It's Good to be 'Bad': Exploring the Re-Negotiation of Female Virtue and Happiness in *Once Upon a Time*

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Links between the performance of gender roles and happiness dominate in traditional fairy-tale narratives, which have provided Western societies with models of gender identification for decades (Zipes 1999). However, amongst rising critique of the genre's narrow rules of gender production, the trend towards the dissolution of such 'myths', "exhausted narrative and … ideologies" (Bacchilega 1997, p. 50) is evident.

This paper grounds the discussion about contemporary femininity in a discourse analysis of Once Upon A Time(ABC 2011-present), which, as a postmodern fairy tale, seeks to challenge traditional canons. Unpacking the narrative journey of Regina, this paper seeks to explore the ways in which the show both reproduces and subverts traditional views on femininity, and its links to happiness. Drawing on fairy-tale scholarship, gender studies and theories of postmodernism this paper demonstrates how the show highlights the tensions around femininity in a postmodern society, providing a more human female character.

Keywords*: Femininity, Happiness, Disney, Gender, Fairy Tales*

INTRODUCTION

> "These stories, the classics. There is a reason we all know them. They are a way for us to deal with our world" – Snow White (Once Upon a Time, S01E01)

Since their original telling, fairy tales have always undergone transformation, maintaining their hold on the imagination of people in "all walks of life throughout the world" (Zipes 2012, xi). Exerting a significant influence on our ideas of good and evil, models of manhood and womanhood, th ey projected fantasies and hopes of a 'happy ending' (Fisher and Sibler 2000). This explains the popularity of the show Once Upon A Time (further referred to as Once) which is based on classical tales re-imagined for a contemporary society. Produced and distributed globally by ABC, Once typifies what McCabe and Akass refer to as "the post- network … integration of content production and distribution within a vast multinational conglomerate" (2007, p. 240), which in this case is the Disney Corporation. The

$179.5 billion (Forbes 2015) media and entertainment giant owns the ABC network and studios, expanding its control over "the cultural life of the nation" (Giroux 1999, p. 19) and arguably the world given its reach.

'Disneyfied' (Zipes 1999) versions of stories have provided Western culture with models of 'proper' gender identification and morality for over a century (Bowman 2011). By appropriating and commercialising the fairy tale, Disney gained a "cultural stranglehold" (Zipes 1995, p. 21) on the genre, and happy endings in particular, presenting a "way of predicting outcome or fate according to sex" (Lieberman 1972, p. 384). Such links between performance of culturally constructed gender roles and happiness dominate in Disney's popular narratives (England et al. 2011), which serve as a basis for many of the key plotlines in Once. The opening of the pilot creates an intertextual link to these stories, and from the very beginning the show relies on viewers' familiarity with the characters and their "associated narrative conventions" (Williams 2010, p. 259):

 "Once upon a time, there was an enchanted forest filled with all the classic characters we know. Or think we know. One day they found themselves trapped in a place where all their happy endings were stolen. Our world" (S01E01). As a contemporary revision entering into a critical dialogue with previous interpretations, Once can be described as what Bacchilega (1997) refers to as a 'postmodern fairy tale': a text see king to "expose, make visible, the fairy tale's complicity with 'exhausted' narrative and ... ideologies" (p. 50) that "pattern our unconscious" (p. 22). By signalling that there is more than we 'think we know', Once draws on adults' intertextual memory to arguably challenge the authority of 'canon' narratives, uncovering the duplicity of fabled 'happy endings' and their "problematized relationship with reality" (Tiffin 2009, p. 4). This tension occurs due to the "utopian gloss" (Tiffin 2009, p. 1) with which 'classic Disney' tales tend to paint society, no longer reflecting the changing social context, but rather operating through nostalgic familiarity and therefore expressing profoundly reactionary views (Wasko 2001). By taking the narrative away from the "morally unambiguous [Disney] universe" (Pizer 1990, p. 330) and situating it in the realities of 'our world', Once allows itself to explore more controversial themes like rape, adultery, and homosexuality, and confront issues of gender, race, class, and morality. While all of the above offer rich possibilities for analysis, the construction of female characters, specifically Regina (Once's version of Disney's Evil Queen), and her storyline are the central focus of this study, mirroring long-standing academic critique of fairy tales' narrow "rules of narrative production" (Bacchilega 1997, p. 23) in regards to female roles (Stone 1975, Lieberman 1972).

