



Curses, Ogres and Lesbians

An Examination of the Subversion and Perpetuation of Fairy Tale Norms in Two Adaptations of *Beauty and the Beast*

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1. Introduction

Fairy tales are a means of acculturation, a way to pass on and reinforce a society's values to a new generation. Due to the fact that societal values are often challenged as a society changes, fairy tales also need to be challenged and adapted to reflect new times and new values. For this and other reasons, adaptations of fairy tales have been on the increase in recent decades, some reinforcing the traditional fairy tales in a conservative manner, others attempting a more subversive remediation. It is therefore of interest to examine different fairy tale adaptations to see what processes are involved in subverting the traditional tale, and to what extent these subversions can be regarded as successful.

The focus of this essay will be on two adaptations that attempt to address different problematic issues in the traditional fairy tale of *Beauty and the Beast*, namely the film *Shrek* (2001), directed by Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, and the novel *Bitter Thorns* by Chris Anne Wolfe. These texts were chosen because of the way in which they address different fairy tale values; *Bitter Thorns* is a lesbian interpretation of *Beauty and the Beast*, and deals particularly with the issue of heteronormativity, and *Shrek* draws on aspects of *Beauty and the Beast* to challenge expectations of idealised beauty. Despite the fact that they attempt to subvert fairy tale norms different from each other, or perhaps because of that fact, plus that they are very different in their formats, plots and target audiences, they are a suitable combination for analysis, especially when examined in contrast to each other. Not only does such an analysis highlight their obvious differences, it also brings to light the many ways in which the two texts are similar, especially on issues that are not directly addressed. This helps to highlight which traditional fairy tale norms and values are reinforced in these texts.

In this essay, I will show that while these two texts do attempt, to varying degrees, to challenge and subvert fairy tale norms such as idealised beauty and heteronormativity, the degree to which they are successful is limited, and in some cases they do more to reinforce traditional patriarchal values than to subvert them.

2. Contextualising *Bitter Thorns* and *Shrek*

As society changes, the stories that are told change with them. Vanessa Joosen suggests that while changes that occur in fairy tale retellings can be due to a "dissatisfaction with the genre", some adaptations of fairy tales are written "not to ridicule [them] but to demonstrate [their] relevance for a new age" (36). A text can therefore criticise certain values in a fairy tale while reproducing others

simultaneously, by removing or replacing the perceived negative aspects and highlighting or transforming the positive aspects to be more relevant for a modern audience. Keeping this dual approach to remediations in mind when analysing retellings helps to pinpoint which traditional fairy tale values are regarded as outdated and in need of subversion, and which values are still regarded as relevant. In the case of *Bitter Thorns* and *Shrek*, some fairy tale values are challenged and subverted, whilst other values are left untouched.

*Bitter Thorns*¹ is predominantly a love story, taking the traditional fairy tale of *Beauty and the Beast* and subverting it by having both lovers be women. It is therefore a blend of three genres; the romance novel, the fairy tale, and the lesbian novel. The first two of these genres are traditionally quite formulaic and conservative, not lending much to a subversive reading, but the inclusion of the lesbian angle provides a twist that allows for a challenge to heteronormativity. Being a story predominantly about two women, it allows for a possible increased feminist reading as well.

The plot of *Bitter Thorns* is for the most part very similar to the traditional tale, with the main difference being that the character who fulfils the role of the Beast, Drew, is a woman who believes herself an abomination after being disowned by her father and cursed by her witch step-mother when her sexual preference for other women was revealed. She hides the fact that she is a woman by always wearing a cloak that covers her face and upper body, and makes use of magic to keep her face hidden behind a black void. Angelique, who fulfils the role of Beauty, does not know that Drew is a woman, and has to learn to love this 'beast' without ever seeing 'its' face. This she eventually does, after which she discovers that Drew is a woman, but is met by a new obstacle in that Drew, despite wanting Angelique, loves her too much to 'contaminate' her with her 'perverted' sexual preferences, and it becomes Angelique's task to help Drew overcome her shame and self-hatred, and to accept their love. That this love story deals with more complicated issues of intolerance and shame adds to its worth as a text that subverts heteronormativity, but there are other fairy tale values that it does not address, such as idealised beauty and the trafficking of women, and the extent to which *Bitter Thorns* reinforces, rather than subverts, these fairy tale values is what will be examined in this essay.

