities that tell a different tale. They are determinedly and openly ‘intertextual’ and ‘stereophonic,’ Roland Barthes’s terms for the ways all writing is intertwined” (Harries, 2001, p. 17). The tales of *Sleeping Beauty*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *Puss in Boots*, all prominent examples of literature written by Charles Perrault, exist in their individual universes and fail to explore how they may be interconnected. Meanwhile, the stories written by women in their salons were more complex tales, since they were created in a communal space, organically produced through discourse and discussion. Zipes refers to Patricia Hannon’s remarks, which

argue, “tale writing was considered a group phenomenon largely because the majority of narratives were published by salon women who displayed their authorial identity through interior signings and intratextual references to each other’s work” (Zipes, 2006, p. 68). Both Harries and Zipes credit D’Aulnoy, Bernard, Lhéritier, and La Force as instrumental in taking tales from Italian and Eastern tradition as well as known oral tales and establishing these works as a legitimate genre in commenting on the affairs of the elite: the monarchy and the royal court (Zipes, 2006, pp. 68-69) (Harries, 2001, p. 17). The salons, in direct competition with Perrault, brought about the legitimacy of the fairytale more than the few individuals who regularly are associated with fairytale tradition. By understanding the instrumental role these women played, we can better conceive of the impact left by underrepresenting and even erasing their contribution. In lauding Charles Perrault and his work over that of Aulnoy and the other prominent members of the salons, we in turn acknowledge the norms and mores established and controlled by the patriarchy as more legitimate than those of the stories by the women who went to great lengths to disrupt the ideals of the patriarchy.

It is important to recognize the immeasurable impact that Italian writers such as Giovan Francesco Straparola and Giambattista Basil had on Western fairytale literature, especially in inspiring the women of the salons on the path to establishing the legitimacy of the fairytale, but I have chosen to focus on Perrault as Walt Disney will end up almost repeating his history and perpetuating many of the morals, ideals, and patriarchal institutions found in Perrault’s work. Written tales were produced for the class of people who had the privilege of literacy, which in France, for the audience of Charles Perrault, was the bourgeoisie. “A literary heritage that was first intended for the upper classes and gradually spread to lower social echelons, more directed toward children to set exemplary standards of behavior in the civilizing process” (Zipes, 2006, p.

31). Perrault is given an incredible amount of credit in the establishment of the genre, when in fact a mass wave of works being produced at the time equally deserve the glory. He is best known for using the concise nature of the fairytale to dole out morals that contribute to the “proper” development of children, specifically monitoring complex relationships of a sexual nature and inducing rigid social standard (Zipes, 2006, p. 32). Perrault had a reputation amongst other members of the *haute bourgeoisie*, and “he endorsed the expansive political wars of Louis XIV and believed in the exalted mission of the French absolutist regime to ‘civilize’ Europe and the rest of the world” (Zipes, 2006, p. 36). Perrault is able to weave his agenda, which complimented the agenda of the bourgeoisie, into well-known and traditional tales. In doing so, the master narrative of the French fairytale is altered, erasing the subversive power of the fairytale against the elite. The stories of universal truth, stories of common folks’ woes and trails, stories once dominated by the womenfolk, have been “civilized” and “colonized” by Perrault and others like him (Zipes, 2006, pp. 28-56). Disney will come to do the same thing, several hundred years later and after the advent of a completely new medium, in a world where the salons are things of the past and Perrault has been deemed an established authority in this field, obliterating the female contribution to the field.

II. The Structure of the Fairytale: the Skeleton of the Story

The bare essentials for a functioning plot arc are, as described by Aristotle: “a plot needs to have a sufficient amplitude to allow a probably or necessary succession of particular actions to produce a significant change in the fortune of the main character” (Murphy, 2015, p. 1). This sentence encapsulates the emotional arc of virtually every story ever told, fairytale or not. The structure of the fairytale will exist entirely in service of this generalized arc. However, we are

able to separate the arc of just any story from that of a fairytale. According to fairytale theorists Aarne and Thompson, Orlik and Propp, fairytales follow a strict structure. Aarne and Thompson, with modern editions from Uther, have created “Tale Types” by which any fairytale or variant can be categorized. Propp defines the seven major players that appear in a fairytale, as well as the thirty-one functions of any fairytale sequence. Orlik has outlined the Epic Laws of the Sage (his term which encompasses any and all elements of folk); laws by which all fairytales follow. The commonality between these three strikingly different outlooks on fairytales is that they all determined the same reason for why fairytales are so memorable and why they persist in tradition: repetition and familiarity. In tearing apart the fairytale to its narrative skeleton, we find a fixed sequence, a familiar cast, worlds with similar rules, and even recurring motifs, as studied by theorists from across the world.

Selected Structural Theory. For motifs to manifest and exist over such a long period of time, they must derive from something elementary. Murphy presents a brief history of thinkers’ and scholars’ attempts to explain why there are certain elements, motifs and tale types that persist despite cultural differences: solar mythology and myth tied to the Sun exists in many forms, the ritualistic elements of tales exist throughout “civilized” history, and there is a theory that all tales come from India, and other draw on historical-geographical method, which links stories through common motif and “tale type” over strictly plot structure (Murphy, 2015, pp. 2-9). Aarne and Thompson (Thompson having expanded on the work of Aarne, then more recently Uther expanding their work even further) systematically categorized every known “type” of fairytale. In doing so, they can trace any tale to the original “version” of the tale, or the bones of the tale; common enough to lend itself to variety, but distinct enough to differ from the structure and messages or morals of other tale types. They do this by defining two key terms. A “type” is

“a traditional tale that has an independent existence,” while a “motif” is “the smallest element in a tale having a power to persist in tradition” (Murphy, 2015, p. 9). A motif typically can be identified as one of three classes: actors of the tale (gods, magical creatures); items (magic objects, certain cultural aspects); or isolated incidents. To create a tale type, the general premise of the story is reviewed and broken down into the bare structure, highlighting the defining motifs. Additions to the tale type are added to account for variations that fit loosely into the structure. For example, in *Snow White*, some essential motifs include the maiden’s pale skin, the sentient magic mirror, and the stepmother who endeavors to kill using a poison object. Defining what makes tales different from one another, and being able to trace any tale regardless of regional variants back to the original, helps to understand the elements of the story that trigger the memory and the elements that stay with us, no matter how many iterations the story goes through.

Propp defines a “fairytale” as the stories categorized as numbers 300 to 749, as classified by Aarne and Thompson in their tale types system (Propp, 1999, p. 382). Propp’s proposal of 31 functions unifies the underlying structure of the fairytale (as defined by the classification above). It takes into account the function of the *dramatis personae*, that is to say, the players involved with moving the plot (Propp, 1999, pp. 382-383). This organization lends itself to the duality of the fairytale: a story that encompasses multitudes in its variants, yet still elicits a comforting sense of repetition and familiarity.

The *dramatis personae*, the “cast” of any story, are as follows: Villain (the antagonist of the tale), Donor/Provider (giver of the magical agent[s]), Helper (the “sidekick,” one who helps the Hero), Princess and her Father (the princess and, typically, the ruler of the kingdom respectively), Dispatcher (initiator of the journey/quest), False Hero (one who lays false claim to

desire), and Hero (one who typically weds the Princess, and has legitimate claim to desire) (Murphy, 2015, pp. 35-36). One character in a story can occupy multiple roles at once, but according to Propp, these are the essential roles filled by the characters in a fairytale.

In addition to the seven *dramatis personae*, Propp has found that every fairytale follows a sequence, including some or all of 31 functions. Propp, in developing these functions, chose 100 tales randomly from a selection of Russian folktales; however, it has since been applied to the full spectrum of European folktales. The 31 functions can be summarized in groups, with annotations from Murphy.

1. Preparation. This establishes the premises of the tale: world/social structures, location, rules of the world, serving functions 1-7 (Absenteeism, Forbidding, Violation, Spying, Delivery, Trickery, Complicity).
2. Complication. A “lack” or “desire” is introduced, and thus seeks to change state of the world or story, serving functions 8-10 (Desire, Mediation, Counteraction).
3. Transference or Donation. This often includes the introduction of the crucial magical element that helps to acquire desire or satisfy lack, serving functions 11-15 (Departure, Donor or Test Function, Heroine’s Reaction, Reception of Magical Agent and/or information about the future, Spatial Transference).
4. Struggle. The first obstacle in satisfying the desire, resulting in new information, serving functions 16-18 (Struggle, No Branding, Partial Victory, Return).
5. Liquidation of Lack or Desire. The Heroine’s desire has been fulfilled, serving crucial function 19.
6. Return. Desire is fulfilled, but the Hero remains unrecognized, serving functions 20-22 (Return, Pursuit, Rescue).
7. Recognition. The climatic action of the story, the hero’s darkest hour, the third act of the story which brings everything full circle and ultimately recognizes the Hero as the true hero and protagonist, serving functions 23-31 (Unrecognized Arrival, Unfounded Claims, Difficult Task, Solution, Recognition, Exposure, Transfiguration, Punishment, Marriage). (Propp [1968] in Murphy [2015] pp. 36-37)

Propp heavily enforces the idea that the 31 functions are strictly serial in nature; that is, “if witness distort the sequence of events, their narration is meaningless. The sequence of events has its own laws.” (Propp, 1999, p. 384). Not all fairytales make use of all 31 proposed

functions, but the ones that are used follow a strict order in terms of story chronologically. However, it is important to note that the presentation, that is, the plot of the story as it is presented to the reader, may not reveal the functions in this order. The subversion of the *presentation* of the order is successful because of the intrinsic awareness an audience has for these functions and their order (Propp, 1999, p. 385).

Aarne has defined what makes a fairytale recognizable or special, while Propp has proposed what every fairytale has in common in terms of chronological plot structure. Olrik contributes his set of Epic Laws, which govern the rules of a fairytale in terms of importance, order, repetition and symbols. Olrik claims these rules apply to anything falling into the category of *sage*, a word meant to encompass many facets of folk expression, from folk and fairytales to “myth, legend and song” (Dundes, 1965, p. 129). The first rule is the *Laws of Opening and Closing*, whereas the *sage* neither starts nor ends abruptly – the transition through the rise and fall of action is smooth, much like Aristotle said. *Law of Repetition/Law of Threes* came about since the folktale lacks the developed elements of other literatures, such as nuanced character development or detailed description. Repetition makes up for this and emphasizes key elements of the story. Specifically, “when a folklorist comes upon a three, he thinks, as does the Swiss who catches sight of his Alps again, ‘Now I am home!’” (Olrik, 1965, p. 133). Threes appear everywhere, especially in Western fairytales: three little pigs, three blind mice, three daughters/son, three days, and so on and so forth. Olrik (1965) states, “three is the maximum number of men and objects which occur in traditional narrative” (p. 133).

However, within one scene exists *Law of Two to a Scene*, stating only two people can play an active role on stage at one time. Olrik highlights that this explains why “the princesses of folktales can attend the battle with the dragon only as mute onlookers” (Olrik, 1965, p. 135). *Law*

of Contrast plays on two to a scene, stating there must be a contrast for every strong force, such as a protagonist must have an antagonist. This applies to plot as well: the hero dies after successfully slaying the villain. *Law of Twins* recognizes that two people may occupy the same role, especially since “beings of subordinate rank appear in two,” such as Hansel and Gretel (Olrik, 1965, p. 136). If they rise in rank, the law will swap over to *Law of Contrast*, and thus fall into protagonist/antagonist structure. The rule *Importance of Initial and Final Position* clues us into the importance of certain elements; the most important comes first, but the one with which we sympathize will be introduced last. Olrik claims the fairytale narrative presentation follows its own rule of *single-strandedness*, wherein the plot follows one strand of events and avoids any synchronous events occurring. Finally, the narrative will only have one true hero or protagonist, as claimed by *Concentration on a Leading Character*; our allegiances will not be divided. According to this theory, the leading character is not always the titular character, because “when a man and a woman appear together, the man is the most important character. Nevertheless, the actual interest frequently lies with the woman” (Olrik, 1965, p. 139). In *Snow White*, the hero is not Snow White, even though she is the center of all the action. The prince saves her in the end, and so he is the hero.

Critique on Structural Theory. These common structures and laws aid in providing a fixed point of familiarity to an audience so that they can orient themselves within a subversive work. A work may subvert the expectations regarding the *dramatis personae*, but by adhering to Propp’s 31 functions in the story structure and establishing some or all of Olrik’s *sage* laws within a world, the disruptive element is exaggerated, and the impact on the audience is greater for this.

Other theorists, notably Murphy and Alan Dundes, have openly criticized the categorization, strict sequencing, and undeniable laws proposed by Propp, Aarne, and Thompson. In addressing the tale type, Dundes notes that Aarne and Thompson never define what an “isolated incident” is. He believes the grounds for defining a tale type are “shaky” at best, since a motif can be anything, and to be a tale type, motifs must occupy certain orders and functions (Dundes, 2007, p. 92). While Propp fails to precisely discuss the inclusion of motif in his structure of functions, and function is a by-product of motif for Aarne and Thompson, Murphy discusses the inextricable link between the two. Motifs only appear within certain functions, and said functions are reliant on specific motifs to exist independently (especially those regarding magical agents).

These critiques reveal the consequences that manifest from attempting to pigeonhole a story as fluid as that of the fairytale, a story that changes over the ages through both oral and written tradition. As these stories acquire a certain power in society, the norms and values they impart become equally as powerful. This is reflected in the establishment and reinforcement of the patriarchy and gender roles for men and women. It is imperative to recognize the limits on the value of these classifications and laws, especially as they apply “universally.” Nature does not come in threes; we in Western civilization see nature in threes. American Indians, in contrast, see nature in fours (Dundes, 1964, p. 140). It is important to take the idea of “laws,” “essential functions” and “tale types” with skepticism, as they may only prove true for Western tradition, and even then only to such an extent.

Despite shortcomings, these scholarly endeavors to organize and make sense of the structure of the fairytale have proven useful in the discussion and analysis of stories. The bare bones of the structure, more often than not, do fall into a rigid system. However, it is the nuance

of the contemporary societal standards layered over this uniform structure that make the fairytale worth studying. Understanding the commonalities of all fairytales is instrumental to uncovering the elements that shift with changing times and perspectives.

III. Fleshing out the Bones: the *Dramatis Personae* with Sociocultural Context

As Disney reshapes the works of the Brothers Grimm, Perrault, and Hans Christian Anderson, here I will expand on their views of the world, specifically, their views on the role of men, women and children, and how they rewrote fairytales of the “folk” to shape their own needs. Hasse claims fairytales “prescribe forms of thought and behavior, and modes and models of humanity, that are meant to be normative.” (1999, p. 360) Herein lies the power of the fairytale beyond that of stories for children. It is not necessarily what story is told, but *how* the story is told. Propp defines the hero as the one “with legitimate claim to the throne.” This tells us nothing about who this person is or could be. Propp automatically assumes this person is male, which is fair, as the fairytales he studied operate under a patriarchal social system, but “legitimate claim to the throne” should be considered more broadly as an exemplary example of a functioning member of society; essentially, what constitutes an ideal person? This includes defining their appearance, their background or heritage, class, their attributes, faults, and motivations. Applying certain qualities to specific functions of a story influences and is influenced by what is considered ideal by that society. Bottigheimer asserts that, “Without subplots and a large cast of characters who can explore gradations of meaning and nuances of social practices, fairy tales and their plots achieve validity in their own cultures by alluding to generally held beliefs, even if these beliefs themselves are an illusion, an illusion which provides for its own survival by functioning as a paradigm for subsequent generations” (1986, p. 119).

Fairytales have been regarded, as Hasse quotes, as “sacred texts” by many, informing us of the norms of a region, of a nation, even of humanity at large (1999, p. 364). Societal constructions have drawn their power, disillusioned or otherwise, from fairytales in their assumed simplicity and accessibility. This became especially true once the label “classic” was added to the works of the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, and Hans Christian Anderson. These authors, as the “classical authors,” have informed their contemporaries, as well as Disney, what is considered “good” and what is “bad” for both men and women. According to Zipes, the motivation these authors had in common, despite being from different parts of Europe and different political climates, was that they all catered to the ideals of the bourgeois rather than offering a verbatim written version of the oral fairytale (2006, pp. 42, 60, 79).

A Heroine’s Silence. Perhaps some of the functions of the fairytale Propp has outlined lend themselves to encouraging certain behaviours and discouraging others, but “that we are forever coming across wise monarchs, compassionate heroes, toiling beauties, and proud princesses has something to do with folkloric plot patterns, but it also has a great deal to do with Wilhelm Grimm's preconceived notions about sex, class, and character” (Tatar, p. 30). The Grimms sought to “clean” these fairytales up so they would be suitable for younger members of the rising bourgeoisie, especially the more conservative brother Wilhelm, and in doing so, they injected the tales with a bourgeois worldview (Zipes, 2006, p. 60). The Grimms presented the ideal female character, the one who is successful, rewarded, and true, as both silent and obedient.