Regina's character is 'morally ambiguous' (Shafer and Raney 2012), as she based on the villainous Evil Queen, yet over the course of the show she undergoes a dramatic development to become one of the main protagonists. The word 'hero' is deliberately not being used to describe her reformed self, as Once arguably transgresses such dichotomies of good and evil, instead producing a range of complex, multifaceted, more 'human' characters, of which Regina is a prime example. What is the significance of examining her story? As Thornham and Purvis note, "narrative concerns the ways in which the stories of our culture are put

together" (2005, p. 29), and these exists an undeniable bond between artistic representation and practices of human behaviour (Vieira 1991). Folklorist Zipes (2006) explains that each retelling of the fairy tale adapts itself to the social codes of the environment it is produced in, and so exploring the motifs inherent in contemporary revisions can help shine light on current discourses in Western society. A rising interest in multifaceted and morally questionable 'anti-heroes', that exists in contemporary culture, can be seen as inspired by the "aesthetic of moral relativism" (Calvin 2011 p. 231) that defines our times, and signals the need for society to explore the complexities in human existence (Shafer and Raney 2012). Studies in character perceptions suggest viewers enjoy complex figures more, as they can relate to their inner 'brokenness' (Sanders and Tsay-Vogel 2016; Michael 2013). However, gender remains a site of ongoing tension. Most anti-heroines are written into narratives that deny them redemption, something their male counterparts are privileged with, and simply dismissed as unlikeable, highlighting that women are still "rarely viewed as fully human" (Ashlock 2015; The New Yorker 2013), and only 'good girls' are 'worthy' of happiness (Bowman 2011). With this in mind, Regina's character offers a particularly interesting case study, as she is not penalised for her deviance in the same way as she would be in more traditional tales, and instead given a chance to find her 'happy ending'.

As Bacchilega notes, postmodern fairy tales are "both doubling and double: both affirmative and questioning" (1997, p. 22) in regards to the issues they tackle, and Regina's story in many ways highlights the controversies in contemporary understandings of femininity. Drawing on fairy-tale scholarship, gender studies and postmodernism this paper seeks to explore the ways in which Once both acknowledges and contests views on female virtue and happiness, and the links between the two. While postmodernism is a widely debated term, for the purposes of this study it is discussed both as a socio -historic condition influencing identity construction in our time period and a cultural trend with specific stylistic features (Gill 2007a; Sim 2001). Postmodernism best helps to understand what the show is set to do, as in its self-reflexive manner it is primarily concerned with the dissolution of binary oppositions and grand narratives, of which gender and morality are a part (Gill 2007a). Moreover, according to the postmodern paradigm, identity is in a state of constant flux, and is comprised of multiple roles that are adopted in fulfilment of the individual's desire (Abrudan 2011). Regina, as a postmodern character, takes on various 'roles' throughout the series and becomes a driver of narrative change. Given that the show currently has five seasons, an in -depth description of Regina's journey is out of scope for this study, so a discourse analysis of pivotal scenes from selected episodes will be carried out instead. As part of the argument is around Regina's 'humanness', her story will be discussed biographically, different from the way it was gradually revealed in the show. Please note that at the time this research is written season five is incomplete, therefore the analysis is based on plotlines as known to the author to date.

ONCE UPON A TIME…
          "Woman's virtue … is man's greatest invention" (Paulette 2014, p. 28).

To facilitate the subsequent analysis of Once's reimagining of the Evil Queen, and lay a foundation for comparison, this research paper begins by using existing academic literature to discuss what gender messages, ideas of happiness and symbolic meanings were inherent in the two most popular versions o f the Snow White story: The Grimm brothers' (1857) and Disney's (1937). As a means of setting up the context in which Once is produced, this section will also highlight some of the tensions around contemporary representations of femininity.

At the times when the Grimm brothers were collecting their stories, fairy tales were institutionalised as a way of endorsing the positions of patriarchal symbolic order, incorporating Christian values and ideals of womanhood. As stable family structure was seen as the foundation of a stable society, gender behaviours deemed appropriate for women were communicated through literature to ensure young girls were socialised into functioning as part of that structure (Zipes 1991). Bowman (2011) distinguishes between two basic elements of female existence: "survival and reproduction" (p. 81), which became established as appropriate desires for women within patriarchy. Fairy-tale narrative, thus, served as "secular mythology" (Bowman 2011, p. 81) outlining socially preferable characteristics of femininity, such as humility, obedience, and innocence, that would secure women a place in the social order, ensuring success in heterosexual relationships and, in turn, reproductive viability (Zipes 1991; Parsons 2004). Female solitude thereby did not fit within the conceptual framework of that era, and considered a threat to society, resulting in single ageing women who transgressed the functions of their sex becoming inextricably linked to sin and repugnance (Warner 1995).

As Marcia Lieberman observes: "women who are human, and who have power or seek it, are nearly always portrayed as repulsive" (1972, p. 393). In the Grimm's version of Snow White (1857), an ambitious Queen, whose vain materialistic desires (being the most beautiful) deviate from the socially acceptable, can only achieve what she wants by fraud, manipulation and crime (Fisher and Silber 2000). In the two female figures, the tale juxtaposes two developmental trajectories of femininity: "one passive, docile, and compliant with patriarchal norms, the other nomadic, creative and socially subversive" (Tatar 1999, p. 76). Indeed, the Queen rejects the role of a mother and thus denies the natural order, refusing to sacrifice her sexuality for her daughter and becomes not worthy of a place in society (Inge 2004; Feldman 2012). In fact, she is the only character in the story who has a clear goal and takes significant action to achieve it, a right prescribed exclusively to men in the patriarchal discourse. Her rebellion against the "feminine plot of passivity and submission" (Fisher and Sibler 2000 p. 123) and its deadly consequences become the only symbols of adult womanhood in the story. Both the protagonist, and the reader are forced to reject identification with this figure, deterred by the fear of social exclusion, and instead seek ultimate security in the bond with a "patriarchal designee: a rich and handsome prince" (Fisher and Sibler 2000, p. 125). This marriage, however, is moralistic, rather than romantic. It is a way for Snow White to finally escape the aggression of her opponent that prevented her sexual development, and gain social and financial security in a world of male domination she was prepared for (Stone 1980). Yet as critics observe, she merely exchanges "one glass coffin for another" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, p. 296) as she is

