



Volume 3

Article 38

2022

Transphobia in *Shrek*: An Anti-Feminist Attack

Parker Schwartz

Roger Williams University

Recommended Citation

Schwartz, Parker (2022). "Transphobia in *Shrek*: An Anti-Feminist Attack." *The Macksey Journal*: Volume 3, Article 38.

This article is brought to you for free an open access by the Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal. It has been accepted for inclusion in the Macksey Journal by an authorized editor of the Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal.

Transphobia in *Shrek*: An Anti-Feminist Attack

Parker Schwartz

Roger Williams University

Abstract

While watching movies within the *Shrek* franchise (2001-2007), viewers may pick up on the fact that they break grounds in terms of feminism, but viewers may not comprehend how they possess harmful gender representations for non-binary viewers. The movies reward the main female protagonist, Fiona, for being a strong independent woman. However, my close reading analysis reveals that the franchise “reproduces white heterosexual femininity as the norm” (Marshall and Sensoy). Moreover, my analysis of the first three *Shrek* movies reveals that their feminist elements are primarily performative. Ultimately, the *Shrek* franchise movies reproduce oppressive transphobic elements that work hand in hand with these performative feminist elements to potentially marginalize transgender people, especially those who identify as women. Exposure to transphobic behavior is arguably even more harmful in children than in adults, since it has greater potential to both introduce and further reinforce the harmful recursive cycle of transphobia. Thus, the *Shrek* franchise is not necessarily safe for either transgender people or women by perpetuating oppressive and harmful heteropatriarchal gender stereotypes.

Keywords: Transphobia, Feminism, Heteropatriarchy, *Shrek*

While watching movies within the *Shrek* franchise (2001-2010), viewers may pick up on the fact that they break grounds in terms of feminism, but viewers may not comprehend that these elements are more harmful than helpful in terms of non-binary gender politics. The movies place the main female protagonist, Fiona, in situations where she is forced to be a strong independent woman. However, if viewers think more deeply, it becomes clear that the franchise “reproduces white heterosexual femininity as the norm” (Marshall and Sensoy). A close analysis of the first three *Shrek* movies reveals that their feminist elements are mainly performative. Further, the movies are also home to many oppressive transphobic elements that work hand in hand with these performative feminist elements to further marginalize transgender women.

Many critics might argue that Fiona represents a feminist protagonist. Fiona is a woman who lived alone for many years, taught herself martial arts to defend herself, and follows all the requirements to appear as a feminist protagonist. She is presented as a feminist protagonist, one who looks out for herself. She is a kind woman who cares about the other characters, even those who may not be stereotypically necessary in the storyline. She looks out for Donkey, even when Shrek pushes him to the side and disregards his help.

A closer look, however, reveals the performative aspects of Fiona’s “feminism.” Fiona is not the main character of the series and she primarily occupies the role of Shrek’s love interest. The objective of Shrek’s quest in the original *Shrek* movie was to rescue Fiona from the tower and to bring her to Lord Farquaad as a prize (dir. Adamson & Jenson, 2001). When Farquaad speaks about Fiona, he primarily refers to her as a commodity, and oftentimes through the movie, she is “variously eroticized, humanized, dehumanized, contested, won, and lost,” rather than treated as a complete individual (Roberts). Aside from Fiona’s insistence to be rescued by a prince rather than to save herself from the tower, she is also incredibly eager to get married, as she believes marriage is the only answer to save her life. The film frames marriage as Fiona’s last saving grace and explicitly states multiple times that the most effective way Fiona can become human again is through true love’s kiss. It is shown that her best option to live a happy life is through marrying the first man that she is able to, rather than to accept that she can be independent and marry a man she truly loves if she so chooses to do so. Much like her own quest for marriage, she is oftentimes forced into the nurturer role in the movies. She cares for Shrek when he gets shot with an arrow in the first *Shrek* movie, and she must calm Donkey’s nerves in several scenarios through the films. It is never clear if Fiona truly wants to be the caretaker of both Shrek and Donkey, as there is never a scene in which Fiona is given the opportunity to make that decision, as she is often forced into the role without any thought, simply because she is a woman. Later, in *Shrek the Third*, Fiona announces to all the characters that she is pregnant (Dir. Miller & Hui, 2007). While Shrek is shown on screen having second thoughts about becoming a father, Fiona is never given the option to have those feelings. She is shown laughing and enjoying her baby shower along with all the other princesses, but there was never a moment in the movie in which Fiona was given the option to be a mother or where she wholeheartedly declared that she made the decision herself. A clear indication of Fiona’s lack of choice due to her conformation to the elements of white heterosexual femininity throughout the series comes from the fourth instalment of the *Shrek* films, *Shrek Forever After* (Dir. Mitchell, 2010). This film focuses greatly on the difference Shrek’s birth would have made on the other characters’ lives. Within this alternate universe, Fiona is shown as an incredibly