The Brothers Grimm did not invent silence, but they perpetuated it. Silence was a valued quality in the Germanic states of the 19th century, accepted across regions and through all ends of the social hierarchy (Bottigheimer, 1986, p.116). The only active form of “female” speech was nagging, which resurged in the Germanic folk tradition during this period and was heavily

criticized. For example, in *Cinderella*, the heroine Cinderella is silent throughout all her trials and tribulations: harassment from her stepfamily, key moments at the ball, trying on the glass slipper. Her stepsisters talk ceaselessly, and their nagging is what defines them as evil and wicked stepsisters; “in the world of Wilhelm Grimm a talkative woman meant trouble” (Bottigheimer, 1986, p. 124-125).

Adjacent to the silent woman is the passive woman. Often, the woman transcends objectification in that she literally becomes an object. Snow White, punished by her stepmother for being more beautiful as she comes into her adolescence, is laid down horizontally in a glass coffin until her prince comes to save her. Silence, passivity, and often martyrdom are recurring attributes of the female character from the Brothers Grimm (Harries, 2001, p. 13). They are rewarded time and time again with the true hero, the prince. The only time passiveness is unacceptable is when the woman must be fulfilling her duties. Zipes presents a comparison between the original edition of the written *Snow White* tale and the first revisions made by the Grimms. Notably, when Snow White encounters the dwarfs in the original version, they allow her to stay as long as she would “do the cooking for them when they went to the mines” (Zipes, 2006, p. 65). In the revised edition, the dwarves request that she, “keep our house for us, and cook, sew, make the beds, wash and knit, and keep everything clean and tidy” (Zipes, 2006, p. 65). The revised request from the dwarves is much more physically demanding, and reflects the role a housewife would play within the domestic sphere of a patriarchal society rather than a guest in a strange house. Passive, dutiful, silent: these are the ideal traits of a woman according to the Germanic bourgeoisie. Wilhelm Grimm intentionally changed the stories published to reflect this ideal image.

The Brothers Grimm were by no means the first fairytale authors to do this. In France, as much as the female French writers were essential to the creation and dissemination of the fairytale, Perrault is credited with spinning them into clean tales for adults and children. His tales also highlighted morals enforced by gender roles and behavior reflective of the bourgeois ideal. (Zipes, 2006, p. 31). For Perrault, “the mark of beauty for a female is to be found in her submission, obedience, humility, industry, and patience,” qualities that mirror those of the Brothers Grimm (Zipes, 2006, p. 56). Perrault sought to create a black and white world, where characters who upheld the values of the bourgeoisie were rewarded, while those who contradicted them were punished. His hope was children would follow suit by embodying the qualities of the heroes they loved to watch succeed, while spurning the faults carried by the evil characters who were punished time and time again (Zipes, 2006, p. 32).

Perrault, by crafting a hygienic story in service of the bourgeois agenda, established defined gender roles in his revisions of the fairytale. Zipes (2006) identifies a non-exhaustive list of small actions reflective of bourgeois standard that creep into the fairytale: “Using a knife and fork as instrumental and dignified tools for eating, sitting straight at the table, using hierarchical forms of serving, maintaining a certain posture while speaking or moving in a prescribed way, repressing one’s bodily functions, and wearing special dress signifying one’s social class” (Zipes, 2006, p. 38). Any character failing to adhere to these standards, or actively opposing this standard, is labeled as an evil character not worthy of success. Even characters that do succeed are unable to do so until they look the part. Cinderella, for example, comes from humble beginnings; she does the chores and serves her stepmother and sisters. Her obedient nature is rewarded later when her fairy godmother magically manifests an outfit fit for a princess: glass slippers, ballgown. Stone notes, in line with Perrault’s hygienic reimagining of the fairytale

world, “Even Cinderella has to do no more than put on dirty rags to conceal herself completely. She is a heroine only when properly cleaned and dressed” (Stone, 1975, p. 44).

In the following century, Hans Christian Andersen would further serve the bourgeois agenda. The son of lower class parents, Andersen managed to finesse his way into the upper echelon of society, but in doing so, he “never felt himself to be a full-fledged member of any group. He was the outsider, the loner, who...hated to be dominated though he loved the dominant class” (Zipes, 1999, p. 82). His written works thus deal with themes of necessary sacrifice and subsequent reward for upholding the institutions and traditions of the dominating class, which in Denmark, during the 19th century, was the bourgeoisie. Zipes notes, “The natural aptitude of a successful individual will be unveiled through diligence, perseverance, and adherence to an ethical system that legitimizes bourgeois domination” (1999, p. 95). These qualities are folded into the Grimm and Perrault models of the ideal citizen; not only must the protagonists look bourgeois and act bourgeois, they must actively support the system that made them be this way. In perpetuating this, Andersen created a cyclic narrative that creates and reinforces the implementation of the bourgeois standard and its system.

Perrault, Andersen and the Grimms began the work that Disney will ultimately finish in what it means to be a “princess,” the ideal construction of a woman in polite society. Stone notes these fairytales “may serve as ‘training manuals’ in passive behavior,” and that “millions of women must surely have formed their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behavior would be rewarded, and of the nature of reward itself, in part from their favorite fairy stories” (Stone, 1975, p. 48). Fairytales have informed society, and society will continue to inform these fairytales in this cycle these revisionist authors have created, particularly regarding the role of the heroine, the role of the woman, the role of the girl finding her independence.

However, in these heteronormative tales, the role of the woman is only half of the story. While the princess is passive, obedient, and silent, the hero fills in the story with the contradictory traits. He is active, smart, and courageous.

A Hero's Performance. The title of the fairytale, perhaps in recognition of its roots, often takes its name from the leading heroine of the story. However, it is the man, the prince, the hero who goes on the journey, who saves the day, or the town, or the princess; it is the hero who receives Propp's idea of recognition in the denouement of the tale. Stone argues that, "Heroes succeed because they act, not because they are. They are judged not by their appearance or inherent sweet nature but by their ability to overcome obstacles, even if these obstacles are defects in their own characters" (Stone, 1975, p. 45). The hero's function is the opposite of passivity: it is to embark on the quest, to satisfy their desire, to obtain rightful recognition for their efforts. A hero that fails to act makes not a story. Stone's observation lends itself more to the hero's inherent function in the fairytale rather than how the "classic" authors qualify the male hero. Zipes offers, "The mark of manliness is to be found in a man's self-control, politeness, reason, and perseverance. (2006, p. 56). The key difference in the enforcement of this "mark of manliness" on the male character is not so much the qualities themselves, but how these qualities are performed by the character. In many societies, Western or otherwise, the performance or ritual of acting out manhood is valued more highly than actually internalizing and valuing these qualities. The male character must perform his duties as the man, the hero, the protagonist of the story. What the woman lacks in action, she makes up in dynamic emotion. What the man lacks in contributing to the emotional arc of the fairytale (as Aristotle noted, the essence of the story), he makes up for in performing, rather than strictly being, the leading role, "there is less focus on 'being a good man' than on 'being good *at being* a man'—a stance that stresses *performative*

excellence, the ability to foreground manhood by means of deeds that strikingly ‘speak for themselves’” (Herzfeld, 1988, p. 16). The hero-prince is able to refrain from contributing to the emotional arc of the story because in being the hero, in saving the day, in completing the journey; he performs his role splendidly as a masculine figure shaped by bourgeois ideology. In this way, heroes truly do succeed “because they act,” as Stone noted. Not because they are the physically dynamic character, but because they act out their part well.

The division of gender, and the performance of gender, serves to explain Olrik’s law, *Concentration on a Leading Character*, whereas “when a man and a woman appear together, the *man is the most important character*. Nevertheless, the actual interest frequently lies with the woman” (emphasis added). The man in performing masculinity must act as though he is the leading character, even though frequently he is not; similarly, the woman must act as though the man is the savior, and she, in performing femininity, is worthy of being saved. This lends itself to the common motif of the princess locked in the highest room and tallest tower: “It might also be seen as a protection for the heroine herself, who must remain pure for the one man who will eventually claim her. The restriction of women at puberty can also be interpreted as a reaction of men to the threat of female sexuality” (Stone, 1975, p. 47). Part of achieving cleanliness lies in restriction, a central mantra to the structure of the church (an institution with close ties to the bourgeoisie). Repression and restriction of natural phenomena, internal or external, is the vehicle that allows the ideal world order to shine through. In actively repressing one’s natural sexual development, curiosity, and chaotic nature, the performance of the gender role is able to take center stage; it is this process that is rewarded by these authors time and time again.

In defining gender roles and expressing the importance of their performance, the essence of all that is “good” and “evil” in these worlds has also been defined. The “good”, the heroes and

heroines, the loyal sidekicks, demonstrate the ideal qualities of their respective gender. The “evil” characters, the villains, the obstacles, the false heroes, demonstrate the very opposite, or if internally they possess these qualities, they fail to perform their role. “The homme *civilisé* was the former homme *courtois*, whose polite manners and style of speech were altered to include bourgeois qualities of honesty, diligence, responsibility, and asceticism.” (Zipes, 2006, p. 36). The “classic” authors have branded the hero as an actor, a performer of his masculine role in addition to being a nobleman, while evil manifests itself in symbols and characters that threaten the patriarchal system cemented into Western society by the bourgeois of Western Europe. The false hero is not to be confused with the anti-hero. While the false hero is, in fact, not the hero at all, the anti-hero archetype can occupy the Proppian “hero” function in the story. The anti-hero is defined by their moral alignment and establishes a “gray” moral area within the world, as they are neither fully good nor fully bad. Murray Smith, in his chapter discussing pervasive allegiances to “bad” characters, remarks, “The moral structure of a film works in terms of whether characters are presented as ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ but there are more subtle possibilities – a film may withhold obvious judgement, allowing only tentative patterns of allegiance, or ironically undercut judgements it has set up” (Murray, 1999, p. 220). The anti-hero elicits sympathy in that, despite their typically “bad” moral alignment, they follow the function of the hero, albeit in an unconventional manner.

Reclaiming Gendered Perception. There is only one solution to dismantling such a system, which involves returning ownership of these tales, taken and revised to fit into a specific idea of what values society should uphold, back into the hands of the individual. “Removing the tale from the service... of universalism requires the subversion of traditional tales” (Hasse, 1999, pp. 361-362). Three names have been credited with the establishment of the fairytale as a genre,

as proper literature, when it has always had place in folk tradition. By reclaiming ownership of the fairytale, by dismantling the supposedly concrete social system it has both created and reinforced, we are able to disillusion ourselves from the power of fairytales, one that draws from their “ageless, universal and beautiful” qualities, and see them as “historical prescriptions, internalized, potent, explosive and we acknowledge the power they hold over our lives by mystifying them” (Zipes, 2006, p. 11).

Walt Disney and the Disney Company, despite seemingly unlimited cash flow and resources, ultimately fail to accomplish this and instead take the opportunity to claim ownership over fairytales in a personal and legal sense. “When Disney called his animated fairytales by his own name...he was not simply making an artistic statement, but also laying claim to the tales in what would become their most widely known, public versions” (Hasse, 1999, p. 361). For many born and raised in the 20th and 21st centuries, Disney over The Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, and Hans Christian Anderson, has become the lone authority on the fairytale. With this power, Disney has and continues to perpetuate the harmful, stunting stereotypes assigned to men and women, assigned to good and evil forces, by the bourgeois ideal while contributing new harmful ideas that bolster the power of the patriarchal system.

IV. Self-Referential Material and Successful Humor

As there are layers to onions and ogres, there are layers to the humor that undercuts the fairytale world in *Shrek* and its sequels. The main characters in fairytales by the Grimms, Anderson, or Perrault are not funny. So, when building upon these stories, Disney folds comic relief into the side characters or sidekicks of the story, “Disney relied upon the formulas of early movies, which themselves drew from 19th-century melodrama: the innocent heroine, the gallant

hero, the evil villain, and comic relief in the form of the clown” (Zipes, 2015, p. 157). While *Shrek* certainly has its own “clown” sidekicks (Donkey, then Puss in Boots), every character is complicit in or capable of some form of humor, from the base humor of flatulent jokes to witty repartee. Although, the “gag” of the film as a whole plays on the pre-existing knowledge and understanding of fairytales and their function as well as American pop culture, thus becoming a comedic film because of this layer of self-referential humor. In this section, I explore why we find comedy reliant on pre-existing phenomena, both diegetic and non-diegetic, clever, humorous, and ultimately successful.

Satire is “a particular type of parody, irony, travesty, and grotesquery, holding people accountable for their actions. Characterized by exaggeration and use of wit, satire is ‘an attack on or criticism of any stupidity or vice in the form of scathing humor,’ and it is also a critique to ‘dangerous religious, political, moral, or social standards’” (Cuddons [1991, p. 202] in Alonso [2018], p. 11). The humor in *Shrek* is difficult to pinpoint since it varies so often, but all instances of comedy contribute to the satiric tone that comments on Disney’s monopoly over the master narrative in regards to Western fairytales. Disney’s relentless acquisition of fairytales, from a cultural and legal standpoint, are the “dangerous standard” being critiqued, represented in elements such as Lord Farquaad and the kingdom of Duloc, and Fairy Godmother’s library of “legitimate” fairytales.

To understand these satiric elements requires, “a level of sophistication that places difficult demands on the audience, such as a sharp state of awareness, mental participation, and shared knowledge” (Alonso, 2018, p. 13). Fairytales are named as such because of their unique prevalence in society. They are the initial exposure to the societal “canon” that we are exposed to, due to their place as literature that establishes morals and norms in society. Thus, they

embody nearly the first instance of “shared knowledge,” as something the average citizen is exposed to during early childhood. This is the inherent brilliance in *Shrek*, and any subversive media that tackles fairytales; in *Shrek*, even a child is able to recognize that conventions are broken due to its exaggerated representation of commonly known material. It does not require a “sharp state of mental awareness” to be in on the joke. This makes the critique of fairytales, their Disney adaptations, and their unique role as an enforcer of societal norms accessible to the average audience member, whether they are a child, an adult, or any age in between. “Humor defeats our expectations by producing a novel actuality, by changing the situation in which we find ourselves’...satirical humor offers a lens for realizing that a certain accepted ‘reality’ is not the only possible one” (Critchley [2002, p. 1]) in Alonso [2018, p. 12]). *Shrek*, which presents a hero’s journey as spearheaded by an ogre, who is the epitome of the villain/obstacle, immediately challenges the expectations we have coming into a fairytale universe. Humor, much like the various aspects of fairytale structure, reels the audience into this world that defies all expectations, an acts a fixed point, beacon of understanding and commonality, in a world that is otherwise foreign.

Shrek melds the familiar, the timelessness of the fairytale world with the modern one by making clever references to pop culture, mostly drawing from film and television. A very small selection of references and spoofs includes *The Matrix*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Cops*, *The Mark of Zorro*, *Jurassic Park*, *Spiderman*, *Babe*, *Hawaii Five-O*, and *Mission Impossible*. The film also models Far Far Away after Hollywood, incorporating the famous Hollywood sign and stores named for puns that incorporate well-known haut-couture. These jokes play on American pop culture, with which we are intimately familiar. They provide another layer of certifiably successful self-referential comedy that, when infused with the upside-down fairytale world,

makes the audience feel more comfortable. The tradition of self-referential comedy in media originates with *The Simpsons*, a show that has, since its inception, been known for successfully satirizing American culture and “created the televisual space for the current satiric boom, establishing self-referential TV satire as the norm” (Alonso, 2018, p. 26). *The Simpsons*, by breaking the conventions of animated sitcoms on TV, paved the way for animated features like *Shrek* to do the very same, all in service of making another deviation from the norm more palatable to a wide audience. *Shrek*'s success as an animated film can be attributed to its clever sense of humor, which allows it to undermine most expectations we have in regards to its characters and the world in which they live.

V. A Dent in the Disney Empire: Popular Reception of *Shrek*

The decade leading up the premiere of *Shrek* was a tumultuous one for its creators. The book on which the movie *Shrek* is based was only released in 1990 with the same title, written by William Steig. It would not be until 1994 that the studio that would create *Shrek* was founded by three men in Hollywood: David Geffen (prominent business magnate), Steven Spielberg (famous director), and Jeffrey Katzenberg (recently having left the Disney Company). The promise of the movie *Shrek* loosely resembles the book: an ugly ogre saves an equally ugly princess. But the DreamWorks adaptation introduces a key element that draws the audience in: Disney fairytales. Shrek must rescue princess Fiona, cursed and living in a tower, in order to save his swamp that has been overrun by fairytale creatures evicted by nefarious Lord Farquaad.

Shrek was released in the US on May 18th, 2001, following several weeks of hype from its reception at Cannes Film Festival (screened May 1st, 2001). It was immediately a hit. Entertainment Weekly reported following opening weekend, “moviegoers nationwide fell hard

for a smelly green ogre this weekend, as ‘Shrek’ blasted to the top of the box office, gobbling up an estimated \$42.1 million” (Reese, 2001). The VHS release (in competition with Disney’s *Monsters Inc.*, as they were released the same weekend) resulted in 21 million sales; between cinema, video, and DVD releases, *Shrek* hauled in \$892 million (“DVD sales ogre well for Shrek”, 2002). Success was not entirely unexpected by analysts, but for an animated feature made outside of the Disney realm, the numbers truly proved staggering (Reese, 2001). The immensely positive popular reception of the first of the *Shrek* films was due to a combination of the technological and artistic advances it presented, the intelligent casting decisions, and its self-referential humor, which pokes fun at both Disney and fairytales in general, that was successful across audiences of all ages.