Shrek is an animated children's film, though one that has been appreciated by adults as well. It does not follow the story of *Beauty and the Beast* as such, being more a story about rescues and adventure than about a Beauty who goes to live with a Beast until she learns to love him, but it does include sufficiently many facets of the traditional tale to be of relevance to this study, such as a

1 *Bitter Thorns* is the original title of the novel. It has also been published as *Roses and Thorns*, with some minor changes.

curse that can only be lifted by true love, and the idea of beauties and beasts. Where it becomes potentially subversive is that the Beast character, Shrek, is not the one who is cursed, but rather the Beauty character, Princess Fiona, though it turns out that she is both beauty and beast in one. How this curse is lifted and what happens as a result are what form the main subversion in the tale, allowing viewers to reassess their attitudes to idealised beauty.

In many ways, *Shrek* can be seen as a postmodern film, making great use of intertextuality by incorporating many different types of texts into its format, including a blend of different fairy tales, and other films like *The Matrix* and *Robin Hood*, as well as other contemporary cultural phenomena such as dating game shows, popular music, romances and girl power. This use of intertextuality, plus a generally irreverent attitude towards the traditional way of telling fairy tales, greatly enhances the expectation that the film will be subversive, right from the opening scene where Shrek rips a page out of a fairy tale book and uses it as toilet paper (Unger and Sunderland 7, 15). Whether this appearance of subversion is realised or is just an illusion is something that will be explored in more detail in this essay.

Shrek has been a popular film, and as a result has received a fair amount of literary criticism, some of which is made use of in this essay. In contrast, little has been written about *Bitter Thorns*, perhaps due to its niche status, or about the connection between these two texts. It is therefore my hope that this essay will contribute to the research on both of these texts and to fairy tale research in general.

3. The Perpetuation and Subversion of Fairy Tale Norms in *Bitter*

Thorns and Shrek

Fairy tales are a cultural product that both reflect and perpetuate the values of the society in which they are given form. Jack Zipes writes that fairy tales evolve as societies evolve, and that they have a “moral code” that reflects the values of the society in which the fairy tale exists (130-131). He argues that the morals and norms of fairy tales are not necessarily good, but rather that they serve the interests of the most powerful groups within society, for the purposes of ensuring that those values are reinforced and reproduced. What different retellings and adaptations of traditional fairy tales reveal are “differences in moral attitudes towards family, the rearing of children, sexuality and politics” (133). Examining fairy tales, and their adaptations, can reveal much about the values of the societies in which those tales are told, as well as which power structures are being maintained.

Moral issues in fairy tales can be particularly problematic for women. Marcia Lieberman draws attention to how fairy tales influence children, that children “may have absorbed far more

from them than merely the outlines of various stories” and gives as examples “behavioral and associational patterns, value systems, and how to predict the consequences of specific acts or circumstances” (187). In other words, fairy tales are not just entertainment; they have morals and values that become incorporated into a child’s developing belief system, and this makes fairy tales powerful and potentially dangerous, especially as they tend to “present a picture of sexual roles, behavior and psychology, and a way of predicting outcome or fate according to sex” (187). The acculturation of women takes place through the way in which gender roles in fairy tales are reproduced for new generations of young children, which for girls means learning to accept certain feminine traits as being inherent to being female.

Because fairy tales play an important role in socialisation and acculturation, and because they tend to perpetuate patriarchal values, it is important to analyse them within their patriarchal context, and be aware of patriarchal norms and values that continue to be reproduced even through remediations that may appear to be subversive. This analysis of *Bitter Thorns* and *Shrek* is divided into three sections, looking in turn at women as tradeable objects, heteronormativity and idealised beauty. These three fairy tale norms fall under a larger patriarchal norm that establishes the interests of the heterosexual male as primary.

3.1 Women as tradeable objects

The trading or trafficking of women is a fairy tale norm that is problematic in how it depicts women as objects that can be controlled and traded by men. According to Gayle Rubin, women have often been exchanged between men as gifts, in order to create new alliances, though are also sometimes “taken in battle, exchanged for favours, sent as tribute, traded, bought and sold” (175) as a part of an extended kinship system. As a result of this system, women have diminished power over their own lives, and are subject to the whims of the men who control them. Although Rubin’s analysis is anthropological and not relating specifically to fairy tales, it is clear that this trafficking of women exists in fairy tales. In *Beauty and the Beast*, it takes the form of the Beast demanding of Beauty’s father that he either die as punishment for his transgression (the theft of a rose), or sacrifice one of his daughters in his place. Although this deal is not specifically made with what Rubin calls a “bridewealth” (206), the Beast does give Beauty’s father a chest of treasures to take home with him, which can be seen as payment for receiving one of his daughters.