independent leader who proudly embraces her own identity as an ogre, rather than worrying about the label of the princess that is placed upon her. This version of Fiona is able to free herself from the tower and eventually falls in love with Shrek and kisses him on her own terms, rather than Shrek's. Unfortunately, this alternate version of Fiona is just a temporary version, so viewers do not get to see her independence for very long. When considering the roles that Fiona chooses versus what she is forced to take on, it is clear that she is heavily influenced by the assumptions and expectations of society. Overall, Fiona is used to further implement performative elements of white heterosexual femininity through the ways in which she conforms throughout the series.

The Shrek franchise not only reinforces patriarchal gender roles in Fiona's relationship to identity, it also reinforces white heterosexual femininity in its portrayal of Doris, the character better known as the "Ugly Stepsister" introduced in the movie, *Shrek 2* (Dir. Vernon, Asbury, & Adamson, 2004). Through the physical portrayal of Doris, it becomes clear that the creator's intention was to make her as masculine as possible. When she first appears in the bar, she turns around and the audience is shocked to see a clear amount of stubble on her face. Even in the dark lighting, it is easy to notice the deliberately masculine feature on this woman. As the King gasps in surprise on screen, it is intended for the audience to laugh at the woman, much like the common circus caricature of the bearded lady. In this case, Doris was created deliberately to be a woman that has many distinct masculine characteristics, or a man that dressed up like a woman. This event reinforces heteronormative ideals because the King, a man who has power and is supposed to be idolized, has an obvious reaction to Doris and it is expected that the audience has a similar reaction because the audience is supposed to act in a similar manner to the King. Either way, these characteristics are harmful. Once again, facial hair is a common insecurity that transgender women tend to have and by creating a character to specifically highlight this insecurity, the movie plays into an instance of mainstream transphobia. As well as normalizing transphobia, placing a noticeable amount of stubble on a feminine presenting character suggests that having natural facial hair is not feminine and, unless the person removes the hair in question, they are not feminine enough and the hair ruins their aura of femininity. By having the characters on screen treat Doris differently because of her "mannish" features, it is suggested that the audience should treat individuals like Doris in a similar fashion. The viewer sees instances of transphobia on screen, and since it is framed as a joke rather than a major issue, transphobia becomes normalized.

Overall, Doris does not seem to be an outlandishly transphobic caricature, but her representation does contain several small instances of transphobia. For example, Larry King voices Doris. This may not seem like a noticeable issue for many people, but a common stereotype of transgender women is that they are just 'men in dresses' and due to this, they are not seen as true women as they should be. Portraying Doris through the use of a male voice actor continues to perpetuate the stereotypes that transgender women are often forced to fight against. By deliberately choosing King to voice a female character, the movie turns a common insecurity that transgender women tend to share into a joke that capitalizes off the general public's discomfort of transgender people and the fear that transgender people will 'trick' cisgender people if they do not pick up on these traits.

This element of trickery is especially noticeable in *Shrek the Third* when Doris becomes the butt of the joke when she is used as bait to attract the evil guards. In this scene, she sticks

her leg out from a corner and pulls her dress up, exposing her bare leg up to her garter. This exposure sexually interests the guards. They “ooh” and “ahh” and begin to walk towards her, but before they can get to her, she moves around the rest of the wall and shocks the guards with her deep voice. The guards gasp in surprise as Doris turns the corner exposing her face and greeting them by simply asking “hey, how’s it going?” before punching the guards and knocking them out (*Shrek the Third*). The reaction that the guards have from seeing Doris’ face and hearing her deep voice suggests to the audience that women are not allowed to have deep voices and if they do, it ruins their aura of femininity. While it could be argued that *Shrek the Third* supports Doris’ character because she outwits the evil guards, the problem remains that her ploy literalizes the metaphor in which a trans person’s goal is to trick the cisgender individuals for their own purposes.