now locked in a dichotomy where she either becomes a 'good', dead mother like her own, or dies trying to escape this fate like her evil stepmother (Barzilai 1990). Whether cast into eternal sleep, or "dancing … to death in red- hot iron shoes" (Barzilai 1990, p. 520), both women are ultimately silenced, and Andrea Dworkin (1974) perfectly explains this position:

> "The good woman must be possessed. The bad woman must be killed, or punished. Both must be nullified. … The moral of the story … tells us that happiness for a woman is to be passive, victimized, destroyed, or asleep … It tells us that the happy ending is when we are ended, when we live without our lives or not at all" (p. 48-49).

It was Walt Disney that once and for all defined the ultimate 'happy ever after' as heterosexual love, by adapting the narrative to include the prince in the first few acts of the story and creating the notion of true love's kiss as a saving grace (England et al. 2011; Wilde 2014). This significantly changed the symbolic meaning behind the characters' conflict and the meaning of the tale itself (Stone 1980). The Queen's pres ence reduced to a function of driving narrative development by keeping the destined couple apart, representing a villainous force to be overthrown to achieve the heroes' happy resolution (Propp 1968). She is pitted against Snow White in what can be seen a rivalry for male approval "between the angel-woman and the monster- woman" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, p. 291), both of them sexualised to become "stereotypical product[s] of the Westernmalegaze"(Zipes2012, p. 78).

While Snow White is the innocent "ideal of feminine perfection" (Kawan 2008, p. 325) with her pleasant looks and art of good housekeeping (Tatar 1999), the Queen projects treacherous sexual energy, her seductive appearance akin to a femme fatale figure typical of the Hollywood classical films of that era (Bell 1995). Reinforcing what Zipes (2012, p. 78) described as the "witch/bitch" stereotype, she represents the the erotic forces of subconscious male desire, exemplifying the demonic powers of a female that "threaten to uproot man from himself" (Bell 1995, p. 115). Disney was the first to further demonise the Queen by giving her possession of magic, alluding to Catholic church traditions that saw female power through witchcraft as the epitome of deviance from patriarchal conventions (Federici 2004; Zipes 2012). While both women show self-reliance in their ways in line with American values of the 1930s, the Queen "takes her individualism and independence to an extreme, and … moves beyond the rules of civil society to narcissistic self-destruction" (Inge 2004, p. 140). Her demise in the Disney version comes as an accident, further stripping the 'good' characters of their ability to cause harm to anyone. Conveying the fundamental moral lesson that good will always triumph over evil (Wasko 2001), Disney reinforces a certain "punishment/reward system" (Fadina 2015, p. 56), closely linked to adherence to gender canons. As the couple rides off into the sunset there is a promise conveyed to 'good' girls by Disney: to be "chosen and elevated by a prince" one day (Lieberman 1972, p. 390), and be granted with a 'happily ever after' for what is essentially their own passivity (Tatar 1999; Bowman 2011). Such an open ending, omitting the realities of domestic life under patriarchy, gives women "the possibility of hope" (Warner 1995, p. 219) for a similar outcome if only they follow in the heroine's footsteps (Stone 1980).   Since the rise of the second-wave feminist

movement in Europe and North America in the late 1960s, arguments about the "value of fairy tales in the shaping of gendered attitudes about self, romance, marriage, family, and social power" (Bacchilega 2013, p.7) became more prominent as academics sought to expose their repressive patriarchal ideologies (Bacchilega 1997; Joosen 2005). At the same time, a growing societal critique of representations of women in the media pointed to their active (re)production of narrow gender scripts and denial in reflecting the realities of the changing social context, in which female emancipation was growing (Gill 2007a; Devereux 2007). With the advent of the 21st century, a new discourse of post-feminism emerged arguing that equality has been achieved and the politics of patriarchal critique are no longer needed, as women now have the freedom to choose to what kind of life they want to live and re-embrace traditional femininity if they so desire (McRobbie 2009). As such, 'traditional' views on female identities persisted, yet became repackaged and "sold ... as empowering" (Dines 2015, p. 439), contributing to the extreme 'contradictoriness' (Gill 2007a) of gender messages in postmodern Western societies (Whitley 2008). As McRobbie (2009) observes, the authority of male approval became replaced with self-imposed benchmarks "against which women must endlessly and repeatedly measure themselves" (p. 63) in order to retain their relevance in the postmodern image-based society (Dines 2015). Aspiring to cultural norms and part-taking in a 'masquerade of excessive femininity' (McRobbie 2009) for women became proposed as a way to 'hav e it all' (Austin et al. 2010) and achieve contentment (Hockley 2015). In reality, however, the rising rates of depression, divorces, and loneliness (Whitley 2008) signalled a growing dissatisfaction with media-produced 'myths of happiness' (Hockley and Fadina 2015) and the need for women characters in popular media to become "the most honest of all things — human" (Gay 2014).