Disney History to the Computer Animated Feature. *Shrek* follows in the wake of a longstanding tradition of animation, an art form which was been around since the inception of cinema, but is one of the first handful of animated features made entirely using computers. Walt Disney had dominated the field of animation since the 1930s, where he hired the most talented artists to illustrate his story in numerous shorts until his big break, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, his first animated feature film which won an Honorary Academy Award (Walt Disney Family Museum, 2013). From there, Disney as a corporation moved into making even more animated features, mixed-media features combining animation and live-action (*Song of the South*), and completely live-action content.

After selling his first film, *Alice’s Wonderland*, Walt Disney was able to form his very own production company. *Steamboat Willie*, Disney’s debut for his original character of Mickey Mouse, was produced in 1929 (History.com Editors, 2019a). The success of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* established Disney and the Disney Company as a powerful player in the field of

animation. Walt Disney himself holds the record for the most Academy Awards nominations and wins for an individual, earning fifty-nine nominations and winning twenty-two of them. He has also received two Golden Globe special achievement awards and an Emmy. Many of these awards honor his role as producer on cartoon shorts, from *Flowers and Trees* (1931-1932) to his posthumous win *Winnie the Pooh and the Blustery Day* (1968) (Buhlman, 2017). The first Disney theme park, Disneyland, opened in California in 1955 as a testament to utopian worlds of Disney's creations. Disneyworld was opened in 1971 to honor his death, and in the coming decades Disneyland Tokyo, Disneyland Paris, and Disneyland in Hong Kong would follow suit (History.com Editors, 2019b). The Disney Company has only since expanded its reach, acquiring assets such as ABC, Touchstone Pictures, Pixar, Marvel, and Lucasfilm, with a percentage of stakes in other companies such as ESPN, Lifetime and The History Channel, just to name a few (Max, 2019). The Walt Disney Company is worth an estimated \$240 billion, rising significantly since the release of its streaming service Disney+, which gives its users access to nearly all content from the Disney "vault," the collection of every movie the company has ever made (Forbes, 2020).

Everything changed in the world of animation in 1995 with the release of *Toy Story*, produced by Pixar (an independent enterprise prior to the Disney merger in 2006) and released through Disney. *Toy Story* was the first completely digitally mastered animated feature film. The success or failure of *Toy Story* would set the precedent for the animation industry as a whole, and due to its commercial success, computer-generated animation gained traction. The process of animating with computers had not been fleshed out yet, and so the Pixar team, on the topic of the Disney animation empire, "notes that part of what made the films so magical was how Walt Disney incorporated all the latest technology of his time, letting that innovation stimulate the

illustrations. When it came to *Toy Story*, the animators didn't have much choice but to follow Disney's lead" (Zorthian, 2015). The digital revolution was in full swing, and the *Toy Story* team had many challenges in building the equipment they needed to create a viable product. *Shrek*, made only six years later, shows what animators have been able to accomplish since the release of *Toy Story*, and also how animation can be used in breaking with the Disney tradition.

Solomon, in the *LA Times* reported, "If 'Shrek' does well--and I hope it does--it will be good for the whole animation industry. It doesn't matter who made the film" (2001). *Shrek* provided an opportunity to take back the animation industry, even if it only made a dent in the expansive power of the Disney empire. Many were impressed with the computer-generated animation in *Shrek*; a BBC reporter noted that "the computer animation is said to be the most advanced to date" while a reporter from *Rolling Stone* said, "what matters about *Shrek* is the wonder of the photorealistic animation" (Youngs, 2001; Travers, 2001). But to compete with Disney at its own game, DreamWorks would have pull together a story that was truly spectacular, supported by an unbeatable cast.

Talent. The animation team for *Shrek* was aware of the limitations of computer animation, and knew that signing on high-profile Hollywood actors to the project pressure would alleviate a lot of pressure. A-list voice talent provided two levels of support for the film. On one hand, signing on big names would guarantee an audience (Mike Myers, Eddie Murphy, Cameron Diaz were all household names in 2001 as much as they are today). On the other hand, excellent actors crafting a solid essence for original characters stood a chance at competing against the characters in Disney movies, which are already universally known in the Western World. William Steig's *Shrek!* did not have the following that a classic fairytale with the Disney name attached had. The DreamWorks team required high-caliber actors to succeed , and the way the

actors were compensated make this clear. Bradshaw in *The Guardian* wrote, “all these people get unprecedented star billing on the posters and opening credits,” meaning the actors names were prominently featured on marketing materials and were included in the opening credits, which in the past was not prioritized in many animated features (2001). Reviewers raved about the voice acting in the film, suggesting, “all the voices are fantastic” (Youngs, 2001). *The New York Times* critic attributes much of the film’s success to its voice actors, “When "Shrek" is cooking, thanks to the writing as well the improvisational skills of stars like Mr. Myers and Mr. Murphy and the performance of Mr. Lithgow, the jokes have a bark” (Mitchell, 2001). *Shrek* relies on immense amounts of comedy: from satiric commentary and witty banter to jokes and gags about bodily functions directed at the younger audience. Mike Myers, Eddie Murphy, and Cameron Diaz are seasoned actors who were up to the task of landing the laughs from the audience. The voice of John Lithgow, not known for comedic acting, ended up being a very pleasant surprise as many critics found his work up to snuff with the rest of the cast, such as Hunter in the *Washington Post*, “[Lord Farquaad], voiced in highly unctuous aristo snit by the fabulous John Lithgow...” (2001). The fantastic voice acting by high-profile actors was equally as essential to the success of the film as much as any of the visual effects.

Satiric Critique. Beyond the technical artistry and the thoughtful casting, the reason that *Shrek* was able to succeed, above all, was its critique of the Disney empire alongside the drama between Michael Eisner, chief of the Walt Disney Company at the time, and Jeffrey Katzenberg, former Disney executive and then part-owner of DreamWorks. *Shrek*, its story and general tone exists as a commentary on the Disney retelling of stories and tradition, but the film itself may have come to be with some personal as much as political intent. Katzenberg filed a lawsuit against Disney, which had renegotiated the 2% of the profit he was promised following top

animated hits from Disney, such as *The Lion King* (Bates and Eller, 1997). Katzenberg left Disney in 1994 after his falling-out with Eisner. In its article about the court proceeding, *LA Times* reporters noted, “Disney had planned to make DreamWorks’ performance an issue in the trial, arguing that Katzenberg was pushing for money because the fledging studio’s start has been rocky, a source close to Katzenberg’s legal team said. Katzenberg’s lawyers, believing that DreamWorks is irrelevant to the case, had filed a motion asking that information on the new studio’s performance be excluded” (Bates and Eller, 1997). Before *Shrek*, DreamWorks had only three relatively successful films under its belt, *Antz*, *Prince of Egypt*, both released in 1998, and *Chicken Run* (made in partnership with a British stop motion company, Aardman Animations), released in 2000. *Shrek* would end up earning over \$400 million at the box office, plus millions more in VHS and merchandising sales.

Few reviews of *Shrek* after its release fail to at least mention, at least in passing, this feud between Disney and Katzenberg. DreamWorks repeatedly acknowledged that they see how his movie could have been influenced by the feud, especially regarding the comparison between Duloc and Disneyland. DreamWorks marketing chief Terry Press told the *Chicago Tribune*, “‘Yes, the park stuff could be taken in that vein’ she said, but asserted that people shouldn’t make too much of it... ‘and the stuff is not mean; it’s just funny’” (Waxman, 2001). The *LA Times* tried to interview Katzenberg about the possible allegory present in the film, “he told Newsweek, ‘There’s nothing [in the movie] in our view that is mean-spirited or nasty to the Disney heritage. It’s not a revenge plot on my part.’ He added that Disney executives had been ‘gracious and complimentary’ when he screened ‘Shrek’ for them. Disney spokesmen have refused to comment on the film” (Solomon 2001). However, between this fallout with Disney and the instability of his own studio, the motivation of vengeance cannot be ignored when talking about

both the production of the story for *Shrek* as well as why it was successful. Having a former Disney executive turn around and make a film that openly criticized one of the top media companies in the world, whether the motivation be political or personal, made for a great headline and even better coverage in the press, and as the saying goes, all press is good press for a “fledgling studio” competing with the corporation that has set the precedence for animation nearly since its inception. The headline for the aforementioned *Chicago Tribune* article, released almost exactly one month before *Shrek*’s wide release in the US, is titled, “KATZENBERG’S REVENGE,” capital letters and all included in the digital version of the article (Waxman, 2001).

A New Angle on Fairytales. Thus far, all the reasons for *Shrek*’s success that I have delved into have to do with its critical reception, its reception as a part of animation tradition, and its success as a strategically and even politically produced film. Ultimately, these factors set up the movie for a successful opening weekend, for a good run at Cannes, and for a shot at the Oscars, even. However, these are not the reasons that over 21 million *Shrek* VHS tapes were sold. People wanted to watch *Shrek* over and over again for its story, above all else. *Shrek* follows the plot of not only his own original fairytale, but also incorporates other elements and characters from other fairytales, from *Sleeping Beauty* to *Pinocchio* to the *Three Blind Mice*. This amalgamation of stories plays a large role in developing *Shrek*’s plot, character development, and establishing the overall humor of the film. Many reviews commented on the idea of *Shrek* drawing in part from the tradition of a “fractured fairytale.” A fractured fairytale, conceived originally in the 1960s television program *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*, takes a well-known fairytale and changes one or more elements of the tale to give the audience a new perspective on the story (Carina, 2019). *Shrek* reprises not only famous characters, but also classic elements of fairytales and Disney movies, such as princesses singing to themselves (or

small animals) in a high-pitched voice (*Snow White, Cinderella*), as Johnson (2001) argues, “an operatic rendition by Princess Fiona satirizes Disney's singing heroines.”. These elements are known to children as much as adults, and so parents and children alike are in on the joke, “Children will love its slightly subversive sense and lavatorial style. Overgrown children will love it for the same reasons - and will get a few more jokes too” (Youngs, 2001).

The *Shrek* tale covers a moral that does not always align with the Disney agenda: everyone is worthy of love no matter what they look like or who they are (even Shrek, an actual ogre). *Shrek* and its story operate on multiple levels, done in a fashion that is humorous and comprehensive even to those who are only peripherally familiar with the Disney and fairytale traditions, “This is a reflection of movie's perpetual sense of doubleness. Those still innocent of postmodernism, say, under the age of 2, will simply see a rousing story of heroism and resourcefulness. All others will see a whole panoply of meanings, from the twitting of Disney to an examination of body image and self-love as it afflicts the modern psyche” (Hunter, 2001). The story is as old as time, the jokes are universal, and the moral is one that should be told more often, using characters that look vastly different from the ones we see in Disney movies. *Shrek* is the longform fractured fairytale geared towards a massive audience, and it is in it for the long game.

In light of the all the incredible strides animation had made in the past few years, the Academy Awards added the category of Best Animated Feature in 2002. *Shrek* was pitted against Disney's *Monsters Inc.* In spite of Disney's monopoly over animated technology and award track record (the only other animated nominations for Best Feature Film have all been Disney movies), *Shrek* won the first Oscar for Best Nominated Feature. People understand the power Disney has over the master narrative of fairytales, fairytale tradition and modern

adaptation. But the world craves for a competing agenda, and *Shrek* was so well received because above all else, it offered the one thing Disney could not: a fresh perspective.

VI. The Birth of the *Shrek* Dynasty: Popular Reception of *Shrek 2* and *Shrek the Third*

Shrek 2 was released almost exactly three years after *Shrek*, on May 19th, 2004. The film picks right up where its predecessor had ended, with Shrek and Fiona's honeymoon following their wedding. In this installment, Shrek must convince not only Fiona's parents, but also himself, that he is worthy of being married to Princess Fiona. The directors of *Shrek 2*, in an interview with *Joblo*, noted that they wanted to "logically take it to the next place emotionally and character-wise," and did so by exploring, "how would Fiona's parents react to her decision to marry this ogre and that her curse is not reversed. Now she's an ogress all of the time. What would they feel about that? And so that presented a whole new story to go on, and a whole new place to go" (JoBlo, 2004). *Shrek 2*, also like *Shrek*, competed in the Cannes Festival of 2004. *Shrek 2*, in the end, made \$923,075,336 worldwide, doubling the financial success of *Shrek* (IMBDPro, 2004).

Shrek 2 continued in the tradition of *Shrek*, from its humor caters to all audiences, and the idea of the "fractured fairytale" to improving the animation style while only adding to an already fantastic cast. Huge stars such as Julie Andrews, John Cleese, and Antonio Banderas (coming off the success of *Zorro*), joined the main cast, with notable secondary characters voiced by Joan Rivers and even Larry King as the Ugly Stepsister. The technical improvements from the first film were lauded extensively, "Visually, pic may be even more vibrant than the first edition, with the colors and backgrounds leaping off the screen in nearly hyper-realistic fashion; numerous moments of photographic visual precision are almost unsettling in their detail" (McCarthy,

2004). The attention to the lighting and the more minute details, such as texture in the background or on a character's skin or fur were particularly noteworthy improvements on the first film. The film lent itself to further critique of not only Disney (although there is plenty), but also Hollywood and the film industry at large. The fictional town of Far Far Away, from which Fiona hails, resembles Hollywood in its obtrusive white signage, while the windy road leading up to the town is taken straight from Beverly Hills. The film builds on more pop culture references, often faster than the audience can process it: television shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies* to *Cops*, much of Steven Spielberg's filmography, and formal features of commercials (Hill, 2004).

Everything that made the first film successful was only amplified in its sequel, as is evident by the rave reviews from critics across the board. TODAY noted *Shrek 2* is "a rare example of a sequel that's better than the original" (Lemire, 2004). In the pun-centric style of *Shrek*, *The Guardian* reviewer wrote, "You'd have to be a real ogre not to like it" while the CNN reporter considered the film "the best comedy of the year so far" (Bradshaw, 2004; Clinton, 2004). The *Shrek* dynasty was established with the addition of *Shrek 2* to the lineup.

Following in the wake of the success and fame of the first two films came the "threequel" *Shrek the Third*. While the third installment of the series was nearly as financially successful as the second, earning just over 800 million at the box office, critically the film did not fare as well (IMDBPro, 2007). The film follows Shrek and Fiona through suffocating royal domestic bliss, at least for Shrek, who misses his swamp even after all this time. After the death of the King Harold (John Cleese), Shrek and Fiona are to rule over Far Far Away. Shrek sets out to change his fate by finding the other only living heir to the throne, all while having a parental crisis after Fiona announces her pregnancy.

Shrek the Third did not receive the rave views that accompanied the first two movies. In fact, the reaction was tepid. Overall, whether people liked the film or disliked the film, reviewers often had the same comment: nothing was new. *Shrek the Third* rehashed the same brand of humor, the same world (Far Far Away), and the same characters with essentially the same dilemma (wanting to return to his beloved swamp), with a pregnant twist. Following a paragraph noting what had not changed, the *Hollywood Reporter*'s critic concluded their review with, "And that pretty much sums up the real problem with "Shrek the Third": It's no longer new" (Honeycutt, 2007). However, *Entertainment Weekly* appreciated the comfort in adding to a universe with which the audience already feels familiar, "But something in the polished reliability of the machinery appeals to me as an antidote to Spider-Man 3-type overstimulation" (Schwarzbaum, 2007). In addition, with audiences now acclimated to the caliber of animation DreamWorks was capable of, critics could not help but compare *Shrek* with *Toy Story*, as always, the crown jewel of Pixar, and its sequel *Toy Story 2*. DreamWorks brought *Shrek* to the public at the same time that Pixar was doing extremely well in its release of *The Incredibles*, and only two years later Pixar was acquired by Disney. Now, with more funding and resources, DreamWorks remains Disney Pixar's biggest competitor. Audiences cannot help but compare the two in many reviews, "The human characters in particular look like cheap knockoffs of the toys in the *Toy Story* movies" (Scott, 2004). But with expectations as high as they were for the second sequel, it is difficult both financially and creatively to deviate from a formula that works while simultaneously adding new elements. *Shrek the Third* stuck to what DreamWorks knew about the *Shrek* universe and took the financial gain while cutting its critical losses.

Even though *Shrek the Third* recycled many elements in its main story arch, the film's analysis remains essential in the context of this thesis for the specific aspects of the movie that

critics did enjoy, notably, the band of princesses lead by Fiona, breaking out the castle to the tune of *Immigrant Song* by Led Zeppelin. *EW* considered this scene “the movie’s One Cool Thing. In a square tale of facing male adulthood, this little, spiky feminist SNL sketch is one for the girls” (Schwarzbaum, 2007). Other elements, such as the vengeance exacted by evil main villains and creatures alike (Captain Hook, Ugly Stepsister, evil forest trees from Snow White) as well as the dip into Arthurian legend cannot be ignored and are equally worthy of critical analysis alongside the first two films.