In *Bitter Thorns*, the idea of the trafficking of women differs from and is taken to a further extreme than in the original fairy tale. When the original Beast threatens the father with death, and requests one of his daughters as a trade to spare the father’s life, it raises the expectation that Beauty will die in her father’s stead and there is no suggestion that the daughter is wanted for marriage. In

contrast, Drew (in disguise as non-female) never threatens Alysius, but rather inquires after the possibility of having his daughter (actually step-daughter) as a potential wife, for which she is prepared to pay handsomely; her proposition is like a business deal, and her use of the words “profitable”, “contract” and “bride price” very clearly suggest an economic transaction (Wolfe 22), and links to the concept of bridewealth in kinships systems (Rubin 206). Alysius feels some unease, but agrees to the deal, after renegotiating the terms in his favour. That this is not the first time that Drew enters into such a contract (Wolfe 23, 45, 86-87) suggests that this is a trend rather than a one-off opportunity. What the original Beast and Drew have in common, however, is that they both demand that the daughter is made aware of what she is agreeing to (a life with a monster), and that she nonetheless comes of her own free will (21-22).

That Drew should initiate a deal whereby she essentially buys women is problematic on two levels. Primarily, it reinforces the idea that women are objects for trade between men, and that they can be bought with a bridal price to be wives. But it is additionally problematic due to the fact that although Drew, with her femaleness hidden, is free to act as a man, she is still a woman; her trafficking in women thus raises the idea of women supporting the patriarchal structures of society. That Angelique should accept being bought by and becoming a possession of her new Liege, as Drew likes to be called, further reinforces the idea of women being complicit in their own oppression. That they should choose to follow the norms of patriarchal society is not only problematic in that it retains the idea of women as tradeable objects, it also reinforces the male-female dichotomy, of man being dominant over woman, and as such also reinforces heteronormativity. That this should exist in an adaptation that otherwise attempts to challenge heteronormativity therefore creates a conflict that undermines some of the subversive elements of the text.

What complicates this analysis, however, are the potentially subversive reasons for why Drew offers the deal and why Angelique accepts it. Although Drew is not cursed into the form of a beast, she is under a curse that binds her almost exclusively to the realm where she lives; she is lonely and does not have the freedom to find love on her own, and is thus forced to entice chance travellers into parting with their daughters or sisters by means of bridal contracts. For this reason, it could be argued that she is not so much supporting patriarchal structures as much as exploiting them. She also insists that it must be the women’s choice to accept the deal, and that they should accept willingly, a fact which puts the power into the women’s hands rather than the men’s. She also allows the women to leave, should they later change their minds, thus maintaining the idea that it is ultimately the women’s choice; she does not keep them against their will. In a kinship system where women are traded between men, women do not have full rights to themselves (Rubin 177), but in

Bitter Thorns, Drew's insistence that Angelique must agree to the contract means that it is not Drew or Alysius who has the rights to Angelique, but Angelique herself. In this way, even though Drew is partaking in the trafficking of women, she ensures that the women she trades for still have rights to themselves.

In this particular instance, there is also the fact Drew is aware that Angelique is treated like a servant in her home, and is regularly hit by Alysius and her brothers (Wolfe 19, 24, 30, and more); Drew makes it a part of the deal that Alysius tell Angelique that she will not be beaten (22). This raises the idea that part of the reason why Drew requests Angelique is to help her away from her abusive male relatives. Angelique herself takes that into account when she is deciding whether to accept the deal, and the fact that she goes to Drew in part to get away from those beatings is again an example of a woman exploiting patriarchal structures for her own gain. Angelique's other reason for accepting the deal is that her mother, much loved by Angelique, is crippled and bed-ridden, and the extra wealth that the bride price would bring the family would make her mother's life more comfortable (27-28). She sees the deal as a way to help both herself and her mother.

Despite these potentially subversive reasons that Drew and Angelique have for entering into a bridal contract, and that this can be seen as exploiting the patriarchal system, the existence of the trading of women in *Bitter Thorns*, especially/even by a woman, continues to be problematic, as it reinforces the patriarchal view that men own women and can trade them for whichever deal suits them best.