THE PRINCESS THAT WAS NEVER SAVED

Postmodern fairy tales, as previously observed, work to constitute an ideological test for prior interpretations (Bacchilega 1997), often relying on the use of parodic representation, which functions through a structural parallel to the texts it wishes to subvert (Hutcheon 1989). In other words, they adopt a narrative pattern similar to the original text and use the same recognisable conventions of style and representation. In Once, before she becomes Evil Queen, Regina is much more like a traditional fairy tale princess, a young, attractive girl with little ambition other than to escape the aggression of an older woman (Stone 1980). Her story mirrors the Disney version of the Snow White tale, with an irredeemable despotic mother figure, Cora, who aims to control her daughter's life and is not afraid to resort to physical and emotional abuse in order to do so. Such absence of 'healthy' motherly love further sets Regina up in the position of a 'traditional' heroine. The mother-daughter conflict in Once is explored in-depth, something non-existent in any previous versions, despite the importance of the mother figure in shaping adolescent girls' gender identity and behaviour (Zahn- Wahler and Polanichka 2004). Cora completely neglects her daughter's desires in light of her own ambitions, ultimately standing in the way between Regina and her love interest,

her family's stable boy, Daniel (S01E18). Not being the 'rich and handsome' designee of royal blood, idealised in traditional tales (Fisher and Sibler 2000), he is not seen as a worthy match for Regina, who is encouraged to believe that "one's trajectory needs to keep moving up" (S01E18).

Ideas of marriage as a means of upward social mobility and financial security, perpetuated in the Grimmstories (Stone1980), are frequently reinforced by Cora, who urges her daughter to behave like 'a lady' to attract an appropriate suitor, as typified in this dialogue:

> "Cora: You ride like a man. A lady should be graceful. You should use a saddle. Regina: I was just having fun. Cora: Well, you're getting a little old for fun. Who's going to want to marry you when you behave like a commoner?... [You're] becoming an old maid. All the other girls [your] age are married. I had such high hopes" (S01E18).

Being 'a lady' is inextricably linked to one's ability to receive a marri age proposal, which is painted, both in this mother-daughter interaction and traditional fairy tales, as the cornerstone of adult female experience and rests on the act of displaying socially constructed gender-appropriate behaviours (Parsons 2004). Such 'performative' aspects of gender (Butler 2006) are reinforced through Cora's attempts to change Regina's appearance, from horse riding pantsuits to dresses, tiaras and let-down hair – all indispensable elements of a typical Disney princess' existence (Stover 2013). While Regina regards such interference as criticism, her mother believes she is helping and physically punishes her daughter for disobedience through magic:

> "Regina: Why can't I just be myself? Cora: Oh, because you can be so much more. If you'd just let me help you... Regina: I don't care about status. I just want to be- [Cora magically wraps the reins around Regina, cutting off her air supply] Regina: Please... I'll be good" (S01E18)

Regina's desire to deviate is silenced, as in all traditional tales, equating 'goodness' to the patriarchal 'feminine ideal': passive and obedient. She represents the rebellious female self, yet, unlike her demonised predecessors, is free from materialistic desires. "I don't want power. I want to be free", – confesses Regina to her mother (S02E02), concerned with "developing a sense of self that does not depend on riches, beauty, or social standing" (Stone 1980, p. 34). Theorist Zygmunt Bauman (1992, p. 198) observes that "the capacity for self-construction and the denial of such capacity, ... autonomously conceived self-definitions and imposed categorisations experienced as constraining and incapacitating" represent the most prominent social division under postmodern conditions, and that it is the freedom of choice that constitutes agency in such an environment. For Regina, the constraints on her character become quite real as she is forced into marrying Snow White's father. The whole affair is a clever set-up orchestrated by her mother: the proposal comes as a result of Regina saving young Snow White from a runaway horse, magically cursed by Cora. Even though Regina had no intentions of accepting the King's proposal, Snow's interference in finding out about her 'true love' with the stable boy resulted in the latter being killed by Cora, after she manipulated the girl to reveal Regina's secret (S01E18). This betrayal of trust becomes the key reason for the conflict between Regina and Snow ,taking it away fromthetraditionaltale'spatriarchalaestheticthatpittedwomenagainsteachothersole

ly on the basis of competition for male approval. Although the King's admiration of his daughter's beauty and devotion to her become problematized, in Once they rather serve to further illustrate the neglect and social exclusion Regina was experiencing in life.