The individual elements that make up *Shrek* and its sequels are in no way new, fresh, or even original, but the way in which *Shrek* uses the shared knowledge of fairytales within its own fairytale world, blended with hundreds of minute references to American pop culture in order to comment and critique the power of the Disney company and its version of fairytale events is what makes it both successful and relevant. As progressive as the film is, it is equally aware of its roots in oral fairytale tradition, a space where stories built upon one another and themselves in a time before a successful print version determined what iteration of a story is the “true” one. This transformation of fairytale from its oral tradition to its print tradition severely changed its function in society. A story once dominated by lower class and dispersed by woman was taken and repurposed to spread the civilizing agenda of the bourgeoisie. As the fairytale moved from print to Walt Disney’s screen, the function and meaning of the fairytale changed once more. The master narrative of the animated fairytale perpetuated the ideals of one man. Over the course of the 20th century, this voice would become the lone authority on Western fairytale narrative for many children. *Shrek*, as the first massively successful film of its kind, reminds us, amidst its

biting wit, an incredible soundtrack and disruptive characters, that the master narrative is more fluid, more open-ended than some would have us believe.

METHODOLOGY

Originally, my goal was to not only perform a content analysis on the *Shrek* franchise, but to also do field research interviewing children on their understanding of fairytales, the *Shrek* movies, spin-offs or musical, and its subversive techniques. As I re-oriented my research to focus on completing a thorough content analysis of the first three films of the *Shrek* series, I kept my original intent in mind as I decided on what variables would become the focus of my research.

I hypothesized that the main characters of *Shrek* undercut the expectations that Disney established about who or what qualifies as a hero or a villain. Through the analysis of my findings, I hoped to pinpoint concrete examples that makes *Shrek* different from Disney's 20th century canon, yet highlight the ways it fails to diverge too far from tradition.

I decided to incorporate the first two sequels *Shrek 2* and *Shrek the Third* as part of my sample because they serve to build on the disruptive tradition that *Shrek* began, introducing new rules, desires, and characters to expand the magical world. *Shrek Forever After* is not included as it fails to expand the universe and instead presents an alternate timeline that critiques the *Shrek* universe as a whole, rather than the *Shrek* universe's relationship with Disney or the Western fairytale canon.

I will be looking specifically at the main characters of *Shrek* and these sequels: Shrek, Fiona, Lord Farquaad, Fairy Godmother, and Prince Charming. I will also examine the role and influence the settings of each film have within the *Shrek* universe. The main purpose of the *Shrek* films is to juxtapose the physical attributes of the characters with the roles they occupy in the series, and so my goal is to understand the function each character fulfills within the narrative, and to evaluate what contributes to or hinders their success in carrying out this function.

List of the Main Characters:

Shrek

Shrek looks and, to a certain extent, acts like an ogre, an obstacle or monster meant to be overcome by the hero of the story. However, in this narrative, Shrek functions as the hero.

Fiona

Fiona was born and raised as a princess, then locked away in a tower until her true love finds her and lifts the curse, which turns her into an ogre at night. After kissing Shrek, she permanently becomes an ogre. Fiona occupies the princess/heroine function.

Lord Farquaad

Lord Farquaad, the comically short ruler of Duloc but not its king, seeks to become king. In order to do so, he must marry. He is the villain of *Shrek*, evicting hundreds of fairytale creatures and blindly choosing a princess to marry in order to carry out his plans.

Prince Charming

Prince Charming, introduced in *Shrek 2*, has physical attributes that match that of most Disney princes. His mother, Fairy Godmother, thinks he should be king; however, he is the False Hero of *Shrek 2*. After his defeat in *Shrek 2*, he still performs as the hero of his self-produced musical in *Shrek 3*, and functions as the villain as he tries to make his dreams a reality by killing Shrek.

Fairy Godmother

Fairy Godmother presents herself to Fiona as someone who can grant her any wish, but the truth is that she is using a debt owed to her by Fiona's father, King Harold, to leverage political favor and have Fiona marry her son, Prince Charming. While she appears as an updated version of Cinderella's fairy godmother, she is the villain of *Shrek 2*.

The Settings: Duloc, Far Far Away, and Worchestershire

These are the three main kingdoms/realms that are the backdrop for Shrek's various quests throughout the films. The crowds of people, the loyal subjects of the character with the most political power, provide the audience with feedback about each of the characters. These locations also represent real places, such as Disneyland and Hollywood, providing a familiar atmosphere for the audience.

RESULTS

I performed a qualitative content analysis of the first three *Shrek* films: *Shrek*, *Shrek 2*, and *Shrek the Third*, the results of which are divided by character: Shrek, Fiona, Lord Farquaad, Prince Charming, Fairy Godmother, and the three main settings of Duloc, Far Far Away, and Worcestershire. The trajectory of the characters is tracked mostly chronologically across the films they are present in.

Shrek shows us how we can turn the classically deviant obstacle into a viable hero in the Fairytale universe by taking the traditionally one-dimensional and making it complex. This is done by progressively increasing the character's emotional capacity that garners sympathy and allegiance towards him, significantly aided by various types of humor. Meanwhile, Fiona subverts the expectations around a traditional princess by initially being lumped in with other Disney princesses, then slowly distancing herself (and thus the audience) away from the "classical" image through codeswitching, humor, and her development as a character that is as complex as the hero, Shrek.

Though the weakest of the villains in the first three movies, Lord Farquaad provides a one-dimensional villain who can realistically be defeated by the unknown, unconventional, yet complex hero Shrek. Adjacent to the villain in the second film, then the villain himself in the third film, Prince Charming is the most complicated adversary. He is the nuanced version of Lord Farquaad: he is also the false hero, but presents himself as worthy of the role of hero because he, like any other prince before him, performs the part of the hero. However, this is undercut by his childish tendencies and his unsuccessful performance of masculinity, shortcomings that only serve to reinforce Shrek as the true hero. Finally, the Fairy Godmother, the most interesting villain symbolically, is also the most powerful villain of all three movies.

She is fairytale “law” personified: she has a monopoly on all fairytale narratives, and has acquired such power in a capitalist fashion. She has asserted her narrative onto Fiona’s parents, and thus onto Fiona, a phenomena that builds the mythology that existed prior to the events of the films. She performs the role of Fairy Godmother, a character who introduces a magical agent to the hero/heroine, but she does so entirely to serve her vision of the fairytale world.

The physical locations and crowds of people within them act as a silent character, a bridge between the fairytale world and ours, which helps the audience measure Shrek’s trajectory towards acceptance into fairytale world. By humorously blending these invented worlds with known American locations (Duloc: Disneyland; Far Far Away: Hollywood), the subconscious connection between the disruptive power of Shrek and its connection with American/Western society as a whole is even more apparent. The townspeople themselves help us expand the world and position Shrek within the social hierarchy.

Shrek

From the very beginning of the film, it is clear Shrek is actively aware of his role in the Fairytale world, which encourages him to perform the part of the monster, the ogre, the obstacle to the hero. The movie opens with Shrek reading a medieval-esque book about a princess in a tower guarded by a dragon, and after reading about the princess receiving true love and true love’s first kiss, scoffs, “Like that’s ever gonna happen!” The toilet is flushed, and the outhouse door bangs open, revealing our protagonist, the ogre, Shrek. The film then cuts to the opening credits over a montage of Shrek going throughout his typical day as an ogre: cleaning out slugs from his pipes, grabbing fish from the marsh, brushing his teeth with mud, painting a “keep out” sign with a poorly executed self-portrait. He is happily performing the role of the monster, the

ogre, going about his disgusting life. But the movie's famous opening song, "All Star" by the band Smash Mouth, with Shrek's big smile as he goes through his routine, begins to humanize a creature we typically associate with being threatening.

The juxtaposition of the ugly ogre with a complex, relatable personality continues into his first lines of dialogue as he confronts a group of villagers. The villagers, spreading rumors about ogres, say, "It'll grind up your bones for its bread." These villagers have never met an ogre, have never met Shrek, but come into the interaction with preconceived, dehumanized notions of what he is like, using "it" to refer to all ogre-kind. Meanwhile, during the interaction, Shrek uses the plural "they" to refer to ogres as he embellishes the villager's story, "They'll shave your liver, squeeze the jelly from your eyes!" He adds, "Actually, it's quite good on toast." Shrek, in comprehending and contributing to the discussion of his own kind while supplementing it with a layer of humor, contradicts our initial judgements based on his monstrous looks.

Shrek embodies multitudes in his complexity, but the qualities of his that are introduced in the first film, then explored in the following films, come down to: self-centered yet dedicated, grotesque, and witty. His selfishness is not much of a concern, since his egocentric goals often align with the desires of others. He says to the hordes of fairytale creatures who invade the swamp after Lord Farquaad has sent them there, "I'm going to get you all off my land and back where you came from!" They cheer; they crown him with wreaths of flowers. In reclaiming his privacy, his most valued possession, by confronting Lord Farquaad in the stead of all the fairytale creatures, he restores what they have lost. However, there is some pushback to this selfishness, once Fiona and Shrek have fallen in love. In *Shrek 2*, Shrek takes the potion that could forever alter his appearance because it will make Fiona happy, by making her parents happy. Donkey argues, "But you love being an ogre," and Shrek replies, "I know, but I love

Fiona more.” Shrek’s selfishness is his most dynamic quality. By establishing that Fiona is the exception to Shrek’s “me, me, me” attitude (to quote Donkey), Shrek is shown to be capable of love. This proves his dedication to a known human being, and Shrek thus becomes humanized for the audience. This dynamic development and complexity permit him to fill the role of the hero.

But Shrek’s grotesqueness, inside and out, presents itself as an obstacle time and time again. From a personality standpoint, the “ogre” part of Shrek will always exist. He participates in gross rituals (brushing his teeth with mud), eats slugs, thrives in filth, but his objectively disgusting choices never harm anyone. Shrek never seeks to terrorize the villagers; rather, they terrorize him. His way of life is unorthodox, yet non-threatening. Physically, Shrek is large, green, with alien-like ears that stick out from the side of his head. Even though his nose is large, with thick eyebrows and a giant mouth, his face is almost perfectly symmetrical. The duality of the oversized yet symmetrical features allows Shrek to be easily painted differently in opposing lighting. For example, in shots when he is painted as the “monster,” roaring at the villagers to scare them off, his eyes are hard, mouth dripping with saliva, baring brown, poorly aligned teeth. The camera angle and lighting only amplify the effect; the wide angle warps his already scary face, and the harsh lighting is directed only at his left cheek. The effect is striking; Shrek is half in shadow, face distorted. Camera angle and lighting, however, are also able to paint Shrek’s complex features as the hero of the story. At the end of the first film, after Fiona transforms, a two-shot of the couple in front of the sky is lit sideways by the setting sun. Half of Shrek’s face is well-lit, the other is nearly blown out from the backlight. The effect is a halo-esque glow that highlights the symmetry of his features.

Even though the main hero of the film is an ogre, the most humanizing qualities of the ogre make up the character of Shrek. The shock value of his green, grotesque appearance is quickly undercut but his non-threatening, unconventional, witty personality. As the audience becomes more acquainted with Shrek and as he is shown in the best “beauty” lighting, the trope of the one-dimensional “ogre” obstacle is successfully subverted with the presentation of a complex, dynamic character.

After the first movie, the shock value of Shrek undercutting our expectations of the hero has worn off. Therefore, in the interest of the success of the second film, his desire has to change. The second film reorients Shrek’s desire away from his own personal interests and towards ensuring Fiona’s happiness. The central conflict becomes the fact that he has been recognized as the hero, but still does not look the part, and is thus considered illegitimate by Fiona’s parents, a proxy of the interests of Fairy Godmother. Since fulfilling Lillian and Harold’s (Fiona’s parents) desires makes Fiona happy, he must actively seek magical aid to change his physical appearance. By the end, Fiona’s unconditional love for him means she accepts him as he is, as he always has been, and her parents are the ones who must change in order to make Fiona happy. Fairy Godmother, the character who allegedly initially cursed Fiona and planted the idea of what it means to be an “ideal” husband into Fiona’s parents, fails to accept an alteration to her immutable institution (an ogre as royalty), and so she is destroyed.

Shrek achieved recognition as the hero within a very small circle of characters by the end of the first film. The circle includes: Fiona, Donkey, assorted fairytale creatures (notably, Gingy, Wolf, Pinocchio, the Three Blind Mice, and the three pigs), Dragon, and within Duloc. This recognition does not extend into the larger scope of the world, and everyone is speechless when he and Fiona step out of the onion carriage. Shrek remembers his “place,” he whispers to Fiona,

“Now let’s go before they light the torches,” a callback to the opening of the first film. Later in the film, Shrek admits to Donkey, “Maybe Fiona would've been better off if I were some sort of Prince Charming...It’s not like I wouldn’t change if I could, I just wish I could make her happy.” The verbal acknowledgment of this desire leads to Shrek following the footsteps of Fiona, where he takes control and changes his physical appearance in a possibly permanent way. This reversal introduces an idealized form of the Shrek character. This altered Shrek is still recognizable; his features are mostly just scaled back to “human” proportions: a defined chin, lightly pigmented skin with brown hair. His physical appearance serves to enforce his ability to perform the role of the hero, which translates to his ability to perform masculinity. Among fawning townswomen and Shrek’s acute assessment of his changes, “A cute button nose, thick, wavy locks, a taut round buttock? I'm, I'm ...gorgeous” Donkey is the character that keeps us grounded, “You're a lot easier on the eyes, but inside you're still the same.” Shrek, as Fiona does heavily in the first film, falls into the habit of medieval codeswitching. He ambushes a man and his son, taking their cloths but remembering to say, “Thank you Gentlemen. Someday I will repay you, unless I can't find you, or if I forget.” He performs the role of the hero in his polite speech, which quickly spirals into dialogue that is much more likely to come from the mouth of Shrek we know. The physical transformation of Shrek from ogre to idealized man proves to the audience, to the townspeople of Far Far Away, to Fiona and Fiona’s parents, that it does not matter if Shrek fulfills our expectations of what a hero/prince/husband looks like, because he subverts our expectations for the ogre character, and in doing so, acts the part of the hero. Donkey’s line is instrumental in reminding us that Shrek may “try on” different aspects of what we would consider “Prince Charming,” such as medieval dialect, but he continues to act like he did before

he changed. Whether he looks the part of the hero or not, he fully embodies the strength, courage, and altruistic nature of the hero wrapped up in the complexity of also being an ogre.

Shrek the Third presents the resolution of the dramatic arc of Hero's Recognition. By the end of the third movie, even if Shrek is not recognized in Worcestershire, another sector of the vast Fairytale world he lives in, he is recognized in Fiona's hometown of Far Far Away. Shrek has proven his ability to perform the hero's role in *Shrek 2*, yet refuses to continue the performance as royalty. *Shrek the Third* opens with Shrek filling in for sick King Harold. He goes about his days doing Harold's job. He knights men, but accidentally slams the sword into the man's shoulder. He sets a ship out to sea, but when he hits the ship with a ceremonial bottle, the entire boat goes up in flames. He is dressed in royal garb with Fiona for a party, where one of the royal servants confuses him for Fiona, "I'm Shrek, you twit." He finds himself unable to fully perform the royal/political aspects of the prince role, and in what is arguably the weakest choice of the series, he finds someone who will be able to do so. Going back on everything the second movie established, Shrek goes on a quest to find the only other heir to assume the throne, the paramount icon of British folklore, King Arthur in his younger years, reimagined as a social pariah who has yet to recognize his worth. Even though Artie does not act the part of the hero, being young and brash, he fulfills the expectations of what a future king should look like based on a Disney fairytale, could easily be likened to a good version of Prince Charming from the second movie who has yet to mature. Artie has wavy blond hair, a symmetrical face; he is small, with a higher-pitched voice, but he is young. In choosing someone who will ultimately fulfill all of the expectations of a hero, a reference to a character in folklore who is known for leading the great mythical kingdom of Camelot, Shrek tip toes around the idea that he is the only valid example of deviating from the norm in fairytales, and even his children are unworthy of being

passed the responsibility of ruling, as their mother should have, and their grandparents (Lillian and Harold) did. This is all covered up by the illusion of his struggle with fatherhood, and what that means for someone who did not have a proper role model to bring and raise children in this world. Any subversive qualities of interest in the third movie are relegated to the villains, and the main plot regarding Shrek is left stale.

Fiona

Fiona's subversive trajectory over the course of the three movies is the exact opposite of that of Shrek. While Shrek is introduced as the ogre, the outsider, the deviant element, Fiona begins as one of three available princesses in the kingdom. Our very first encounter with Princess Fiona is through the Bachelor-esque presentation of Cinderella, Snow White, and Fiona. The only thing that sets Fiona apart from the rest is that she must be rescued from the dragon to be acquired, and her description: "She's a loaded pistol who loves piña colodas and getting caught in the rain." Her name, Fiona, is the Scottish version of Gwen, meaning "fair." She is thin, white, and wearing a green dress typical of medieval royalty. Other than "she's a loaded pistol," nothing about her appearance indicates subversive intent. Shrek's transformation into the hero is the main mystery of the film, but Fiona's backstory and transformation are the plot twist.