In *Shrek*, the idea that someone can be a commodity is established in the beginning of the film when, during a purge of magical creatures from the kingdom, citizens are being paid for turning in any such creatures that they know of. Whilst there is no official buying of women in the way there is in *Bitter Thorns*, there is still a clear sense of the trafficking of women in *Shrek*, as can be seen in the following two particular instances involving Fiona as the trafficked woman.

Lord Farquaad discovers that in order to become king, he needs to marry a princess, and in a scene reminiscent of a dating game show, is offered by his magic mirror the option of three women as potential candidates. This in itself suggests that men can take whichever woman they desire, without needing the consent of the woman in question. He settles on Princess Fiona, but there is the complication that she is currently being held prisoner by a dragon and needs to be rescued. As he does not wish to rescue her himself, he organises a tourney to find a hero to go on a quest to save her and bring her back to him. What is clear from this is that Princess Fiona has no choice in the matter; she is not even aware that her fate is being so decided. She has been chosen by a man she has never met to become his wife, as if she were tradeable goods that can be ordered and delivered. In the context of the game show, she is merely a winnable prize, one that will increase Farquaad's

status and allow him to be king. This reinforces the idea of women as being objects for sale or trade in a patriarchal system.

When Shrek discovers, much to his dismay, that the purge of magical creatures from the kingdom has resulted in these creatures settling in his swamp, he goes to Lord Farquaad to see about having them removed. He arrives at the start of Farquaad's tourney and inadvertently wins it. He and Farquaad then come to an agreement: Farquaad would see to the removal of the creatures from Shrek's swamp if Shrek finds and rescues Fiona and brings her to Farquaad. In this way, Fiona becomes a mere commodity or product of exchange in a contract between two males. Neither Shrek nor Farquaad give Fiona any agency of her own in this context; they decide between themselves that she is to be rescued; that she may not wish to return to Farquaad is something that neither of them even consider, and when later in the film she in fact refuses to return with Shrek, demanding instead that Farquaad come and rescue her himself, Shrek picks her up against her will and carries her off over his shoulder. Shrek sees his role as "delivery boy", with Fiona merely a object to be delivered, and he acts purely to meet the requirements of the agreement he made with Farquaad.

This fairy tale norm of a princess being locked away and in need of a prince charming to save her is what drives the story forwards towards Shrek and Princess Fiona's first meeting. Lieberman argues that "[s]o many of the heroines of fairy stories [...] are locked up in towers, ... imprisoned by giants, or otherwise enslaved, and waiting to be rescued by a passing prince, that the helpless, imprisoned maiden is the quintessential heroine of the fairy tale" (192). The princess is meant to be a passive damsel in distress while an active hero rescues her. When Shrek rescues Fiona, however, it becomes apparent that Fiona has appropriated this fairy tale norm for her own benefit, and has willingly allowed herself to become a prize to be won by a man, due to the fact that she needs a hero to free her from her curse (Unger and Sunderland 27). When Shrek enters her chamber, and later after they have escaped from the dragon, Fiona expects him to save her with "true love's first kiss". That Fiona has made this choice for herself makes *Shrek* appear subversive in how it violates the norm that the heroine has been captured and is held prisoner against her will. Fiona's taking initiative as a way of lifting her curse, while making her seem active and in control of her own destiny, hides the fact that her actions make her complicit in her oppression as a woman, being totally reliant on a man to save her. It also suggests that Fiona is unable to think of her own solution to the problem of being cursed, and has to rely on existing patriarchal fairy tale norms (Takolander and McCooey 4). In this way, *Shrek*, while appearing to be subversive in how it tweaks this particular fairy tale norm, instead continues to reinforce the patriarchal idea of women as objects to be saved, traded and taken for marriage.

By both Angelique and Fiona being placed in positions where they are traded for the benefit

of men, the idea of women as exchangeable, trafficked goods is reinforced in both *Bitter Thorns* and *Shrek*. In this way, both texts support the patriarchal idea of men owning women, and by extension, the idea that only men can own women, thus also supporting heteronormative ideals.