This perpetuation of a heteronormative definition of femininity is not only damaging towards transgender women who are naturally predisposed to have deeper voices, but it also creates an issue for cisgender women, who may now infer that deep voices are not feminine. The *Shrek* franchise is a collection of children’s comedy films that contain harmful connotations toward individuals who do not fit the white cisgender heterosexual norm of femininity. Seeing these stereotypes in films promotes the idea that it is okay to laugh at people for being different from what is expected and what is ‘normal,’ further implying that transgender individuals, specifically transgender women, are included for no other reason than to be laughed at. This inclusion implies that transgender women will primarily be seen as a joke or they will not be taken seriously as a woman.

Doris’s name reveals an even more blatant example of transphobia. While her official name is Doris, more often than not, the other characters throughout the movies only refer to her as the Ugly Stepsister. For example, in *Shrek 2*, the King enters a bar and says, “excuse me, I-I’m looking for the ugly stepsister” to the bartender, a woman in a dress who is turned away from the camera (*Shrek 2*). As the King says this, the bartender turns around and shocks both the King and the audience. By not using her real name, the King, as well as every other character that does not call her Doris, are further supporting the idea that transgender individuals do not deserve the respect that is typically awarded to all people when they are called their name. Moreover, the word “ugly” reinforces the heterocentric idea that those who do not conform to heteropatriarchal gender standards will be perceived as unattractive.

The previously mentioned action by the King and other characters in *Shrek* also creates a mentality that Doris is different and is an “other,” or an alienated outsider, even though many of the characters that participate in creating this difference should be aware of the feeling of being an outsider or different. Several of the side characters were displaced in the 2001 movie when Lord Farquaad declared his kingdom to be free of any fairytale creatures and forced those unwanted citizens onto Shrek’s swamp. Watching the direct change in these character’s behavior, going from being understanding of different people and being empathetic towards all types of creatures, to calling a woman ‘the Ugly Stepsister,’ making insensitive jokes towards her throughout the series, and largely refusing to use her name shows the audience that being a marginalized individual does not prevent a person from being an oppressor and continuing the cycle of hate. Watching these instances of transphobia and misogyny become normalized, especially when these occurrences come from other marginalized individuals, truly puts it into perspective how little consideration and respect there is for transgender people, more

specifically transgender women, receive in a time that claims to be incredibly progressive and caring.

Doris is not the only transphobic caricature in the *Shrek* franchise. Briefly appearing in the first *Shrek* movie, the Big Bad Wolf, is a very prevalent transphobic stereotype. Although the Big Bad Wolf, nicknamed Wolfie, is referred to by he/him pronouns, and although he is assumed to be a cisgender male, many components of Wolfie's character urge viewers to understand that not all transgender coded characters are visibly transgender or gender nonconforming. In popular culture not all transgender-coded characters are actually transgender. One major example of the transphobia that Wolfie's depiction invites is his clothing. Throughout the series, every time he is seen on screen, Wolfie is wearing a nightgown and cap. This costume is not an issue alone; however, when it is paired with Wolfie's actions, it becomes transphobic. A large portion of other characters' interactions with Wolfie is noticing how odd it is that he is a male in a dress. Just as a male actor voiced Doris, Wolfie is voiced by Aron Warner. This choice once again points out the common insecurity that both transgender and cisgender women share, stating that deep voices are not feminine. This deliberate action of pairing a deep voice with a character in a dress creates a joke that harms all women with deep voices, both transgender and cisgender. This repeated element ~~not only~~ causes distress towards women, it also perpetuates the performative elements of white heterosexual femininity, which are just thinly veiled transphobia.

Not only does Wolfie play into transgender women's insecurities, his character is also a blatant stereotype of a transgender woman: he is depicted as a man in a dress, and his character is shown as predatory and greedy. Wolves are often thought to be hungry, villainous, and lustful, like many carnivores are painted to be. By choosing to trans-code a wolf, *Shrek* correlates the common fear of wolves as predators with transgender coding.

This indication that Wolfie is a predator created a negative stigma against transgender women, showing the audience that all transgender individuals are not only to be disrespected, they should also be feared. Wolfie's character is supposed to be a monster, which viewers understand from the wolf's full name: The Big Bad Wolf. By giving the character a fear inducing name as well as making this character a vicious predator, it becomes clear that the creator of Wolfie was intending to villainize transgender women through the use of this character.