Fiona's physical transformation is initially planted in her verbal codeswitching between medieval dialect and modern dialect. Her first spoken sentence is, "I am awaiting a knight so bold as to rescue me," an example of medieval speak, of the language she was taught to use growing up in a kingdom that raised her to be the ideal image of the "classical" princess. But she does not perform that one-dimensional role well. Her complex nature begins to show when she speaks in modern vernacular, "Just take off the helmet...take it off!" She drops her performance

of the damsel in distress in trying to force the narrative into a classical rescue situation. She also possesses physical abilities that few other princesses have: she is seasoned fighter. She singlehandedly takes down French Robin Hood and his merry men in the forest on the group's way to Duloc, climbing trees and kicking two men at once in a nod to *The Matrix*. She yells and grunts as she fights, screwing up her face in concentration. She battles between being poised, as she fixes her hair mid-*Matrix* kick, and winning the fight. Her outward struggle with this duality continues until she permanently transforms into an ogre, breaking the curse that forced her to be a princess by day, and an ogre by night. However, Fiona in her final "loved" form is an ogre on a permanent basis, as though the true punishment all along was having to perform the role of the princess she never was destined to be, as a complex character capable of more than a vapid performance of femininity.

By the opening of *Shrek 2*, Fiona has proved her true heroine status to herself by now, but the obstacle lies in proving her viable heroine status to her parents. Unlike Shrek, she never chooses to change back to "princess" form, and in fact screams when she sees herself in her former princess body in the mirror the morning after Shrek had consumed the Happily Ever After potion. Rather, she subverts expectations of the princess by expecting her elders, her parents, and society to conform to *her* choices, rather than her conforming to their expectations for her. "They're my parents," Fiona tells Shrek, expecting that "they love me no matter what." This proves untrue, as Harold tells Lillian, "She was supposed to choose the prince we picked out for her." Harold and Lillian, like many royal parents, were meant to choose the person Fiona would marry, and she would agree since her parents know what is best for the kingdom. It is rare that a princess has one or even both living parents, and usually without parents she acts in a way that would make them/her kingdom proud. In the sequel, Fiona has thus disrupted two more

common narratives: the absent mother narrative, as she has a very strong, present mother who performs her role as Queen well (Julie Andrew's voice supplements this performance), and the submissive princess performance. She, unlike many, many fairytale princesses before her, legitimately had a choice in her marriage. She chose, against the will or interest of her parents, to continue to pursue that love.

Fiona still harbors the desire for her "happily ever after," but for her, that phrase has taken on a new meaning. Fiona of yesteryear, Fiona before she met Shrek, the Fiona that obsessively wrote and rewrote "Mrs. Fiona Charming" in her diary, desired the classical happily ever after. She had an idea of what a "proper prince" would look like, and expected to end up with this idea of a prince. Fiona, altered by the events following her rescue, in light of her new love, was initially shocked when her parents believed Shrek does not fit into the narrative they had constructed for her, so she altered the narrative for herself, "I want what any princess wants...to live happily ever after...with the *ogre* I married." She actively constructs her destiny, wishing for the blessing of her parents but not strictly needing it, undercutting the submissive, down-on-her-luck, occasionally orphaned princess narrative. Fiona also diverts from the traditional idea of "happily ever after." In the first movie, she chose Shrek, but she also chose everything that comes with marrying an ogre rather than a prince. She chose to live in the swamp over a large castle. She chose social isolation and seclusion rather than political power or influence. To Fiona, however, these are not sacrifices; these aspects of Shrek's life make her happy. She reaffirms this choice publicly in the second film. Fiona diverts from the audience's expectations for her wishes once again, establishing that every princess' "happily ever after" can look very different.

The third movie affirms Fiona as a strong female character, but one that is static throughout the film. This works in asserting the success of the dynamic changes that have taken place over the past two movies, and reasserting the mother as a positive, impactful influence on Fiona. This is another pushback against the deceased mother narrative; instead, she has a mother who can break through no less than two cement walls in order to escape their cell. Fiona is also pit against princesses who have gained agency for this film, such as Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Rapunzel, who are depicted as vapid and useless, or even evil (Rapunzel turns out to be a traitor, and lover of Prince Charming). While in jail, in what could be their darkest hour, the princesses “assume the position” of waiting. Cinderella sits primly, legs crossed, on a box. Snow White lies down as though the ledge on the wall is her famous glass coffin. Sleeping Beauty yawns, and falls asleep standing up. They act as though this is any other tower, and at any moment they will be rescued. They perform their roles as the damsels who require rescuing; it is their job to wait. Meanwhile, Fiona is the epitome of calm, while being confused at their lack of action. She has just safely ushered everyone out of the tearroom, before they were caught because Rapunzel gave away their location to Charming. She is the one who grants agency to the other princesses, saying, “Okay girls, from here on out, we’re going to take care of business ourselves” after Lillian paved the way for their prison escape, borrowing from the plot of Arthur Hiller’s comedy film *Taking Care of Business*. Bras are burned, dresses are ripped, glass heels are sharpened. Snow White harnesses the power of song (which Fiona, as we know from the first film, is incapable of) for their escape. Voiced by Amy Poehler, Snow White starts singing with the same sound quality present in the Disney’s *Snow White*, drawing in nearby woodland creatures, until her high-pitched note transforms into the opening scream of Led Zeppelin’s “Immigrant Song”. The animals, under Snow White’s control, attack the guards in

front of the gates to Far Far Away. Fiona is an agent of retrospective change. Now that Far Far Away and fairytale law have accepted her as one of the princesses, she has the clout to reexamine the old interpretations of Disney in a new light. Fiona is not dynamic, but her character is strong and accepted, thus not requiring any sort of change. The film contends Fiona's strength as an immutable trait rather than something that needs to be earned time and time again.

Lord Farquaad

Lord Farquaad subverts our expectations exactly one time: with his entrance. Intense, dark theme music featuring the organ, a tune akin to Darth Vader's "Imperial March," plays. Lord Farquaad's footsteps match the chorus' "ah" as he marches through the hallway. He pulls on his gloves; he appears to look down at everyone. He pauses, an over-the-shoulder shot revealing two guards in front of a door. They move aside without acknowledgement as Farquaad struts through the door. He is half of the size of the guards, at most three or four feet tall. Our vision of the ruthless ruler of the kingdom, amplified by the dark theme, is undercut before Farquaad even speaks. His height will become a recurring joke throughout the movie. Farquaad is established as the villain with one clear desire: to become king. It is unclear why he is not king in the first place, as he is repeatedly recognized as "ruler of Duloc," but perhaps he must be married to be recognized as king. While his height serves to contribute to his illegitimacy as ruler, it is confirmed in that he chooses to pursue princess Fiona almost exclusively based on her looks, chose hastily, and did not consult her in the slightest. At all times, Farquaad objectifies her; she is no more than a means to an end. Within a minute of meeting her, he says, "Princess Fiona, beautiful, fair, flawless Fiona. I ask for your hand in marriage." She responds, "Lord

Farquaad, I accept. Nothing would make...” She does not even begin to finish her acceptance without him interrupting her as he immediately speaks of arrangements and plans.

Shrek, however, never faults him for his myopic view of women or his narrow-minded desires. Time and time again, any legitimacy Lord Farquaad could have had is undermined by his comical lack of height, an emasculating feature. His duplicity is made clear in how his face displays all the attributes of a prince: sharp cheekbones, clean face; but he is very short. Shrek attacks him for his height; he and Donkey often riff off each other in their ridicule. Shrek says, “Let me put it this way, Princess. Men of Farquaad's stature are in *short* supply.” Donkey responds, “I don't know. There are those who think *little* of him.” Farquaad is comically small, his intentions are untrue from the beginning, and he demonstrates no complexity or depth to his character. He fails to make the cut into the cast of the second movie.

He is, like Duloc, loosely associated with Disney. His face is displayed everywhere throughout the kingdom; what he lacks in height, he makes up for in ego. His goal throughout the film is to establish his idea of a perfect world, and that involves removing any and all fairytale creatures. He seeks to curate the kingdom to include the people and creatures that fit into his utopian image of the kingdom. In his dank torture dungeon, he keeps Gingy the gingerbread man, one of many anthropomorphic creatures in the world. He waterboards Gingy in milk to get him to reveal where all of the creatures are hiding. While torturing Gingy, he reveals, “You and the rest of that fairytale trash, poisoning my perfect world.” He includes Shrek and Fiona in this after her transformation, calling, “I will have order! I will have perfection!” Any power Lord Farquaad has lies in his loose comparison to Disney's perfectionist, hygienic goals for the landscape of fairytale literature. Unfortunately, this motivation is hardly elaborated on

throughout the first film, and so the comparison falls flat compared to Fairy Godmother's allegorical representation of the Disney empire.

His superficiality and lack of subversive elements work in favor of establishing Shrek as the hero. He is physically and narratively easy to overcome as an obstacle because his motivation is shallow and his personality is bland. Lord Farquaad functions as a simple villain that establishes Shrek as the clear hero for the audience, who is still getting used to the idea of an ogre as the hero. In order for Shrek to tackle more complex villains and dynamic emotions, he must prove worthy of audience support and sympathy against Lord Farquaad.

Prince Charming

Prince Charming opens the second film, which mirrors the point of entry of the first film. An unknown voice narrates the storybook as it magically turns the pages, displaying medievaesque illuminations that give away more information about Fiona's curse. The last page, an illustration of a knight on a white horse, starts to move, which is matched by a knight in real time moving through the forest. This is Prince Charming's side of the rescue story. The phrase, heavy with imagery, "Through blistering cold and scorching desert" becomes his tagline, his claim to fame. He continues to narrate as he approaches the castle we know once kept Fiona.

The camera flips, putting Charming's face in the frame. We realize he is narrating the rescue as though he were still reading the fairytale book while performing the rescue. Unlike Donkey, and even Shrek, Charming has no reservations about the dragon; he knows based on prior literature he is destined to find the princess. He takes his hair out of a hairnet, which prevents him from having helmet hair. He freshens his breathe with a bottle that came out of

nowhere. The audience has never before witnessed the work that goes into the performance of being the Prince Charming (the hairnet, the tagline, the breath freshener).

Charming, with his good looks, nice hair, and normal height, is physically a viable option to be the hero, however, his viability is undercut by his performance, or lack thereof, of masculinity. In *Shrek 2*, his childish tendencies make him appear immature, and a pawn of his mother's (Fairy Godmother) in her attempt to grab power. He orders a "medieval meal" at Friar's Fat Boys, wearing a Burger King-like crown in the back of the magical carriage during the grown-up conversation between Godmother and Harold about why Charming should be married to Fiona, not Shrek. He repeatedly whines, "mummy," and feels he is "deserving" of the princess because he performed the part of the hero, enduring, again, "blistering cold and scorching desert." In the fairytale world of Disney, even in that of Perrault, the Grimms, and Hans Christian Andersen, the act of performing the role would be enough. But, he is not as fast as Shrek. He whines and moans, saying he did not get "what he deserves," which means both Fiona and control of the kingdom (in Fairy Godmother's stead). He is obsessed with his looks, his "golden locks," and wears lip balm, "cherry flavored." Shrek never cares about his looks or what he "deserves" based on a book. He acts in the interest of Fiona rather than himself. Charming, wrapped up in his own interests, in his looks, in his "deserved" place in the narrative, is further emasculated and thus unable to fulfill the true hero role. The façade he presents, rather, places him as the False Hero.

Charming, by the third movie, has proven to be the foil to Fiona's character. While Fiona is able to accept her disruptive role, herself, and her relationship, Charming is not. *Shrek the Third* is Charming's last-ditch effort to assert his "classical role" on the story. Since he was incapable of marrying the princess in the second movie, he strives to successfully overcome the

initial obstacle in service of his role as “prince.” The obstacle is no longer a dragon. The obstacle is, and always has been, Shrek.

The movie begins with Charming appearing to be riding through the forest on his horse, much like the opening of the second film. The camera pulls out to a wide shot to show that Charming performing in a “dinner theatre” setting. Immediately, he is painted as a fraud, unsuccessful, condemned to performing for others in a show of his own creation. During the spectacle, Charming plays the hero he was meant to be, the hero that aligns with the story he narrated at the opening of the second film. He reaches the makeshift wooden tower, and the actress announces, “Hark! The brave Prince Charming approacheth,” emphasizing the medieval dialect. Another actor in a sub-par costume, donning a cubic green head with ears that stick out, unconvincing plays the part of Shrek. Shrek is the obstacle to the princess rather than the famed purple dragon of the first film. Charming does not even have the chance to fight the actor, because the audience cheers as soon as actor Shrek steps on stage. Charming moves to kill the ogre when a waiter crosses through the lower third of the screen, loudly singing “Happy Birthday.” Charming exclaims, “Do you mind?!” and Gingy yells back, “Do *you* mind? Boring!” Charming coughs, bringing himself back into the performance, just before the shoddy wooden tower falls down on him, the window cut-out saving him from certain injury. The audience erupts in laughter. The first two minutes of the film successfully plant Charming’s ultimate demise (at the end of the film, he is crushed by an actual tower constructed for his final performance), and establish him as the false hero. Much like Sisyphus, he is doomed to perform his role repeatedly without any tangible result.

His downfall stems from his inability to accept that the “hero/prince” function was never to be the role he was meant to fulfill. Once Charming realizes he will not get to rule the kingdom

and defeat Shrek via conventional “hero” means, he turns to the unconventional; he gets help from villains of various stories. His desire remains the same: slay the proverbial dragon and assume his “rightful place,” but he ropes other villains into his plans by promising them recognition and redemption for their efforts. Once he has gained control of Far Far Away, in the climax of the film, Charming attempts to kill the real Shrek as part of his final performance of his musical before he assumes the throne. He enters into the new version of his musical, now with a much higher production value, in a clamshell, singing how he is “strong, and brave, and dashing my way there [to the princess in the tower].” His villainous accomplices join as either part of the choral accompaniment, or as crewmembers moving set pieces and adjusting lights. His control of the scene is first undermined by Shrek. Charming poorly sings at the top of his register, “You’re about to enter a world of pain with which you are not familiar,” the same line that preceded the flop of his performance which opened the film. His singing causes several glasses to shatter. Shrek rolls his eyes and comments, “Well it can’t be any more painful than the lousy performance you’re giving.” The audience, again, erupts in laughter.

Shrek buys himself enough time for his friends and Fiona and the loyal princesses to arrive, quickly followed by Artie. Artie is able to get the villains to lay down their weapons through a speech, stating, “You’re telling me you just want to be villains your whole lives?” The Evil Enchanted Trees from *Snow White*, named Steve and Ed, argue, “It’s hard to come by honest work when the whole world’s against you.” But Artie recites the lesson Shrek has learned over the course of two films, hoping to inspire the villains, “A good friend of mine [here, he refers to Shrek] once told me just because people treat you like a villain, or an ogre... doesn’t mean you are one. The thing that matters most is what you think of yourself.” Here, Artie is able to gain the allegiance of the villains in changing their worldview. While Charming chose to cater

to their “classical” roles as magical obstacles or villains, Artie clues them in to the power of subversion; that just because one person determined a certain character is meant to fulfill a certain role, does not mean this convention needs to be upheld. Prince Charming fails to accept this, refusing to give up; he tries to stab Shrek with his sword and misses. Dragon topples the very real tower on top of him, and his falsely earned crown rolls until it is stopped by Artie’s foot. Artie puts on the crown, and rightfully assumes the power Charming sought.

Fairy Godmother

Fairy Godmother is the most powerful character because her power is established well before the timeline of the second movie, and her influence continues even into the third movie. She is painted as a force that kicked off the events that lead to the plot of the first movie. She is the one who planted the idea in Harold and Lillian’s heads of what is best for Fiona, what it means to become and to be a princess. In her diary, Fiona writes, “Mom says when I’m old enough, my Handsome Prince Charming will rescue me from my tower and bring me back to my family.” She was put in a tower as part of the rescue arc that she according to Fairy Godmother, had to participate in to rid herself of the curse. The curse placed on Fiona by an unidentified witch goes, “By night one way/By day another/This shall be the norm/Until you find true love's first kiss/And take love's true form.” There is speculation that Fiona may have been cursed by Fairy Godmother, but no information in the film definitively indicates as such. The power she holds over Fiona’s parents is demonstrated in the film mostly through Harold. Fairy Godmother was involved in his “happily ever after,” which involved turning him (once the frog prince) into a real person. Harold, at first presented as an unaccepting, angry father figure towards Shrek, crumbles in the next scene before Fairy Godmother, who orders fast-food while threatening

Harold to make sure Fiona ends with her son, Prince Charming. Her established magical and political power within the context of the universe, past and present, is evident in the first act of the film.