3.2 Heteronormativity

That the beautiful, passive women in fairy tales are invariably rewarded with marriage to wealthy, handsome princes or heroes not only creates the idea that only beautiful women will be chosen by these handsome heroic men, and thus only they will receive riches (Lieberman 189-190), it also suggests that the ultimate reward in life is a heterosexual marriage. If the purpose of a woman is to be rewarded with the ultimate prize of marriage to a handsome and heroic or wealthy man, and if the purpose of a man is to win the love of a beautiful woman, there is little room left for love between two women or between two men. Where women are the prizes or objects for trade between men, it is beneficial, and even necessary, for society to have heterosexual marriages (Rubin 180). Heteronormativity is thus a value that best serves the interests of heterosexual men, who arguably constitute the most powerful group in society, and whose values are thus most frequently reproduced in cultural expressions. That the societal value of heterosexual marriage is reinforced in fairy tales results in children learning from an early age that when they marry, it must be to someone of the opposite sex. This can result in internal conflicts for those whose sexual orientation may be other than heterosexual, and can otherwise lead to an intolerance in society of non-heteronormative practices. By reproducing heteronormative values, fairy tales not only reinforce gender roles, they also reinforce the idea of normal, pre-defined gender identities and sexual orientations.

Because *Bitter Thorns* is a lesbian romance novel, there is a strong expectation that this novel challenges and subverts heteronormativity. The very nature of the novel as a lesbian romance provides the lesbian reader with a space away from heteronormative romances and a chance to experience vicariously a successful relationship and imagine a chance for love (Betz 49). While early lesbian novels often dealt with issues of denial, shame and despair at not being normal, contemporary novels fall more in line with conventional romance novels, where obstacles are overcome, understanding and acceptance of one's sexuality is achieved and a love relationship is gained in the end (30, 53). In a sense, *Bitter Thorns* reflects both the angst of the early lesbian novel and the joy of the contemporary one; Drew's experiences of being rejected by her father and cursed by her step-mother lead her to self-loathing and a belief that she is a monster, but Angelique's acceptance of her love for Drew, and her helping Drew come to an acceptance of herself, turns the ill-fated story into a happy one where the two women find love together. In this way, *Bitter Thorns*

is not only a lesbian novel, it also captures the historical change that has taken place between early lesbian novels and more contemporary ones, and in this way provides a hopeful message for the reader.

Another way that *Bitter Thorns* subverts heteronormativity is in how it addresses homophobia. The issue of intolerance towards homosexuality is central to Drew's story, both in how she was treated by her father and cursed by her step-mother, and in how she believes as a result that her way of expressing love is perverted, and that she has to be ashamed of her sexual orientation. Linked to the idea of intolerance is the notion of Other, and in *Bitter Thorns*, this is taken up not in how Angelique deals with her or Drew's sexuality, but in how she comes to terms with the magic that exists in Drew's realm. At first she is afraid of it, but through her own curiosity and insistence that she not reject what she does not understand, she "releas[es] her nagging superstitions" (Wolfe 69). As she comes to terms with the magic around her, she also learns to love Drew, despite not knowing what form of person was under the cloak that Drew always wears. From the start, Angelique faces her fears, and slowly learns to overcome them, by refusing to be intimidated by Otherness, and by showing curiosity for things unfamiliar until they become a part of her. Her attitude, even though not specifically addressing the issue of homophobia, is still linked to it by virtue of the context of the story, and the fact that the reader knows that the secret Drew is keeping from Angelique is that Drew is a lesbian. How Angelique deals with her fear of Otherness and comes to accept that which had previously been unfamiliar can thus be seen as a subversion of heteronormativity.

It is only when Angelique accepts that she loves Drew, no matter what her dark secret is, that she finally, by chance, finds out that Drew is a woman; Drew, not knowing that Angelique can see her, has removed the cloak she usually uses to conceal herself (Wolfe 120-121). Angelique is astonished at Drew's appearance and tries to "reconcile the haunted beauty of the woman she had just seen with Drew's own descriptions of monstrosities" (121). Angelique reflects over how her grandmother had had a female companion, and that Angelique's mother had respected the grandmother's relationship, and that this had imbued respect and tolerance within Angelique as well. Angelique accepts Drew and her finding out that Drew is a woman does nothing to diminish her love for Drew. Although Angelique came to Drew's castle with heteronormative expectations, her thoughts reveal that she does not conform to heteronormative values. Angelique's response to discovering that Drew is a woman thus subverts the heteronorm.

How the heterosexual human males in the novel are portrayed also suggests a subversion of the heteronorm. Alysius and Angelique's two half-brothers, Ivan and Phillip, are depicted in a negative light and have no redeeming qualities, being greedy with a penchant for beating women.

With the exception of Drew's witch step-mother and possibly step-sister, the females in the novel are conversely portrayed positively or at the very least sympathetically, as are the magical beings – the Old Ones – whose society is not heteronormative. The misandry in the novel suggests an attempt to subvert patriarchal values by undermining the heterosexual human men in the story, and raising the value of the women. That both Drew and Angelique are women suggests that in the context of the *Beauty and the Beast* fairy tale, only another woman is worthy of Beauty's love (Reith 28).