Zygmunt Bauman (1995) describes the postmodern era as a fading of illusions, and part of the mission of contemporary disenchantment of the fairy tale is related to "a now-public dissatisfaction ... with the reality of the social conditions that canonized tales of magic idealize" (Bacchilega 2013, p. 5). Regina's engagement story is a twisted version of the 'love' at first sight narrative of tales perpetuated by Disney (Whelan 2012). Just like the prince in Disney's Snow White falls in love with the girl as she is demonstrating her household capabilities, the King in Once admires Regina for the traditionally feminine 'nurturing' characteristics that she exhibits in saving Snow. His only ambition is to find a woman with an interest in his daughter, and thus Regina's sole function is reduced to becoming a mother. Her life becomes a direct opposite of a typical princess narrative (Whelan 2012): trapped in a loveless marriage with no prince to come and take her troubles away, and no supporting allies to help her get though the hardships. Regina's is a tragedy of lost innocence and naïveté about the world, much like the postmodern woman gives up hope of a fairy- tale happy ending when faced with the realities of "the inevitable shortcomings and disappointments" in life (Pritchard 2014; Purnell and Bowman 2008, p. 359). Regina's way out is cynicism and a natural urge to defend herself from pain by "transforming the experience of being threatened into the experience of making the threat" (Ihilevich & Gleser, 1991, p. 18). Snow White becomes her vehicle for expressing anger and the sublimated object that Regina places the blame onto, unable to accept her own involvement in what happened. "In these postmodern times, one is either on the bandwagon or is left behind" (Cooper and White 2012, p. 96), meaning there is an inevitable necessity of making choices about one's life on a daily basis, and adapt to the changing context in order to exist. While the Disney world struggles to explore dealing with defeat, failure, or injustice (Wasko 2001), Once portrays its antagonist finding ways to cope with her situation.

Broken by her experiences and left to her own devices, Regina resorts to magic as a means of acquiring power to overthrow the abuse from her mother that denies her control over her life and identity. "Power is freedom", – her mother advises her (S02E02), and magic in Once is a metaphorical credit card, representing the postmodern promise of instant gratification with a delay in payment (Bauman 1995). Yet all magic "comes at a price", the show warns (S01E02). For Regina, this price is becoming the Evil Queen and the social exclusion she experiences as a result. Miller (2004) observes how there exists an intrinsic tendency to "endow the actor wit h moral traits that correspond to the acts themselves – that is people, who do good deeds are, themselves, good; those who do evil are evil" (p. 2-3). If in the traditional tale presumably no one was aware of the Queen's nature, in Once it is known to everyone. Unlike the Grimms' and Disney versions, she is no longer vilified for her vanity, but for laughter in villages and torturing innocent common people in her pursuit for Snow White. It is this range of violent behaviours that she displays that get her the reputation of 'Evil'. Miller emphasises the importance of

"the eye of the beholder" (2004, p. 5) in interpreting any social acts, and through taking the audience from the insularity of the traditional narrative into Regina's life world, Once arguably blurs the moral binaries. In her view, Regina is gaining justice, hoping that after killing Snow White she can make the villagers see her as she sees herself: the real victim of the story. However, the social condemnation ultimately drives Regina to accept herself as others see her: "The Queen is dead. Long live the Evil Queen!" – she proclaims (S02E02). This final act of giving in to the 'unacceptable' allows her to once and for all forego the concerns over reputation that come to dominate lives of young women in Western societies (Coppock et al. 1995). In fairy tales "appearances belie other realities" (Vieira 1991, p. 363), and just as the 'obedient daughter', the villain becomes another act of Regina's fractured self as she adapts to this new situation. S he alludes to stereotypical dark outfits and heavy make-up, in doing so forcing a comparison with her Disney predecessor, and places herself in the familiar role of the 'evil bitch' (Zipes 2012). Yet unlike her counterpart, Regina's self-reflexivity and theatricality in 'playing' the bad guy arguably serves as a way of ridiculing the fairy tale genre's over- simplistic means of representation (Hutcheon 1989). Having succeeded in affirming her individuality on her own terms and freeing herself from the constraints of 'normalisation' (Iftode 2015), she is now faced with the inevitable loneliness of her moral decision (Bauman 1992). And while staying in the Enchanted Forest would have never allowed her character to change, by enacting the curse she strips hersel f away from the "morally unambiguous universe" of the fairy-tale land (Pizer 1990, p. 330) and unknowingly places herself on the road to redemption.

EVIL IS MADE, BUT SO IS GOOD

"The negotiation of a character's heroism (or villainy) is fleshed out ...
by the examination of moral choices made" (Reynolds 1992, p. 40-41).