Physically, Fairy Godmother is a new interpretation of the fairy godmother from Disney's *Cinderella*. In *Cinderella*, the fairy godmother is heavily cloaked in a blue dress and hooded cape with billowing sleeves. She carries a small magic wand. Her face is gentle, and she has a grandmotherly demeanor. She wants to help Cinderella as much as she can, but knows the girl must make some mistakes on her own. She is a mentor and magical donor figure with only good intentions throughout the film. Meanwhile, Fairy Godmother in *Shrek 2* alters that image into a character with more sex appeal and business prowess. She attempts to occupy a mentor role to Fiona, visiting her room at the beginning of the film, because this is how she maintains her political influence. She adds sex appeal to this mentor function as a marketing agent, outfitting herself in a bright red dress, as this is what comes with the traditional "Happily Ever After" product curated by Fairy Godmother herself. Fairy Godmother undercuts this traditional grandmotherly godmother image by revamping it to maximize financial and political gain.

But there are as many layers to the Fairy Godmother as there are to ogres. She is the personification of the Disney fairytale empire, packaging the concept of the "fairytale ending" into something that can be mass produced, bought and sold in an industrial fashion. Our very first impression of the Fairy Godmother is not in person, but rather on a giant billboard that Shrek spots on his way into Far Far Away. Fairy Godmother poses in a red dress, lying across the length of the board. The sign says, "For all your Happily Ever Afters; Fairy Godmother," much in the advertising style of Disney itself. She markets herself like Disney because she holds the same power Disney does, both economically and culturally. She determines what is deviant

and what is the norm in fairytale society. She perpetuates the Disney ideals in *Far Far Away*. They are imposed upon Shrek as much as they are imposed upon Fiona's parents. When Shrek breaks into the factory to meet with Fairy Godmother, seeking to make Fiona happy, Fairy Godmother explains to Shrek how the fairytale world works. She pulls book after book, fairytale after fairytale from the shelf of her colossal library. *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*. She ends each tale concluding, "no ogres." She explains, "You see, ogres don't live happily ever after." She presents this as definitive fact, as an immutable consequence of the fairytale narrative; the ogre, the creature, the obstacle, does not get the hero's ending because she has determined this to be the case. It is clear that she has always had the most control over the narrative.

Fairytale Settings: Duloc, Far Far Away, Worcestershire

Shrek revolves around one main location, Duloc, which is never mentioned in any of its sequels. That is because Duloc, much like its unrecognized ruler Lord Farquaad, is a superficial facsimile of Disneyland. Upon arrival, Shrek and Donkey's first obstacle is entering the kingdom. They are blocked by velvet ropes that lead up to turnstiles, much like the amusement park. Shrek, in a poignant commentary on the film's disregard for Disney's conventions, calmly walks through while a man dressed in a Lord Farquaad costume screams and runs through the maze of rope. Inside, Duloc has a garden modeled after Lord Farquaad's face, much like the famous garden curated to look like Mickey Mouse's face. Streets and stores devoid of people, all at the tournament, are full of Lord Farquaad merchandise, such as stuffed Lord Farquaad heads (a commentary on the size of Lord Farquaad's ego, as compared to his stature). A small animatronic show introduces the kingdom with a song to the modulated tune of "It's a Small

World.” The extent of Duloc’s layered meaning lies in its heavy-handed references to Disneyland. While it has little meaning in the myth of the world of *Shrek*, to the audience, everything that occurs in Duloc is a reflection of the conventions of Disney. It is more than just another fairytale kingdom; Duloc humorously embodies the power of the commodified magical realm. The audience immediately feels comfortable in this world, many being familiar with the suffocating atmosphere of “magic” within Disneyland and Disneyworld. Therefore, it is even more comical when Shrek and Donkey enter and react to these elements that are completely unfamiliar to them, but all too familiar to the audience.

Duloc acts as the test case, the guinea pig in producing a kingdom with a more extensive mythology attached to it, such as Far Far Away. The people of Duloc, much like its leader, are one-dimensional. They are a vague guideline by which the audience can gauge the characters’ moral alignment. For example, when Shrek is named “champion,” everyone cheers, even if they were just horrified by the thought of an ogre appearing in their midst. Shrek is initially off-putting to the viewer, but through both getting to know and understand Shrek, as well as through feedback from within the film itself, we garner more sympathy for Shrek. Duloc and its people serve that function throughout the first film. At the very end, Thelonious (Lord Farquaad’s torturer and right-hand knight) cues the people between laughing and clapping during Fiona and Farquaad marriage ceremony. They are horrified at Shrek’s intrusion; one woman faints after Fiona becomes an ogre at sunset. But after Dragon eats Lord Farquaad while the guards hold Shrek and Fiona back, they breathe a sigh of relief. They cheer after Donkey breaks the tension, “Celebrity marriages, they never last, do they?” After Shrek and Fiona confess their love for one another, Thelonious creates an “Aawww” sign, and the kingdom responds in kind. Duloc reflects the whirlwind of emotions the audience experiences during the darkest hour of the film, cuing

the audience (comprised heavily of children) into acknowledging the disruption of the hero of the story.

Far Far Away is directly linked to myth and tradition that precedes the events of either *Shrek* or *Shrek 2*. Far Far Away also has opportunity for redemption; Far Far Away is the kingdom capable of reformation, with a populous that exists on a spectrum of acceptance rather than confined to the shallow, one-dimensional capacity of Duloc. Far Far Away exhibits the preferences indicated by the ruling party. Fairy Godmother planted a specific idea of what it means to be a king, a queen, and a princess into the heads of Lillian and Harold. They accepted it, this becomes the norm for all. The subjects are just as surprised as Lillian and Harold when Fiona and Shrek exit their onion carriage onto the red carpet. But, by the end of the film, because Lillian, Harold, and Fiona are able to accept themselves and Shrek, as well as destroy Fairy Godmother, the tides of change ripple through the rest of Far Far Away as a result. Shrek is accepted in his ogre form over his human form; it is no longer up for debate whether he is a viable option for the hero/prince role in the universe. By *Shrek the Third*, Shrek is a known royal entity; no one questions his presence as a stand-in ruler, or at his father-in-law's funeral. At the end of the film, in Shrek's darkest hour where he is forced to "perform" in Charming's musical, still some locals come out with "SHREK" painted across their chests. The people love Shrek, the people of Far Far Away root for Shrek as much as the audience does. The audience, in turn, receives positive feedback on their allegiance to Shrek.

However, in Worcestershire, ogres and fairytale creatures have not been widely accepted. This town represents the folklore aspects of Western canon with a British name that would easily be found in a story about King Arthur, yet is funny in that the town shares the name with the popular Worcestershire sauce. In this place, people still scream when they see Shrek, the youth

exclaim “ew-eth” in the medieval/modern crossover dialect found in Fiona’s performance in the first film. This tells us there is more work to be done in the larger world in terms of accepting disruptive fairytales, and perhaps gives Artie purpose going forward in this reign. It is important that the film recognizes the youth are the fastest to accept the subversive representations. By the end of Shrek’s time in the Worcestershire, the same “mean girl” that came up to Shrek earlier is now asking him out in her friend’s stead.

The people of the fictitious kingdoms in *Shrek* and its sequels serve as a guide, a moral compass, in shaping and reinforcing the diverse audience’s allegiance for or against certain characters. Specifically, they reinforce Shrek and Fiona as the heroes of the films, while helping us gauge the success and failures of the villain, be it Lord Farquaad, Fairy Godmother, or Prince Charming.

Conclusion

The subversive elements of Shrek manifest in how the characters of the series perform their “classical” roles as compared to their new, subversive ones, aided by feedback from the world at large. Throughout the first film, Shrek learns to balance the role of “ogre/obstacle” and the role of “hero,” and he succeeds using humor and expressing complex emotion. Inversely, Fiona undercut the role of “princess/heroine” from the inside out. She began the film as a princess under the control of her parents, an object to be earned in the narrative of recognizing Charming as king of Far Far Away. But Fiona, unlike the “classical” princess, takes control of her own destiny, even going against her parents to fulfill her desires. She is an agent of change rather than an object of affections.

Lord Farquaad is one-dimensional, fueled by a superficial desire for power, and thus unworthy of the role of the hero, which he physically is qualified to fulfill. Charming, meanwhile, unsuccessfully performs masculinity and refuses to adapt in a world that thrives on change (the song “Changes” by Butterfly Boucher featuring David Bowie is on the soundtrack for *Shrek 2*, and accompanies the scene following Shrek’s physical transformation into a human). Fairy Godmother and her worldview directly contradict that of Shrek: she seeks to maintain the power she earned through a economic means as Shrek, in trying to achieve acceptance, disrupts the world she has built.

Such a large endeavor would not be successful without humorous references to movies, television, Hollywood culture that the audience knows, as well as guiding feedback from the spectators to the events present in the diegesis of the film: the loyal subjects and citizens of Duloc, Far Far Away, and the high school cliques of Worcestershire. These elements guide viewers young and old alike through the intricate process of dismantling audience expectations in regards to the main characters, who remain true to themselves, but if not to the “classical” roles they would have been assigned.

Shrek and its sequels are a study in how performance functions in establishing the audience’s expectations for certain archetypes, from the hero, to the ogre, to the princess, and the villain. In exposing the performance, in making the audience aware of what qualities and acts are associated with the performance, the films are able to subvert and then, eventually, completely alter our expectations within the cinematic universe and beyond.

DISCUSSION

“No Ogres:” Subversive Characters within a Conformative Structure

The skeleton of the plot and the functions of the characters are in no way disruptive, but ultimately that enhances the subversive elements of the characters themselves. *Shrek* and its sequels insert a new type of person into an established archetype: ogres take the place of heroes and heroines; princes and fairy godmothers take the place of villains. Over the course of the 20th century, Disney insisted upon a hygienic, curated, dutiful hero and an inherently evil, dirty, often vengeful villain. *Shrek* subverts these preconceived notions about certain characters within the confines of a conformative plot structure, aided by cutting humor.

Conformative Structure and Comedy. The events of the *Shrek* films follow the Propp’s fairytale story structure, composed of 31 total functions, which I discussed in my introductory section. Propp argues that most or all of these functions, whether presented sequentially or not, can be applied to nearly every fairytale story. Murphy applied this theory to Perrault’s *Cinderella*, and I have elected to do the same with the plot of *Shrek* (2015, pp. 34-50). I found that *Shrek* closely follows the Proppian framework, and in contrast with its character and production choices, makes no attempt at subversion on the level of plot structure. Here, I apply Propp’s model to the plot of *Shrek*:

1. Preparation: Shrek is alone, but happy in his swamp. Lord Farquaad is rounding up fairytale creatures.
2. Complication: Lord Farquaad sends creatures to Shrek’s swamp for bullying his knights, and so Shrek desires to have his swamp back (en route to Lord Farquaad, Shrek’s hidden desire for someone to understand his complexity is made explicit; “ogres are like onions”).
3. Transference/Donation: Shrek goes to rescue Fiona, and they become acquainted on his way to give her to Lord Farquaad. Shrek’s understanding of Fiona’s ogre transformation curse is tested, and he fails. Shrek believes Fiona thinks him ugly, when in reality, this is how she sees herself in ogre form.
4. Struggle: Shrek fast-tracks Fiona’s return to Lord Farquaad by bringing him to their camp. He is victorious: he has completed the task, and so –

5. Liquidation of Desire: Lord Farquaad hands Shrek the deed to his swamp. He has completed the initial goal of his quest.
6. Return: Shrek returns to the swamp. Donkey makes him realize his love for Fiona satisfies his hidden desire (emotional connection). Shrek sets out to stop the wedding.
7. Recognition: Shrek crashes the wedding, unwelcome. Lord Farquaad asserts he is meant to be king. Shrek's love for Fiona is exposed, and she is magically transformed into "true love's form:" an ogre. Lord Farquaad's superficiality and hunger for power are exposed, and he is eaten by Dragon. Shrek and Fiona marry happily ever after.

The plot of *Shrek* is succinct and intentional. That is, all the events that occur throughout the film serve to push the plot along the structure outlined above. The pacing of the film never falters. There is neither time nor sufficient motivation to deviate from this sequence of events, a structure that shares striking similarities with the three-act structure, another structure commonly associated with the hero's journey. The subversive elements of the series are found in the *dramatis personae*. In this summary, I will include characters across the three films analyzed.

1. Villain: Lord Farquaad (1), Fairy Godmother (2), Prince Charming (3).
2. Donor: Fairy Godmother (Arguably, 1, 2, and 3).
3. Princess/Her Parents: Fiona (1, 2, 3); Harold and Lillian (2, 3). Usually only the Father is living/of importance in fairytales, but Lillian plays a remarkably important role in *Shrek 2* and *Shrek the Third*.
4. Dispatcher: Lord Farquaad (1), King Harold/Shrek (2, 3). No one directly "dispatches" Shrek on the quest in either sequel, rather he elects to go.
5. False Hero: Prince Charming (2, 3).
6. Hero: Shrek (1, 2, 3), Artie (Harold's only other heir to the throne in 3, besides Shrek).

Making the plot subversive in some form, especially considering this movie is targeted towards children, would have several negative impacts on the series. It would have taken away from the disruptive elements of the *dramatis personae*. The plot structure is a familiar concept that gives the audience space to adjust to the unfamiliar moral alignment of certain characters. Many members of the audience for these films, especially the younger audience, grew up watching 20th century Disney films and have attached expectations to certain visual cues. A

monster, an ogre, presents an obstacle to be overcome by the protagonist. A fairy godmother introduces helpful magical elements. A prince, with a cape, a sword, and a “noble steed,” will overcome the obstacles to save the princess. A princess “assumes the position” (as the princesses in *Shrek the Third* do not hesitate to do), dutifully awaiting the rescue of her true love. The order of these events, in a Disney film as much as *Shrek*, is reliably predictable. The order of the events must be predictable to ensure the comprehension of the plot for an audience thrown into a “whirlwind adventure,” as Donkey says, where every character is either new or altered in some way, and to enhance the dramatic subversion of the Transformation function at the end of the film. Fiona, the one character in the first film who, at least seemingly, physically aligns with audience expectations of a princess, ends up magically transforming into the very permanent “true love’s form:” an ogre, rather than a “princess.” Conforming to a conventional plot structure is the anchor that allows the audience to adjust to a new world, with new rules and new characters, a tradition that continues through the next two sequels.

Further, adhering to a more traditional plot structure is another grounding use of self-referential comedy. As much as it gives the audience a familiar context to orient themselves within a quickly changing fairytale world, the juxtaposition between the plot and the cast of characters enacting these events is another layer to the self-referential humor present throughout the films. For example, the second obstacle Shrek encounters in the journey to get his swamp back is that he must slay the dragon. This scene in its “classical” context serves one purpose: prove the hero is worthy of the princess by eliminating the obstacle that separates them. *Shrek* conforms to the conventional structure of this common scene. The hero arrives, fairly confident in their ability to accomplish two goals: remove the obstacle and acquire the princess. They struggle, but manage to do both of these and escape with the object of their desire: the princess.

The hero proves themselves to the audience as worthy. In the *Shrek* series, many layers are added to this scene. Even though the sequence of events and purpose of the scene remain the same, the execution is not. The stakes of this scene are higher because Shrek has proved his strength in the tournament against the other knights of Duloc, but he has never been pitted against another non-human creature as strong as himself. This is the scene in the very beginning of his quest to gain his swamp back that establishes the audience's allegiance with Shrek as the hero of the tale, even though he is an ogre. An unconventional character calls for clever, unconventional means. Shrek swaggers into the castle, despite Donkey's reservations after his traumatizing experience crossing the rickety bridge and seeing the skeleton of a deceased knight. He does not find the princess; instead, he is tossed by Dragon into the highest room in the tallest tower, where he falls through the ceiling into Fiona's chambers. She harbors the expectation he will kiss her, that they will share a "romantic moment", but this never comes to pass. Shrek exposes her expectations as specific and even lofty, "You've had a lot of time to plan this, haven't you?" On their way out of the castle, Shrek never actually slays the dragon, just traps her using a chandelier. Shrek, Donkey, and Fiona, to the tune of the original score of the film, successfully escape the Dragon's keep.

This scene, now a key piece of *Shrek* canonical knowledge, becomes even funnier when *Shrek 2* recycles Dragon's tower to introduce Prince Charming. Shrek has already performed the "slay the dragon" function of the hero in the first film, and now we find a character who looks and expects to perform the part of hero, narrating the story of his going to slay the dragon as he does it. The audience is already in on the joke; they know Shrek has already been here, done that, and there will be nothing for Prince Charming to find. This small sequence perfectly opens the second movie, which seeks to expand and build upon the layered world Shrek exists in. It does

this by expounding on this scene in particular, which is now well-known in its original context as well as its successfully subversive one. The same sequence is reproduced with the same conditions: a possible hero seeking to prove himself by rescuing the princess from the dragon's keep. However, *Shrek 2* presents the physical embodiment of the hero that the audience expected in the first film: the handsome, dashing prince character, but unlike Shrek, the motivation to prove his worth is not earned. This time, the audience is privy to information that the character on screen is not; there is nothing for this character to achieve here, since the dragon has already been "slayed," and the princess rescued, in every sense of the word. It is necessary that the "slay the dragon" scene structurally conforms to fairytale convention, but it is subversive in every other way, and this juxtaposition is inherently funnier. It becomes funnier when this scene adds another self-referential layer in the opening of the second film; Charming returns to this place trying to conventionally perform this crucial scene, but is unsuccessful because Shrek has already done it. The fact that the ogre slayed the dragon is funny; the fact that the ideal-looking hero is unable to slay the dragon because the ogre did it first is even funnier and very clever.