What complicates the subversion of heteronormativity in *Bitter Thorns* is that Angelique is for the most part a fairly stereotypical fairy-tale/romance novel heroine and Drew tends to fulfil the role of a romance/fairy-tale hero, at least in many of her mannerisms and actions. A sense of a male/female (or masculine/feminine) divide thus emerges in the story, even though it is a tale of two women. Although Drew's androgyny for most of the novel subverts traditional gender roles, the overall impression of the hero/heroine divide in the novel tends to support the idea of heteronormativity rather than subvert it.

In contrast to *Bitter Thorns*, which for the most part subverts heteronormativity, *Shrek* is clearly heteronormative. Aside from the friendship between Shrek and Donkey, all the main (potential) relationships in the film are heterosexual in nature: Farquaad and Fiona, Shrek and Fiona, Donkey and the dragon. Furthermore, this heteronormativity also reinforces the idea that where a heteronormative relationship can take place, it should. Fiona is first linked to Farquaad and then to Shrek, and the possibility that she chooses neither is never raised. Particularly problematic is how the female dragon is also quickly linked to a male, namely Donkey. The dragon is a powerful female and is thus a threat to patriarchy, so the fact that she becomes enamoured with Donkey, and turns from aggressive fire-breathing to coyly blowing smoke hearts around him, highlights the need within a heteronormative society for females to be tamed into submission (Takolander and McCooey 4). That Fiona's ogress form is also quite matronly, suggesting her future role as wife and mother, creates a contrast to the possibility of her being a strong, independent princess as she may have been as a single woman. As with the dragon, she becomes tamed and docile when she enters into a relationship (3).

Shrek is also heteronormative in its lack of supporting homosexual values. This does not mean that there are not homosexual elements to the film, but the way that these are portrayed is problematic. Monsieur Hood and his Merry Men are depicted as camp, and despite their being many of them, they are easily beaten in a fight by Fiona. Lord Farquaad, due to his short height, is seen as lacking in masculinity and is portrayed effeminately. In both these cases, the use of camp or effeminate traits in men is used for the purpose of comic effect and for providing a contrast to Shrek

in order for Shrek's masculinity to appear primary. Additionally, that Fiona chooses to fight the Merry Men rather than let them save her from Shrek, and that she falls in love with Shrek rather than Farquaad, suggests that their forms of masculinity are inferior to heterosexual masculinities, such as Shrek's. The inclusion of these non-heterosexual elements therefore functions to actively reinforce heteronormativity rather than to subvert it (Takolander and McCooey 5).

That Shrek is to be seen as the hero of the film, and that his heterosexuality is to be seen as primary, is further reinforced by the fact that when Fiona's curse is lifted after she and Shrek kiss, it is into his form as ogre/ogress that she transforms. This not only reinforces the heteronorm, it also reproduces patriarchal ideals of the woman submitting to her man. That her form is also quite matronly, suggesting her future role as wife and mother, creates a contrast to the possibility of her being a strong, independent princess as she may have been as a single woman.

That is not to say that *Shrek* does not embrace any kind of Otherness, as there are a lot of unorthodox characters, relationships and friendships. But while both Otherness in general and homosexuality in particular are tolerated and accepted by Angelique in *Bitter Thorns*, in *Shrek* the heteronorm remains unchallenged.

3.3 Idealised beauty

The fairy tale value of idealised beauty is evident in most fairy tales that deal with princes, princesses, heroes and heroines. The ideal of beauty is also almost always associated with goodness, with ugliness being associated with wickedness, which creates a problematic value system where especially young girls learn that beauty, along with its corresponding feminine traits of kindness and passivity, is the most valuable asset to have, as beauty in female characters leads to rewards while ugliness in female characters (such as witches, step-mothers and step-sisters) leads to misery (Lieberman 188). In *Beauty and the Beast*, even though the idea of growing to love an ugly Beast is the central plot, Beauty herself is beautiful, and therefore good, and the Beast, after suffering misery during his time as a cursed beast, transforms into a handsome prince once his curse is lifted; his becoming a handsome prince is Beauty's reward for her goodness in learning to love him. There is a slight subversion of the association between ugliness and wickedness in *Beauty and the Beast* in how the Beast's ugliness is not connected to a wicked heart, but as the ugliness is a curse and not natural, the effectiveness of this subversion is limited.