Moving to Storybrooke gives Regina a fresh start and 'human' alter-ego, and therefore a freedom to exercise her choice between good and evil, which Bauman (1995) sees as the meaning of being moral. Her struggles to make the 'right' decisions shape her transformation arc in the series and ultimately illuminate her complexity, allowing her to be perceived as more 'real' by the audience. Like the postmodern subject, she is faced with the diversity of voices and tensions within her character and the effort to maintain her identity (Iftode 2015). The nature of identity itself becomes problematized, as Regina attempts to balance the multiple fractions within her personality: the Evil Queen, Storybrooke town mayor, and a mother, resisting the urge to fall back into her evil ways. This drive to become 'good' emerges primarily through her relationship with her adopted son, Henry, and the experience of motherhood becomes central to Regina's redempti on. In postmodern ethics, such responsibility for another human being is seen as a way of relieving "emotional isolation" (Marcus 2008, p. 48), and Regina's view of her son as the metaphorical fairy-tale 'prince' that saves her reaffirms this belief:

"Once upon a time there was a queen. And she cast a glorious curse
that gave her everything she wanted... or so she thought. She
despaired when she learned that revenge was not enough. She was

> lonely. And so she searched the land for a little boy to be her pri nce.
> And then... she found him" (S03E09).

Through caring for another, one cares for and heals himself (Marcus 2008), and Once re-emphasises this idea, suggesting that "a mother's love is stronger than her dark heart" (ABC 2013). In placing Regina within such a gendered transformation arc, the show seemingly resorts back to 'exhausted' narrative, recalling the Christian tradition that has exemplified childbearing as the redemption from sin (Warner 1995). However, it can be argued that Once does more than simply perpetuate motherhood ideology, but rather uses it to draw attention to some of the tensions around feminine identities in postmodernity (McRobbie 2009) and the dissolution of 'mother' as a "fixed, essentialized quality" (Kaplan 1992, p. 219). Motherhood has been socially constructed as a critical aspect of femininity and the ultimate meaning of the word woman (Gillespie 2000), and traditionally used to to lock women into the domestic sphere. However, experiencing motherhood does not condemn Regina to a subordinate role idealised within a patriarchal discourse (Coppock et al. 1995). By having her adopt her son rather than give birth to him and raise him on her own, Once reinforces her independence, and showing her struggles with the new-born works to demystify motherhood as a biologically inherent trait (Choi et al. 2005). Regina's struggles between the 'self -sacrificing' instincts of the 'Good Mother' and the 'destructiveness' of her inner dark self (Kaplan 1994; Bowman 2011) reflect anxieties of contemporary women, who are similarly faced with a feeling of being unable to match the ideals of 'supermums' (Choi et al. 2005) and are unwilling to deny their selfhood outside mothering (Glenn et al. 1994). While motherhood remains a critical role in postmodernity, the number of other social functions available to women has increased, complicating identity construction and the 'price' paid for particular commitments (Austin et al. 2010). The expectation of 'having it all', a product of the postmodern era (Austin et al. 2010), is deconstructed through the reality Regina has to face: Henry would be the 'price' she would have to pay to get her vengeance (S02E17). The theme of sacrifice has historically been considered as an important aspect of a hero's journey to transformation (Campbell 2008; Vogler 1992), and in Once works to affirm Regina's desire to change. However, in Regina's case choosing Henry is not a sacrifice of selfhood, but rather a 'letting go' of a feeling that 'stifles' in order to "focus energy on [the situation] that lift[s]" her (Purnell and Bowman 2014, p. 178), and signifies her activity over passivity:

> "The Queen was worried for her prince's safety. While she knew she
> could vanquish any threat to the boy, she also knew she couldn't raise
> him without worrying. No. She needed to put her own troubles aside.
> And put her child first. And so the Queen procured an ancient potion
> of forgetting" (S03E09).

In emphasising that she is still 'the Evil Queen', Regina contests the binary that divides 'good' and 'bad' mothers, and therefore 'good' and 'terrible' women (Bowman 2011). She is a good mother to Henry, putting his needs first, yet she retains her sassy, sarcastic and subversive identity, traditionally seen as aspects of 'treacherous femininity'. The show therefore allows her to possess the same traits as the Evil Queen, but put them to a 'socially worthy' cause (Sanders and Tsay-Vogel 2016). Through her developing maternal instincts Regina makes an effort to improve relationships with other characters and works with them to secure her

son's happiness. Her 'right' choices become linked to "restraining individual self-interest to make group life possible" (Baumeister and Graham 2012, p. 406). The theme of sacrifice is thus further developed, as group 'life' in Once is rather literal: on several occasions Regina is faced with a choice to give herself up to save everyone from an upcoming threat (S02E22; S03E11). Such a display of pro-social acts, "involving helping, social inclusion, assistance, support, volunteerism, and empathy" (Miller 2004, p. 4) earn Regina the social acceptance she so desired in the Enchanted Forest, and ultimately celebrate her deviance, as her powers give her ability to resolve situations where the conventional 'heroes' fail.