If the plot structure were disruptive, Shrek would not have made the cultural impact that it did. I could explore the hypotheticals, such as situation where hero Shrek is unsuccessful in the end, or where Fiona only takes one physical form and undergoes no transformation, or where one of the arrays of villains turns out to be, in a modern twist, a sort of anti-hero. But ultimately, these situations would have left a very different impact than the actual source, as they would be incomparable to the Disney narrative structure the films successfully undercut.

Subversive Characters. At the most superficial level, the moral of the films is that anyone can achieve a "happily ever after." The goal of the film is to overcome, on screen, these institutionalized concepts of who is entitled to such a goal, in hopes that alternative tales can be

as revered as highly as the “classical” ones. Happy endings are not to be limited to a select group of people with particular qualities, as Fairy Godmother would have us believe. Rather, anybody, even an ogre, can fulfill the “hero” function of a fairytale, as long as their intentions are true.

These subverted characters are placed within a conformative structure often used by both the “classical” authors as well as Disney. In turn, the cultural norms and expectations impressed upon the structure by Disney are exposed as the audience is forced to reflect on exactly why they find it bizarre an ogre would function as the hero of a tale. Disney has constructed an image of what a hero looks like, how they act, and what qualities they have, curating a very specific image that was (and still is) presented to the audiences of the 20th century time and time again. As Fairy Godmother says in the second film, “no ogres” are to be found getting their happily ever after. No character remotely like Shrek fulfills the hero function in a 20th century Disney narrative. *Shrek* squeezes a big, green, sarcastic, loud, ogre into a role foreign to this character, juxtaposing Disney’s idea of the “hero” in the most exaggerated fashion possible. Even when Shrek is physically morphed into the ideal Disney prince in the second film, his ogre-esque qualities are still present, as Donkey notes, “Inside, you’re still the same old, mean...cantankerous, foul, angry ogre you’ve always been.” As we garner sympathy and allegiance towards Shrek and his friends, a question is raised: Who is truly fit to function as a hero? *Shrek*, and, to an extent its sequels, answer: Anyone who acts in the name of passion and love, regardless of looks or qualities.

Meanwhile, Princess Fiona, a heroine in her own right, disrupts our expectations of the princess time and time again throughout the film. Like many other princesses, she is introduced from an objectified perspective: through the eyes of the magic mirror and Lord Farquaad. She has no input on her rescue; she is subject to the brave hero who finds her first. As addressed in

the previous section, Fiona harbors these passive, obedient, romantic expectations for herself as a princess, which the audience learns in *Shrek 2* was heavily influenced by her mother and, in turn, Fairy Godmother. She undercuts these personal attributes through codeswitching and her own cutting wit, but also proves her sense of physical agency. She repeatedly uses her combat abilities to handle situations: she matrix-kicks Robin Hood's merry men, she headbutts Prince Charming pretending to Shrek, and she breaks out of prison to wage war against Charming's villain army. At the end of the first movie, Fiona permanently transforms into an ogre, subverting the traditional events of transformation, which typically asserts an image of conventional beauty. This physical transformation is the grand symbolic gesture of the series that makes its intentions clear. Fiona is perfectly capable of fulfilling the role of princess and heroine, but she does not follow the "classical" conventions of that role: she is powerful, loud, and smart. In *Shrek the Third*, she not only embraces her sense of agency, but encourages other princesses to embrace theirs.

While *Shrek* alludes to Duloc and Lord Farquaad representing Disneyland and Mickey Mouse, in *Shrek 2*, Fairy Godmother actively villainizes not only Disney properties, but Disney's intent. Our expectations are undercut twofold with Fairy Godmother. She appears like same helpful, grandmotherly fairy godmother that Cinderella has, yet she is duplicitous. Her intent is to sabotage Shrek and Fiona's happiness in order to make her son, Prince Charming, happy. She turns the good, "magical donor" character into a vengeful villain. On another level, Fairy Godmother disrupts our allegorical expectations of the villain. While a villain often reflects an antagonistic force found in the real world, Fairy Godmother is a commentary on the institution that reinforces certain expectations in fairytale media content, namely Disney. A construct and

image curated by Disney, the omnipotent, magical Fairy Godmother figure, is repurposed to critique a similar socioeconomic power that Disney maintains in Western society.

Fairy Godmother's business card, used to directly contact Fairy Godmother herself, reads, "Happiness is Just a Teardrop Away." A fallen tear on the card will summon Fairy Godmother or her away message service, which gives direction to a seemingly private, nondescript cottage in the woods. When Shrek arrives at the small cottage pictured in the away message bubble, it turns out the cottage was only a fraction of the entire picture: it is attached to a huge factory with multi-colored steam rising, accompanied by factory clanks and blaring horns. It is a fitting visual metaphor for comparing the face of Disney to the actual operations of the company. Disneyland's motto, for example, is "The Happiest Place on Earth." Disney's theme parks, hordes of animated features and shorts, then further merchandising and adjacent products are all branded and marketed as products of stories, products of happiness, and products of magic. This is first reflected in the one-dimensional capacity of the Disneyland-like kingdom of Duloc, whose leader uses these techniques to assert his power in the kingdom. Fairy Godmother expands this power in *Far Far Away*, linking the concepts of commodity with sociocultural influence.

Fairy Godmother is a powerful metaphor for the Disney Company because the film *Shrek 2* maintains that her sociocultural power is linked to her economic and magical powers. She has indirect control over *Far Far Away* because she has control over one of Fiona's parents: King Harold. King Harold is not only a reference to the Frog Prince story, but was once the Frog Prince himself. Fairy Godmother was instrumental in ensuring his Happily Forever After with Lillian, Fiona's mother; therefore he owes her a great debt, which she plans to have repaid in the form of her son's own Happily Forever After with their daughter. It is unclear when Fairy

Godmother established herself, but based on the fact that she has a firm grasp on her magical abilities, her billboards, business cards, and large factory, she has held this political and economic position of power in Far Far Away for some time. Unlike the fairy godmothers of other tales, who turn pumpkins into carriages on the condition their recipient returns at midnight, Fairy Godmother of *Shrek 2* has warped this expectation into something she can systematically exploit. Later in the film, Harold tells her, “You can’t force someone to fall in love,” to which Fairy Godmother replies, “I beg to differ, I do it all the time.” She makes the character she chooses to help feel as though they are the main character in their own narrative, as though they have control over their own destiny, when in reality Fairy Godmother has orchestrated these scenarios time and time again, be it between Harold and Lillian or Prince Charming and Fiona. She does this in order to reinforce the status quo, these devised concepts of tradition and convention, and her power. Prince Charming, in his attempt to rise to power in *Shrek the Third*, perpetuates this relentless desire to return to the conventional structures and expectations of fairytale stories and “fulfill his destiny,” as projected onto him by the Fairy Godmother/Disney complex.

Rather than upheave all of the conventions of fairytale stories, *Shrek* selectively conforms to certain elements, namely a traditional plot structure and character functions, so that the characters that fulfill those functions can subvert the “classical” physical and personal attributes assigned by Disney to these roles. By doing so, *Shrek* reinforces the idea that the forces of good and evil are defined by intent, not by certain character traits.

Producing Subversive Content: A Technical Review

The *Shrek* franchise purposefully mobilizes production techniques in order to enhance the subversive qualities of the characters as well as those of the fairytale universe within the world, but it was not the first to do this. *Shrek* follows in the tradition of disruptive fairytales in films that dates back to the rise of the popularity of animation. Zipes argues that before even *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*, there was Tex Avery, who “was taking apart the traditional fairy tale and using motifs to delight audiences and unsettle the canonical tales” in pieces such as *Red Hot Riding Hood* (2011, pp. 28-29). In the short cartoon, as the narrator begins talking about the “mean, old wolf” waiting for Red in the forest, the world interrupts the narrator, breaking the fourth wall, “Oh stop it...it’s the same old story over and over. If you can’t do this thing a new way, bud, I quit!” Red and her grandmother start to do the same, yelling at the narrator until he yells, “Okay, okay, all right! We’ll do this story a new way,” and the cartoon launches into *Red Hot Riding Hood*, turning innocent, pastry-delivering Red into the star of the modern gentlemen’s club.

In the 1960s, the series *Fractured Fairytales*, as part of the animated cartoon series *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*, expounds on the concept of reorienting the viewer into seeing an old fairytale in a new light, and discusses Disney in particular. *Fractured Fairytales*, much like *Shrek*, always opens with a large tome opening up to the story of the week. The episode titled “Sleeping Beauty,” written by head writer Jay Ward, is of particular interest. The story begins with the traditional princess who is cursed to sleep until a prince arrives to kiss her. However, the prince, in this subversion of the tale, appears to be a caricature of Disney (who was still alive when *Fractured Fairytales* was airing). The prince, armed with his humorously large sword (not unlike Lord Farquaad, with his tall castle and theme park-like kingdom), decides to make

Sleeping Beauty into a commodity rather than save her. He opens up the castle to the public, rebranding the disjointed blue castle as “Sleeping Beauty Land”, and becomes obsessed with the profits. An *LA Times* reporter, in an article following Ward’s death, noted, “The common denominator of Ward’s cartoons was literate wit. Children could delight in the silliness and adults could guffaw in recognition of the clever double-entendre. Ward had a way of helping us remember that in humor the child and the adult merge” (“Jay Ward: Master Humorist,” 1989). *Fractured Fairytales* provided a short (a mere five-minute episode), experimental sort of “case study” that demonstrates how fairytale convention can be blended with caricature and satire on modern phenomena (namely, Disney’s rapid expansion) for successful comedic effect.

But to compete, and especially to critique the conventions of the Disney Company, *Shrek* had to uphold the tradition of highly produced content, from the writing, to the music, to the animation, “by the early 1930s the Disney Studio had become the dominant producer of fairytale cartoons using voiceovers, music, and Technicolor in stunning and adroit ways” (Zipes, 2011, p. 27). In *Shrek*, every character is funny and witty to an extent not found in virtually any Disney film, “Disney led the way in expanding personality animation to include melodrama...that high seriousness rarely left his work” (Zipes, 2011, p. 27). If anything, Disney is known for having short bursts of comedic relief, quick one-liners. Older Disney animation is known for its physical comedy gags (Zipes, 2011, p. 26). While some of the comedy in *Shrek* is visual, such as Lord Farquaad’s short stature, the majority of it is to be found in its inherent cleverness. When trying to break into Fairy Godmother’s factory in *Shrek 2*, without missing a beat, Shrek tells the receptionist he is, “from the Union...we represent the workers in all magical industries both evil and benign. Are you feeling at all degraded or oppressed?” The receptionist candidly responds, “Uh... a little. We don’t even have dental.” Shrek gives Donkey, in on the

joke, a pointed look and sighs, “They don’t even have dental.” There are many layers of humor present in this short exchange, the first being that the audience is, like Donkey, in on the gag: Shrek is not representing any sort of union, just using this as an excuse to waltz into the factory. Second, the idea that the fairytale world, traditionally rooted in monarchical structures, would be remotely concerned with its workers and their rights, is funny. A third layer: dental insurance. In the fairytale world, the desires of utmost importance are usually of the magical (potions, curses), or of the intangible. But this particularly agitated, French-accented elf is worried about his lack of dental insurance, a concern lifted directly from “our” world, the real world the film references but in which it does not exist.

The voice acting, as discussed in the overview of the reception of *Shrek*, is essential to the success of the film from a critical standpoint as well as a subversive one. Mike Myer’s performance of Shrek disrupts a long history of American-accented heroes. Disney is known for having heroes with an American accent positioned opposite villains with foreign accents. Even heroes who would geographically not have an American accent speak with one, such as Aladdin from *Aladdin*, who grew up in a fictional town in the Middle East called Agrabah, and John Smith from *Pocahontas*, an Englishman. Mike Myers, a Canadian, gives Shrek a Scottish accent because he “always thought Shrek was raised working-class. And since Lord Farquaad (the villain) was played English, I thought of Scottish...there is a class struggle in *Shrek* between the fairy-tale kings and queens and the common people” (Chorley, 2014). Shrek’s Scottish brogue represents a bridge between the ogre monsters of before with the verbal agency of a human hero. The stereotypical Giant or Ogre is presented as brutish, communicating its base needs with grunts and howls. While Shrek has his fair share of roars, from scaring the villagers in the beginning of the first movie to often yelling in frustration throughout the rest of the series, Shrek

is able to verbally communicate basic feelings, such as pain when Fiona pulls an arrow out of his body, “Ow! Hey! Easy with the yankin’” as well as express deeper desires and complex emotion, such as when he tells Fiona, “I love you, too.” The guttural timbre of his Scottish accent constantly reminds the audience of his ogre nature, his non-human status. His ability to speak perfect English, as well as to develop and express complex emotion, illustrates that he is able to overcome obstacles related to his ogre/monster status, thus foreshadowing his overall disruption of the narrative.

The use of music in *Shrek* marks one of the biggest departures from Disney from a production standpoint. The entire series uses a blend of pop/pop-rock tracks and original score throughout the films. The music contrasts with the fairytale atmosphere curated by the visual elements of the movie, such as the creatures, the forests, kingdoms full of peasants and knights. The pop soundscape on top of this world is jarring, as the audience is used to hearing the characters explicitly detail their actions and desires through a catchy melody. This juxtaposition consistently reminds the audience that this world is not the typical magical fairytale world. Besides Fairy Godmother (a symbol of Disney and its influence), no character sings an original song except Donkey, who sings quite frequently, but only sings bits of pop songs. Fiona tries to sing and makes a bird explode, foreshadowing her inability to conform to the “classical” idea of a princess. *Shrek* relies on these pop songs to set the tone of the opening montage of Shrek enjoying the swamp, the travelling montage from Duloc to the castle, and the montage sequence where Shrek and Fiona start getting along and falling in love. Such moments in a Disney film would be represented in a choreographed musical number, such as the dwarves’ song in *Snow White* “Heigh-ho,” which audibly and visually makes the insignificant journey from home to work, and work to home, an highly coordinated affair.

Meanwhile, the two moments where Fairy Godmother sings in *Shrek 2* are used to establish and assert her power, much like the effect of a catchy Disney musical soundtrack. Fairy Godmother, however, uses song in Fiona's first meeting with her to establish her omnipotence, much in the style of the Disney fairy godmother. She sings, "I know what every princess needs, for her to live life happily." She continues to enforce the "classical" elements, be it desires or qualities, of a fairytale princess. She sings about a Fairy Godmother's magical abilities knowing no bounds, and about how she is able to give her princesses anything, including "A high priced dress made by mice no less, some crystal glass pumps and no more stress..." This is the only song in the films performed in the style of a Disney musical song, with a whimsical melody aided by magical visuals. The second song performed by Fairy Godmother combines the diegetic nature of Disney songs with Shrek's use of popular pop tracks. She sings a cover of Bonnie Tyler's "Holding Out for a Hero," an 80s power ballad that perfectly sums up both Fairy Godmother's desire for Fiona to "hold out for" Prince Charming and the audience's knowledge that the true hero, Shrek, is on his way. She stalls for time, waiting for the "proper" hero to be recognized as such (Fiona kisses Charming, under a potion), but the audience has different expectations, as synchronously, our true hero Shrek (with the help of Mongo, the gigantic gingerbread man) works to disrupt the celebration. In performing a song that would traditionally be non-diegetic music in the Shrek universe during the climax of the film, Fairy Godmother reasserts her "classical" power and influence over the subversive world of Shrek; in her mind, she inserts her vision of the fairytale narrative ending back into this backwards world. This is, of course, interrupted by Shrek barging into the party as Fairy Godmother says the last line of the song, "I need a hero", much like his disruption of Fiona and Lord Farquaad's wedding.

Fairy Godmother is the only character to sing in the second film, and Charming attempts to assume that responsibility in the third film, a sign of his allegiance to her embrace of fairytale convention. However, Charming is a horrendous singer. The audience cringes as he sings; he breaks multiple glasses during his final performance with Shrek on stage. Whereas Fairy Godmother is successful in functioning as a villain, while presenting this outer façade of magical helper, Charming is doomed from the start, demonstrated by his inability to both perform masculinity and sing, two essential qualities in Disney's hero/prince. Music and musical ability are honed and earned as skills for original characters in the *Shrek* universe. Snow White uses her ability to sing to harness the power of woodland creatures against Charming and his army of villains. Snow White took a skill that was used to mark her femininity in the 1938 film and subverted its intention, using it in *Shrek the Third* as a formidable weapon. The pop selection, original score and song, and purposeful mobilization of music as a subversive technique not only supplements the top tier dialogue, but is powerful in its own right.

The *Shrek* films paved the way for mass commercial success of other films like it, such as *Hoodwinked!* and *Ella Enchanted* by modeling what is possible for a children's animated film made with purposeful investment into its production. It is hard to imagine any of these subversive movies, fairytale-oriented or otherwise, would have even been pitched or even conceived, without the groundbreaking success of the subversive production techniques in the *Shrek* franchise.