In *Bitter Thorns*, the concept of a Beauty and a Beast is different from the original in that Drew's beastliness does not stem from some kind of physical ugliness or beastliness. The fact that both Drew and Angelique are beautiful women downplays the role of idealised beauty in the narrative (Reith, 19), as neither woman needs to overcome a physical aversion to the other, and

there is no physical transformation either, as there is in both *Beauty and the Beast* and in *Shrek*. Instead, Drew's beastliness comes from her belief that she is abhorrent because she loves women, and her transformation when she receives Angelique's love is instead an emotional one; she lets go of the self-hatred she has, and with Angelique's help accepts her sexuality, leading to her release from her self-imposed isolation (Reith 24).

Where the issue of idealised beauty comes into play is in how both Angelique and Drew are both beautiful and also inherently good. It is significant that it is only when Angelique has learnt to love Drew and is prepared to accept whatever dark secret Drew has that she is rewarded with the knowledge of what Drew's secret is, and that it is not so terrible after all (Wolfe 121), leading ultimately to the further reward of a relationship with Drew. That she is rewarded for loving Drew reflects the original tale where Beauty is rewarded for loving the Beast by him transforming into a handsome prince. The association between Angelique's beauty and her goodness is thus well-established and leads to her being rewarded. Drew also, despite believing herself a monster for loving women, is consistently depicted as good-hearted and kind, looking after her subjects and Angelique with care (e.g. 51, 62, 82). The norm of beauty and goodness being associated with each other is therefore upheld in *Bitter Thorns*, and the norm of the beautiful fairy tale heroine is not challenged in any way in, but rather is consciously reinforced. That the beauty norm is perpetuated in *Bitter Thorns* can also be explained by the novel also being a romance novel, where the fantasy of a happy romance perhaps requires beautiful heroes and heroines.

What makes the beauty norm particularly problematic in *Bitter Thorns*, however, is not only that both the heroines of the love story are beautiful, and that their beauty is linked to goodness, but that Drew's step-mother, the witch who cursed Drew, is depicted as ugly. She has not aged beautifully and is described as "an old woman with stringy hair dyed too black to be lovely and with lines etched too deeply from hate to ever find peace in living" (Wolfe 197), and her hands are described as "claws" (196), her eyes as "crazed" (197), and she has a "cruel smile that thinned her lips" (198), and at one point "spittle drooled" from her mouth (199). In these descriptions there is a connection made between physical ugliness and wickedness. That the step-mother is also living in misery further establishes the contrast between goodness, beauty and reward on the one hand, and evil, ugliness and misery on the other. That beauty should equal goodness and ugliness equal wickedness is a fairy tale norm frequently perpetuated in fairy tales involving step-mothers, step-sisters and witches. That *Bitter Thorns* links goodness to beauty and evil to ugliness reinforces the beauty norm in the text. Lieberman argues that for young girls who have self-perceived ideas about how pretty or ugly they are, this can often lead to self-fulfilling prophecies where pretty girls expect to be rewarded and plain girls believe they deserve whatever punishments or misfortunes come their

way (188). This highlights why the ideal of beauty, and how it is so often connected to an ideal of goodness, is problematic in fairy tales, and why it needs to be addressed.

In *Shrek*, on the other hand, there is a marked attempt to address the issue of stereotypical beauty, and this can even be regarded as the film's main message and its most subversive element. The film establishes an alternative to traditional fairy tale beauty in the opening scenes of the film, where Shrek's bodily functions are linked to the carnivalesque (Takolander and McCooey 6), and are meant to inspire disgust, such as gargling mud, brushing his teeth with the insides of a caterpillar, letting off a fart so foul that it kills a fish, eating eyeballs and pulling earwax from his ear to use as a candle. Shrek is thus established as a disgusting ogre living in a swamp, but significantly, he is also depicted as being content with his life there; he enjoys the comforts of his home, takes pleasure in his daily rituals, and relishes his swamp to the point of lovingly putting up a sign to keep others away. The idea that ugliness leads to misery is therefore subverted already in the opening minutes of the film. Also, although Shrek comes across as unsociable, the way in which he humorously chases away a group of men who attempt to capture him, instead of doing them any harm, quickly establishes that he is not to be regarded as cruel or wicked. The association between ugliness and wickedness is thus also subverted.