Wolfie is shown as predatory in more than just the sense of being a carnivore. When Prince Charming finds Wolfie in *Shrek 2*, he pushes away the curtain to reveal the wolf, shown lying in bed while reading a magazine. The magazine in his hand, titled *Pork Illustrated*, has a scantily clad female pig on the front cover. The magazine is a parody of the well-known *Sports Illustrated*, which is well known for images of women in bikinis and other revealing outfits on the covers and in the pages for the enjoyment of heterosexual male readers. While this seems to be a joke targeted towards the adult audience, it becomes an element of transphobia since Wolfie is coded as a transgender woman. The joke is that a masculine appearing character is consuming media that is meant to be for heterosexual men, but the character is not necessarily a man. This stereotype, while being false, does potentially prey upon and or reinforce the public's fear and the scene at hand profits from this fear. This deliberate choice to place the *Pork Illustrated* magazine in Wolfie's paws demonstrates that the heteronormative and cisgender ideals that the *Shrek* franchise has been continuously displaying. This scene potentially activates the stereotype of transgender women being men who pretend to be

women so that they can enter women's changing rooms or bathrooms. For example, the curtains on the bed suggest the small enclosure of a changing room. Likewise, the curtains also suggest the privacy and secrecy in which sexual voyeurs "peep" at women. These curtains also provide a level of secrecy, where only the outline of Wolfie is able to be seen, so Prince Charming believes that Wolfie is the princess he has been tirelessly searching for. When it is revealed that Wolfie is not Fiona, there is a moment of hesitation and fear for Wolfie, as it is expected that Prince Charming is incredibly upset that he was "tricked" and this brings the potential of violence upon the wolf.

This transphobic correlation also contains repercussions for the white cisgender heterosexual norm of femininity. This joke is also at the expense of objectifying a woman. It encourages the audience to laugh at this objectification, so it becomes clear that the movie does not take into consideration the struggles transgender people or women face. When placing a character that is coded as a transgender woman into a situation where the primary purpose is to sexualize and objectify women, it is clear that the creator intended for the adult audience to pick up on the double meaning of the word "predator." As a carnivorous animal, Wolfie is coded as a predatorial transgender woman whose voyeuristic desire to objective women's bodies is treated as a joke, not a problem.

Wolfie's interaction with Prince Charming also indicates an element of trickery, much as Doris is also presented as a trick. In *Shrek 2*, Wolfie is seen as a silhouette as Charming approaches the bed in the tallest tower of the Dragon's Keep. Charming did not know Fiona had already been rescued, so he is taken aback when an ugly, hairy, deep-voiced wolf is laying in Fiona's bed. Charming gasps in disgust as Wolfie informs Charming that Fiona is happily on her honeymoon. Charming storms off in disgust and anger. Thinking more deeply about this interaction, it is quite noticeable that Charming is deeply upset that he encounters Wolfie rather than Fiona. It appears he is discouraged because Fiona is not where he expects to find her, but Charming would not have had that same reaction if there had been a different princess in that bed instead of Wolfie. This scene is almost a direct inversion, for example, of the scene in *Shrek* when Shrek finds Fiona. Charming was tricked, and by placing a transgender coded character in that situation further indicates the transphobic elements within this series.

It is not just speculation that Wolfie is supposed to be a transgender coded character. Later in *Shrek 2*, the Fairy Godmother recounts Charming's encounter with Wolfie. She states that Charming went all the way out to the Dragon's Keep, only to be met with some "gender confused wolf" rather than the beautiful princess Fiona he was expecting to rescue (*Shrek 2*). Wolfie's gender is turned into a complete joke, not acknowledging the transphobic situation that the movie created. The Fairy Godmother's tone is one of disgust when she refers to Wolfie. She is an "evil" character, so one could argue that her disgust is part of her evil nature; however, there is no corrective, alternative reaction to that disgust in this scene, further continuing the cycle of harmful white transphobic heteronormative patriarchal gender standards.

The *Shrek* movie series was not the only media that created a transphobic joke with Wolfie. Ten minutes into *Shrek the Musical* (Dir. Moore), the wolf introduces himself. The characters are discussing why Lord Farquaad decides that fairy tales characters are unfit to live on his land. Wolfie states that Farquaad kicked him out claiming he is a "hot and tr*nny mess" (*Shrek the Musical*). This line is a joke, and the recorded version of the musical shows the

audience laughing at that line. The use of the t-word is an extreme example of transphobia. That word has been used as a slur against transgender people, more often transgender women, and it is wildly inappropriate to place this word in this scenario. This musical is on Netflix, where it is also labeled as a suitable title for children and is even called a family movie. Exposure to transphobic behavior is arguably even more harmful in children than in adults, since it has greater potential to both introduce and reinforce the harmful recursive cycle of transphobia. By having these jokes in a childrens' movies it begins the ideal at a young age, makes it hard to stray away from harmful white heteronormative patriarchal gender roles because it is considered normal to be transphobic.