The Business of *Shrek* and its Critique on Disney

Shrek critiques not only how Disney saturated and controlled the fairytale movie market from a cultural perspective, but also from an economic one. Throughout the 20th century, Disney virtually monopolized the market, laying legal claim to tales from *Snow White* to *Cinderella*. The animated movies have been packaged and distributed on a massive scale (VHS, Made-for-TV, DVD) in order to serve the Disney brand of creating and distributing happiness and magic. Disney made magic and happiness into an industrial product, just as Fairy Godmother does in *Shrek 2*. Today, Disney's fairytales are caught in this endless loop of repackaging. Remake after remake of fairytale films they have already animated are being produced. Some are physically repackaged as a live action films, as CGI technology has taken off, but repackaged with more modern culture relevance or modern sensitivity. Take, for example, the first Disney fairytale live-action remake, *Maleficent* (2014). Disney also remade *The Jungle Book*, *101 Dalmatians*, and *102 Dalmatians* around the turn of the century, but did not revisit this concept until the first *Alice in Wonderland* remake in 2010. The film opens with the lines, "Let us tell an old story anew, and we will see how well you know it." *Maleficent* tells the story of *Sleeping Beauty* from the perspective of the antagonist, making the villain of the original story more complex, perhaps, but as a *Variety* critic notes, "its reference points from the 1959 animated original feel more dutiful than inspired." While the company wants to appear as though it can keep up with sociocultural shifts, beyond updated content warnings on Disney+, it will never rectify or even acknowledge the harm it has caused by choosing to package and market certain people, qualities, and phenomenon as "magical" or "good," and condemning others as "evil." Some movies, particularly films that have been identified as having racially insensitive content, such as *Dumbo* and *The Aristocats*, include a lukewarm warning at the end of their description on Disney+.

“This program is presented as originally created. It may contain outdated cultural depictions.”

While it is a small step in the right direction, it fails to explicitly warn the audience about content outside of anything that is deemed outright racially insensitive. *Snow White's* description begins as follows: “Forever enchanting and inspiring, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs embodies The Walt Disney Signature Collection’s legacy of Animation.” No content warnings are provided for the princess without parents, “victimized by her wicked stepmother,” whose function in the story is to tend to the household needs of seven miners and await her prince to save her as she lies in her glass coffin (Maslin, 1987). The content warnings that do exist are a by-product of releasing the Disney “vault” to the public with the release of Disney+ streaming services on November 12th, 2019. Even after *Fairy Godmother*, in 2004, exposed Disney’s business model of selling magic and happiness for profit, it took until 2019 for the company to begin to acknowledge some of the more negative cultural phenomena it has perpetuated in its films in the pursuit of financial gain.

It is important to recognize that *Shrek* itself falls into this trap, capitalizing on its prominence in the market of alternative fairytales. *Shrek* was a hit, but *Shrek 2* doubled the profit of the first movie in the box office. One of the most prevalent critiques of *Shrek 3* is that nothing new comes to pass, yet DreamWorks still released a fourth film accompanied by an incredible amount of extraneous content (DVD bonus material, two spin-off television films and a series titled *The Adventures of Puss in Boots*). While not nearly impacting the market to the level Disney has, the *Shrek* franchise still dangerously leverages its reputation for forging new critical content in the pursuit of guaranteed financial benefit of following a formulaic, tried, and accepted approach.

Shrek and its sequels are movies that are about love, happiness and magic as much as any Disney movie, even as they implicitly critiques Disney's socioeconomic power. *Shrek* would not have been a good movie if it had been made from a place of hate, if it promoted a message of exclusively criticism and anger. Instead, *Shrek* the movie as well as the character, teaches us in a positive, entertaining manner to be critical of all the media we consume. It weaves reflexive off-handed comments and jokes into a plot that asks the audience to reflect on what makes *Shrek* different from the fairytales before it. It also teaches us success can be achieved through subverting and then reorienting the expectations of the viewer. In the third film, Fiona recruits classical Disney princess such as Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty to rescue themselves, to be proactive rather than reactive. She does not abandon them, but introduces them to this new strong, feminine vision of the world. These stories and characters do not need to be abandoned, since it is clear the universality of many of these tales has stood the test of time, but they do need to be reoriented based on modern cultural values.

In the age of the limitless platforms and streaming services, our eyes are worth more than ever before to advertisers, which means content is being held to a new standard. New risks are being taken. Representation of underrepresented groups and interests is rising and will hopefully skyrocket. We see subversive codeswitching akin to the medieval/modern codeswitching performed by Fiona in Apple+'s series *Dickinson*, where Emily Dickinson switches between modern vernacular and the linguistic conventions of Massachusetts in the 1800s. We see the demand for incredible voice talent rise in an age where CGI and animation have gained traction and now legitimacy as art forms. Cutting, dark, smart humor in television and film grabs the attention of the generation that grew up watching the *Shrek* movies.

Jack Zipes, in the book that sparked my theoretical research on fairytales, called *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairytale Films*, argues, “we might see the world around us with more insight if we took off our Disneyfied lenses” (2011, p. 30). *Shrek* is just one of many, many pieces that attempts to critique and dismantle the image of “magic” and “happiness” that Disney has curated since the 1920s. (Others include some of the works of Hayao Miyazaki and Michel Ocelot being among such pieces [Zipes, 2011, p. 30]). The process of breaking down and analyzing *Shrek*, *Shrek 2*, and *Shrek the Third*, while understanding the moving parts that make the film successful, including its individual characters, settings, the production value, and the writing, allow us to replicate this process. Producing a successful subversive piece is a delicate process, full of allegorical layers that must make sense on an individual level as much as they do when stacked on top of one another. A satiric work on fairytales, which at the same time critiques the narrative instilled into these stories by the Disney Company, is a very high-stakes venture. *Shrek* was a risk that came with a high reward from a financial standpoint, but also from a cultural one.

Shrek asks its audiences, of all ages, to be critical of everything they watch and hear. *Shrek* tells us that not everything is how it seems. *Shrek* asks us to keep an open mind, to be wary of accepting presentations and representations as immutable facts, as “how things should be,” as the end-all, be-all, even within its own universe. Fairytales are like onions: each allegorical and literal layer is to be examined and considered, but not always taken as a perfect reflection of Western society.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

I did not expect the amount of background research I would need to successfully orient and compile this content analysis. While nearly all of the research I gathered contributed in guiding my conclusions, as I had a very limited knowledge of fairytale and folklore theory outside of my French studies, it took time away from me being able to do an in-depth analysis of any of the influential side characters of *Shrek*, *Shrek 2*, and *Shrek the Third*, especially Donkey and Puss in Boots. I will explore some possible directions research on these characters in particular could take in the following section.

I performed a qualitative content analysis, and the methodology, the execution, and the choice of doing solely a content analysis comes with its own limitations, namely a bias in research organization and the scope of information that can be realistically drawn from research of this type. Being a team of one involved with coding and recording the pertinent examples drawn from the source material (a total of 4.5 hours of content over the course of the three movies, not including any bonus material, which was examined but not strictly within the scope of the argument), any inherent bias in the results is that of my own. I did not have anyone else involved in an official capacity in this endeavor with whom I could compare my research. Having another person involved could have easily changed the outlook of the results, and perhaps produced more nuanced conclusions.

A content analysis as method of research offers much in terms of discussion, questions, and hypothetical larger impact, but it often leads to more questions that it does answers. A content analysis cannot tell us the intent of the authors of the work and it cannot tell us about the work's impact, in either the short term or the long term. This first limitation I attempted to overcome by compiling information presented in the press on the films, but considering media's

own bias in light of the relationship between DreamWorks and Disney following Katzenberg's exit, it is unclear to what extent the information available is the complete truth. This will be expounded upon in the next section, but ultimately content analysis research can and often should be supplemented by other forms of research to tell us about the impact of a work like *Shrek*, a piece that informed nearly two generations of children.

I harbor my own bias in choosing to focus my research on a work that has personal significance to me. *Shrek* and its sequels are films I have always held in high regard, and so it was not always easy to critically examine them with a historical lens, a 21st century lens, or a feminist lens. In the same way, I recognize that I have been, at times, overly critical of Disney films, the Disney Company, and adjacent properties. From the beginning, I recognized such bias and attempted to stay as objective as possible regarding the intentions and impact of Disney and DreamWorks. Language was adjusted as necessary during the writing process, since, as critical as I am of stories, I am aware that as a storyteller myself, I too often take a complex, nuanced situation and paint it in within the confines of the moral binary.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As an avid fan of the *Shrek* series, the instrumental roles in the movies played by the characters designated to the “sidekick” roles never escaped me. These roles carry the bulk of the humor and comedic relief throughout the films, they reinforce our allegiance to the protagonists, and they discourage sympathy for the antagonists. The sidekicks, beginning with Donkey, then expanding in the sequels to characters such as Puss in Boots, Gingy, Pinocchio, the Three Pigs, the Three Blind Mice, and the Wolf, maintain the witty, comedic tone of the piece while helping Shrek and Fiona accomplish their goals. They are equally important in guiding the local subjects in accepting Shrek, cheering for the actor playing Shrek in the opening of *Shrek the Third* during Charming’s dinner theatre performance. Further, Donkey, voiced by Eddie Murphy, and Puss in Boots, voiced by Antonio Banderas, ask the critical viewer to assess the relationship between the sidekick role, race, and humor in children’s media in particular. *Shrek* is shown in this thesis to be, in many ways, a subversive piece of media. But, as a product of Hollywood, remains conformative to many expectations present in early 2000s media on the topic of racial representation.

From a more sociological angle, the literature and analysis compiled here would serve well in guiding research on how subversive fairytales, especially Shrek, have impacted the way the next generation thinks about fairytales, be it from the “classical authors,” or of older or newer Disney. What does the term “fairytale” mean to them, and are characters like Shrek now part of that rapidly changing tradition?

I had a conversation with Amy Rose, who was producing *Shrek the Musical* in Sudbury. While not always present during rehearsals, she often worked and spoke with the students involved with the production. A few of them were tasked to write a long scroll, the scroll listing

all the fairytale creatures that were to be banished from Duloc, and so they began to write down all of the fairytales they could think of. Mrs. Rose found their responses to be much different than she was expecting. The tales they wrote were nearly all recent Disney releases, such as *Frozen* and *Moana*. She had to prompt them to think of “older tales,” such as *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Hansel and Gretel*, etc. It is interesting to consider research on this information in both the short-term and long-term. In the short term, it would be interesting to explore how Disney, and perhaps other subversive fairytales, and “classical” fairytales are compared to one another in the minds of Generation Z. Will fairytales like *Snow White* and *Cinderella* always be considered classics? Or will these tales someday be considered stories of a by-gone time, labeled as “outdated cultural depictions?”

Finally, from an educational lens, *Shrek* warrants further research into how popular media, particularly Disney reimagining compared to their “classical,” could be incorporated into a media literacy curriculum in order to make it more interesting and engaging for all ages. *Shrek* and its sequels, in particular, ask the young viewer to reflect on some tough questions about presentation and representation in Western society, such as the following:

1. What are the expectations in regards to certain people we harbor as members and participants in western culture? What happens when we fail to fulfill these expectations?
2. What does it mean to be a princess, prince, or villain in each piece of media?
3. How can this be related to the media we consume every day, such as television and the news? How can we be more critical of the way a situation of a person is represented?

By using *Shrek* as the center topic, two major shifts in the perception of media occur. First, using *Shrek* as a tool in the classroom validates the film as media content worth academic consideration. Secondly, using *Shrek*, a blockbuster movie distributed on a massive scale, engages children and adolescents in a conversation about how even movies packaged and marketed as entertainment pieces have an agenda, and it is crucial to become aware of the agenda of media in order to draw one's own conclusions. Several lesson plans and booklets that accomplish this goal already exist, such as this "Shrek Film Study Booklet" from Mrs. H's classroom, distributed by Teachers Pay Teachers. Geared towards middle schoolers, the lesson poses questions about *Shrek*, such as "How does the audience know this is a comedy?"² It asks the student to consider the writing style of the piece and makes the student consider why *Shrek* is funny when many other fairytale films are not.

The *Shrek* franchise, composed of *Shrek*, *Shrek 2*, *Shrek the Third*, and *Shrek Forever After*, and related properties, such as *Shrek the Musical*, *Shrek* the video game, and all of its spinoffs, warrant further research as the franchise has developed. While *Shrek* was subversive in 2001, and set precedence for creating subversive content today, it is now widely known and accepted content. Tracing the alteration of audience expectation over the course of the entire franchise, and how that impacted the content that was produced, particularly *Shrek* compared to *Shrek Forever After* and *Shrek the Musical*, could provide information on how the transition from cultural deviancy to cultural norm can occur within the microcosm of one cinematic universe.

² The booklet from Teachers Pay Teachers can be found here: <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Shrek-Film-Study-Booklet-2851880>

PERSONAL REFLECTION

I did not come to university expecting to study *Shrek*. I came to Tufts in 2016 vaguely considering a course of study in film production and theory, and will be graduating in 2020 with two degrees, one in Film and Media Studies and the other in French. Even though this piece exists as part of the FMS degree path, my studies regarding French fairytales, particularly those of Jean de la Fontaine, who is not mentioned here, heavily informed my understanding of the complex nature and origins of fairytales.

I chose to study *Shrek* because it has been instrumental in my development as both a child and young adult. As a kid who did not love the Disney princesses, *Shrek* provided an alternative to the narrative that was common in Disney: a princess without agency, who did not speak much, who needed a prince to be validated, accepted and whole. Fiona is strong, funny, and loud. She sounds like me; she acts like me. I had never been able to relate to a fictional character like that before.

Fiona in particular, but also the protagonists, informed my sense of identity. I saw the movie for the first time the year it came out, in 2001. I was four years old. I was starting to explore my role in society, my place amongst my preschool friends. I was starting to explore who I wanted to be. *Shrek* was the movie my family kept in the car, especially in the summer, since we spent a lot of time travelling between New Jersey and New York. *Shrek* has sat in that car for nearly 20 years. I believe I have seen the movie over a hundred times since 2001, at all different points in my development. There have been times where I have liked certain characters more than other, Puss in Boots and Gingy/Mongo being fan favorites at times. I remember the first time I understood certain jokes, or got certain references.

Shrek talks about how ogres are like onions. In fact, the movie *Shrek* is very much the same, comprised of all these allegorical, historical, and theoretical layers. From the age of four until now, I have been slowly peeling back these layers in order to understand more about myself and my role in society. As it turns out, this is the case for many other members of my generation as well.

While out of the scope of my thesis in terms of analysis, the most miraculous part of this thesis has been talking to others about it. My friends, my family, my students, people at parties, people's friends and significant others, even complete strangers. Every single person with whom I have discussed my work knows exactly what *Shrek* is, has seen at least the first movie, and more often than not, has seen the memes on the internet. People loved the first movie, the sequel, while many abhorred the sequels that followed. Some played the *Shrek* video games growing up; others jumped at the chance to show *Shrek* to their children. *Shrek* has remained culturally relevant for nearly two decades now, and based on the response to this research, I do not see that stopping anytime soon. *Shrek* asked a lot of my generation as children, more than most children's programming. As adults, we actively seek content that challenged us as *Shrek* did.

Jack Zipes talks repeatedly about how the inherent power in fairytales comes from both their mystification and unassuming innocence; their subjects, characters far removed from the rules of our world, end up learning a lesson in a narrative vacuum. There is a lack of literature regarding subversive media on the subject of fairytales, perhaps because that would acknowledge the unique influence that "the classics", whether from Perrault, Hans Christian Andersen, or the Grimms, or Disney, over Western culture and society. Behind the guise of entertainment, the mask of clever writing, and the magic of animation, *Shrek* offers an intense critique of a literature that today sometimes feels immutable. From within its unassuming, "family-friendly"

packaging, it has emboldened an entire generation to rethink how we want to frame our values as society.

The stakes of this thesis have only grown since I have started and fully realized the impact of the *Shrek* movies on my generation, and on children today. It has informed a generation obsessed with self-referential humor, cutting wit, and heavy criticism. It has encouraged a generation looking to see themselves on the screen and to redefine what we consider beautiful, ugly, good and bad. *Shrek* has taught us the value of the complex and the nuanced by peeling back the layers of the onion before our very eyes.

Many children, members of the next generation, have told me Fiona is their favorite character in *Shrek*. I cannot help but wholeheartedly endorse this decision, knowing how such a choice will influence their formative years. Personally, it led me to the most eye-opening experience in my academic career to date.

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Directors: Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, Hamilton Luske

Fractured Fairytales from *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*: “Sleeping Beauty”

Series created by: Alex Anderson, Bill Scott, and Jay Ward

Maleficent (2014)

Director: Robert Stromberg

Red Hot Riding Hood (1943)

Director: Tex Avery

Shrek (2001)

Director: Andrew Adamson, Vicky Jenson

Shrek 2 (2004)

Director: Andrew Adamson, Conrad Vernon, Kelly Asbury

Shrek the Third (2007)

Director: Chris Miller

Sleeping Beauty (1959)

Director: Clyde Geronimi

Snow White and the Seven Dwarves (1938)

Director: David Hand