The beauty norm is further challenged by the function of the curse in the narrative. The curse that transforms Fiona into an ogress at night subverts the idea that the princess should always be beautiful, and that she transforms into an ogress permanently² when the curse is lifted further reinforces this alternative to the traditional fairy tale norm of beautiful princesses. Additionally, Fiona displays some traits that are not typically associated with beauty or femininity in fairy tales, such as loud burping, enthusiastic eating of weed rats and flies, and fighting. Despite this, she is still clearly the heroine of the story, and is seen as good-hearted, suggesting that goodness does not need to be associated with beauty alone.

When Shrek rescues Fiona, and she demands that he remove his helmet so that he may kiss her with "first love's true kiss", she remarks resignedly that he is an ogre, and Shrek replies "Oh, you were expecting Prince Charming". At this moment in the film, the traditional fairy tale norm of a handsome hero is consciously brought into light, whilst simultaneously being subverted; there is no denying that Shrek has rescued Fiona, and has thus fulfilled the function of the fairy tale hero, but that he is an ogre challenges the expectation that the hero has to be a handsome prince. Shrek later reflects over why he keeps people out of his swamp: "People take one look at me and go 'Ah! Help! Run! A big stupid ugly ogre!' They judge me before they even know me". When Shrek later comments that Fiona is "not exactly what [he] expected", she retorts "Maybe you shouldn't judge

2 Or at least until *Shrek 2*.

people before you get to know them”. That both the hero and heroine express this sentiment reinforces it as the primary message of the film.

From the above discussion, it would seem that in *Shrek*, the traditional fairy tale norm of ideal beauty is challenged and subverted. Both the hero and heroine of the story are (partly) ogres, and yet both are good as well, thus undermining the link between beauty and goodness. It creates the suggestion that goodness and being a hero or heroine is not dependent on the extent of one’s beauty. Unfortunately, the film manages to reduce the effect of its subversion of the beauty norm through the way in which Lord Farquaad is depicted. Farquaad’s appearance is ridiculed, with numerous jokes about his height being made particularly by Shrek, with the suggestion that Farquaad’s being short implies his inadequacy as a man. That Farquaad is also seen as lacking in any good virtues reinforces the idea of physical undesirability being linked to wickedness and ambition, and that his fate is to be eaten by a dragon after rejecting Fiona when she transforms into an ogress also reinforces the idea of ugliness leading to misery or doom. Despite this failure to maintain a consistent message of not judging a person by their appearance, though, *Shrek* as a whole does succeed in delivering a different message about the connection between beauty and heroes/heroines in fairy tales.

4. Conclusion

In this essay, I have shown how *Bitter Thorns* and *Shrek* can be seen to subvert the original story of *Beauty and the Beast* in different ways. *Bitter Thorns* tackles the problem of heteronormativity by changing the Beast character into a woman, thus turning the original tale into a lesbian story. Through how Angelique comes to terms with various forms of Otherness, and through how she accepts her love for Drew unconditionally, both homophobia and heteronormativity are challenged. Additionally, that Angelique helps Drew come to terms with her sexuality and that they together have a happy ending provides a further break from the norm of heterosexual romances.

Shrek challenges the fairy tale norm of idealised beauty by having Fiona transform from a beautiful princess into an ogress when she finds true love. The idea that good people are beautiful and wicked people are ugly is also challenged. Through Shrek’s and Fiona’s words and actions, the message that one should not judge or love people based on appearance comes to the fore.

But both of these texts are also problematic, and both do more to reinforce fairy tale norms than to subvert them. Both texts reinforce the idea of women as objects for trade and as subordinate to men, with Drew essentially buying Angelique from Alysius, and Farquaad and Shrek entering into a contract whereby Shrek would deliver Fiona to Farquaad so that Farquaad could marry her.

Bitter Thorns also reinforces the connection between beauty and goodness in the heroines on the one hand and ugliness and evil in the witch step-mother on the other. *Shrek* reinforces heteronormativity, not only in its perpetuating the heterosexual relationship as ideal, but also in how it sets up the heterosexual male, i.e. Shrek, as dominant over both women and any other kind of masculinity.

In conclusion, what I have shown in this essay is that while fairy tale retellings will often attempt to address a norm or value that is regarded as in need of revision, many other values remain untouched. As a result, while some fairy tale norms are being subverted and challenged, others continue to be consciously or inadvertently reinforced. By examining *Bitter Thorns* and *Shrek* together, I have shown how even when texts succeed in subverting a particular fairy tale norm, other fairy tale values continue to go unchallenged.

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