Empathy and forgiveness become key themes in Regina's transformation, as Once lets its Queen and Snow White experience something that no traditional tale has ever imagined: a resolution of the conflict. The patriarchal myth of the demonic older woman becomes obsolete in the real world, where Snow and Regina are both adults. No longer are they binary opposites, the 'angel' and the 'monster' of patriarchy (Gilbert and Gubar 1979), but human beings able to admit their flaws and put the past behind them for the sake of a common goal of saving their loved ones (S03E18). While female bonding was something unimaginable for any traditional tale serving the needs of patriarchy, Once breaks away such treatment of "more-than-two- women-together as a menace to society" (Chambers 2006, p. 84) by putting its heroines at the heart of decision-making and thus making them the "bearers of discursive authority" (Thornham and Purvis 2005, p. 115) on questions of morality. Their union works to empower both characters in their exposal of the duplicity of a binary division of traits they were historically forced to represent:

> "Snow White: You have literally seen my heart. You know it's not untouched. You are not all evil, and I'm not all good. Things are not that simple. ... Your stories went poorly because you made bad choices. But now you're making good ones. ... If you stay the course, your happiness will come" (S04E08).

By finally becoming able to accept her life as the consequence of her decisions, Regina is placed a position of agency over her own 'stories' and status, challenging the authority of fairy-tale canon and the predetermined function she was made to enact. The theme of the importance of moral choices becomes more evident when Regina is pitted against the Wicked Witch of the West, Zelena. Once uses Zelena as a 'mirror' image of Regina, reflecting everything the latter moved away from: desire for revenge, envy, and inability to see herself anything other than a victim of others' faults:

> "Zelena: Don't tell me what I can be! I tried to be good once, but it wasn't in the cards. This is who I am, and it's who you are!" (S03E20).

In her self-reflective awareness of her place in the fairy-tale dichotomy, Zelena voices Regina's own concerns over the possibility of redemption, and the struggles around understanding her identity in its full. "I am a villain. And villains don't get happy endings", – admits Regina (S03E11), and her internal struggle to balance the fragments within her fractured self and piece herself together as one is reflected in her and Zelena's fight. In juxtaposing the two, Once alludes to the battle "between two halves of a single personality" (Barzilai 1990, p. 520) that explain the binary good/bad character division in traditional tales (Bettelheim 1991). Regina's intent,

however, is not to kill the 'the other in the self', but rather accept its existence and exercise her 'freedom of choice' over an alternative solution (Bauman 1995):

> "Regina: Heroes don't kill. Zelena: So now you're a hero? Regina: Today, I am" (S03E20)

Regina's reference to 'today' illustrates the tensions in the ongoing nature of identity construction. While traditional gender scripts are still present within her narrative arc, they rather serve to further highlight the complexity of dealing with gender in postmodernity. However, by demonstrating that morally worthy actions are what make up characters' virtue, Once does distance itself from the simple "good girl/bad girl" dichotomy (Bowman 2011, p. 83) based solely on conformity to feminine stereotypes. And like the postmodern paradigm, Regina's journey reassures that anything can be transformed and renewed as long as there is a desire for change (Adrudan 2011).

HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

Postmodernity is governed by the "pursuit of individual happiness" (Bauman 1997, p. 3), and just like the other characters in Once, Regina's drive to action is fuelled by her desire to achieve her 'happy ending'. However, over the course of the show her perspective on what it constitutes changes, once again exposing some of the romance 'myths' perpetuated by classic Disney (Wasko 2001):

> "Love, true love, is magic. And not just any magic: the most powerful
> magic of all. It creates happiness" (S01E18), –

Young Regina tells Snow thinking of Daniel, reflecting the very idea Disney audiences were brought up to believe: that female empowerment and liberation is closely linked to "catching and loving a handsome man" (Giroux 1999, p. 99). This patriarchal belief is reinforced in Once even after Regina steps onto the path to darkness, and is offered a possibility of escaping her 'evil' fate. The lack of a satisfying life and social isolation that Regina experienced after becoming Queen, present her in a 'damsel in distress' position (Whelan 2012), to which a classically romantic solution is prescribed. "You need love", – asserts Tinker Bell, a fairy determined to help Regina escape the imprisonment of an unfulfilling marriage by finding her soul mate:

> "Inside here lies the beginning of your happiness. All the pain in your
> past will be just that. The past" (S03E03).

Tinker Bell is the voice of fairy tale canon itself, functioning to return a rebellious character back to the constraints of a 'traditional' heroine's plot of submissiveness (Fisher and Sibler 2000). In the fairy's view, being tempted by evil makes Regina "exactly someone who could use help" (S03E03) and can be interpreted as a re-affirmation that only certain types of women are worthy of a happy ending. Moreover, her claim once again exposes the inability within patriarchy to acknowledge the acceptability of female independence in defining their own happiness. Alluding to the Victorian ideals of love as attaining "supreme existence through losing oneself in the other" (De Beauvoir 1953, p. 614), what Tinker Bell sees as happiness not only promotes the normative heterosexual resolution, but paints any other experiences a woman's life might include meaningless in comparison to a romantic union. Thus, whether becoming a couple with her soul

mate, Robin Hood, or gaining power through marriage to the King, the ways to happiness Regina is presented with by women in the magical realm paint her the prospects of being subordinate and define herself "almost exclusively in terms of dominant male narratives" (Giroux 1999, p. 98-99).