One surprising instance of transphobia and sexism comes from Pinocchio, one of the cisgender male characters. In *Shrek 2*, many of the side characters go to rescue Shrek, Donkey, and Puss in Boots. The side characters dive into the dungeon like spies, but they fall short. To reach Shrek, Pinocchio was required to lie so that Gingy could run across his nose. Donkey suggests that Pinocchio says that he wears women's underwear as an easy lie, but the truth is that Pinocchio does wear ladies' underwear. All the characters laugh at him for an extended period of time while he is forced to defend himself, reinforcing the idea that men cannot have hints of femininity or that they are looked down upon as men if they are interested in feminine things/clothing. Paying close attention to Pinocchio's reaction to this hazing truly shows the impact of these misogynistic comments. This scene shows the audience that a cisgender male acting like a woman will invite public ridicule, and further perpetuates the idea that transgender women are putting on a costume to pretend to be a woman and are just men in dresses, rather than acknowledging their maleness and "manning up" to becoming the men they truly are. This scene creates a situation in which men are forced to be embarrassed if they enact "femininity." Transphobic elements, both in the media and everyday life, not only perpetuate heterocentrism and transphobia; they also perpetuate patriarchal gender roles for cisgender women.

Choosing to watch *Shrek*, *Shrek 2*, *Shrek the Third*, and *Shrek the Musical* with a transgender lens allows for viewers to truly understand that the Ugly Stepsister and the Big Bad Wolf are transphobic caricatures for the audience to laugh at, furthering the idea that transgender women are not real women, and they are to be laughed at and not be taken seriously, unless they are being treated like they are men. The use of this lens also allows views to understand that Fiona and Pinocchio are both anti-feminist characters who are forced into heteronormative and cisgender boxes, as well as depicting the lack of support for those who do choose to remove themselves from the norm.

In conclusion, none of the first three movies in the *Shrek* franchise should not be considered a feminist movie. Although the fourth movie comes close to insighting feminist ideals, the ending cements the fact the *Shrek* franchise promotes cisgender and heteropatriarchal ideals as the end goal for all. Moreover, the first three are almost certainly harmful to the transgender community. This is especially true, considering these movies are geared towards children, with a PG rating. In the different ways described above, all four of these characters, Fiona, Doris, Wolfie, and Pinocchio, reinforce harmful white heteronormative transphobic patriarchal gender roles. Choosing to watch the films in the *Shrek* franchise through a transgender lens allows for viewers to truly understand that Doris, and Wolfie, the Big Bad Wolf, are transphobic caricatures for the audience to laugh at, furthering the idea that

transgender women are not real women, and they are to be laughed at and not be taken seriously. The movies within the *Shrek* franchise truly build the case themselves that they are not safe movies for either transgender people or women by perpetuating oppressive and harmful heteropatriarchal gender stereotypes.

Works Cited

- Marshall, Elizabeth, and Özlem Sensoy. "The Same Old Hocus-Pocus: Pedagogies of Gender and Sexuality in *Shrek 2*." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, vol. 30, no. 2, June 2009, pp. 151–164. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/01596300902809104.
- Roberts, Lewis. "'Happier Than Ever to Be Exactly What He Was': Reflections on *Shrek*, Fiona and the Magic Mirrors of Commodity Culture." *Children's Literature in Education: An International Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 1, Mar. 2014, pp. 1–16. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1007/s10583-013-9197-4.
- Shrek*. Directed by Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, performances by Mike Myers, Eddie Murphy, and Cameron Diaz, Dreamworks, 2001.
- Shrek 2*. Directed by Andrew Adamson, Kelly Asbury, and Conrad Vernon, performances by Mike Myers, Eddie Murphy, Cameron Diaz, Dreamworks, 2004.
- Shrek the Musical*. Directed by Jason Moore, performances by Brian d'Arcy James, Daniel Breaker, and Sutton Foster, Dreamworks, 2013, *Netflix*, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/70253398?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C1%2C00e65ea435191584a762cdbe803e3f498e81e916%3Aa614991c9bca4b6888e47791e932290a7d796a15%2C00e65ea435191584a762cdbe803e3f498e81e916%3Aa614991c9bca4b6888e47791e932290a7d796a15%2C%2C>.
- Shrek the Third*. Directed by Chris Miller, Raman Hui, performances by Mike Myers, Cameron Diaz, Eddie Murphy, Dreamworks, 2007.
- Shrek Forever After*. Directed by Mike Mitchell, performances by Mike Myers, Cameron Diaz, Eddie Murphy, Dreamworks, 2010.