"Tinker Bell: Was being happy such a terrible fate?
Regina: Yes. Yes, it was. ... I was afraid. ... You said I can let go of the anger that was weighting me down and suddenly it felt like—without it—I would just flood away. That anger was all I had. What would I be without it?" (S03E03).
Regina represents what in Stone's view is the true meaning of the fairy tale: "not about finding one's prince or princess, but about finding one's self" (1980, p. 35), and her anxieties about the importance of her own identity mark her difference from conventional Disney heroines, guided solely by their quest for love (Wasko 2001). Reflecting the "focus on personal experience of the se lf" (Raghu 2015, p. 8) in postmodernity, Regina is rather concerned with "real and frightening conflicts with [her]self – conflicts not simply resolved with the appearance of a lover" (Stone 1980, p. 35).

By making a choice to reject meeting her soul mate in the fairy tale land, Regina has allowed herself self-realization, making her encounter and subsequent relationship with Robin Hood in the real world a "mutual recognition of two liberties" (De Beauvoir 1953, p. 667). Regina and Robin's love story works to demystify the notions of 'love at first sight' and 'one true love' propagated not only by Disney itself, but numerous popular films (Hefner and Wilson 2013). Not only does their romance take time to develop, resting on the "informal, casual and unceremonious character of everyday interactions" (Illouz 1998, p. 168), but it's not the first one for either of them. Contrary to the promise of a worry-free 'happily ever after', their relationship is a project requiring effort and commitment, and is complicated by the presence of Robin's ex- wife and child, reflecting some of the realities of contemporary life (Dowd and Pallotta 2000). While there is no doubt about the 'destiny' behind their love, it is no longer painted as the only 'way out' available to a woman, rather an exercise Regina's choice over what kind of life she wants to lead, somewhat alluding to contemporary discourses of post-feminism (Gill 2007b). Yet nevertheless it preserves the fairy tale's wondrous quality, as unlike young women in postmodernity, Regina does not have to allude to a 'masquerade' in order to remain desirable (McRobbie 2009). The meaning of 'true love' in Once is equated to unconditional acceptance, an empowering force that encourages people to be the best versions of themselves. It is articulated by Robin on numerous occasions as he comforts Regina, saying he sees and believes in the best in her, despite knowing about her monstrous past (S04E01). While it may seem like Regina is swiftly subjected to a classical fairy-tale resolution (Wilde 2014), in a self-reflecting manner Once is quick to reassure the sceptical viewer that a heterosexual romance is not solely what Regina's happiness encompasses:

"Zelena: Another woman defining her happiness relative to the love of
a man. Sad, really. Regina: Oh, don't get it wrong... Robin isn't my
happy ending. My happy ending is finally feeling at home in the world.
Robin is just a part of that world" (S04E21)

As Zipes (2012) points out, feelings of being misfit for the world and the subsequent resolution of such feelings are inherent parts of the fairy tale, aimed to

guide people through their own anxieties (Bolaki 2010). Bauman (1997) sees such an 'acclaim of belonging' as a natural state for the postmodern subject, who sees a community as a 'safe place' with which he wishes to identify (Donskis 2011). The theme of being different runs through the whole of Regina's narrative, but unlike some of Disney's latest creations that seem to celebrate ideals of individuality, she does not become "forever an outcast within the princess ideology" (Wilde 2014, p. 148):

> "Regina: When I was the Evil Queen, I spent every day not giving a damn about anyone. And in return, no one cared about me. I thought all I needed was my vengeance to keep me warm at night. But then something happened. My enemies became my family. And that's when I finally felt happy" (S05E16).

'Feeling happy' for Regina means being accepted not just by her romantic interest, but society at large. And as the show and this research paper seek to demonstrate, it comes with a celebration of her deviance, guided by her capacity to love and accept herself, embracing all the aspects of her fractured identity. Her happy ending is thus not an ending at all, but rather a change in perspective, that states while life might not be perfect, it is the ability to hold "hope, trust, and belie[ve] in goodness" (Klein 1975, p.180), and letting go of the negative that truly changes one's life. Like in the postmodern world, Once shows how each Regina's choice has consequences, that are "difficult to evaluate, impossible to predict and which are ultimately irrevocable" (Cooper and White 2012, p. 96-97). No longer silenced and trapped by the constraints of patriarchy or the fairy-tale canon, she is able to proclaim loud and clear: "I'm so tired of standing in the way of my own happiness and I'm not going to do it anymore" (S04E21), conveying what may be the essence of the postmodern condition that "we are all artists and creators of our own lives (Donkis 2001, p.133), regardless of our gender.

CONCLUSION

As humans, we have a powerful belief that we "ought to be happy, and that if we are not then there must be something intrinsically and deeply wrong with us" (Hockley and Fadina 2015, p.3). As the beginning of this research paper has shown, the fairy tale genre has historically linked certain ideals of femininity and virtue to a woman's ability to achieve a 'happy ending', and Disney in particular has succeeded in associating it with the promise of a love story, proclaiming its authority over narrative conventions of the genre (Zipes 1995). In a postmodern society, however, especially for women, the gap between expectations and reality remains a site of ongoing tension. Amongst these debates, Once's postmodern take on the fairy tale arguably attempts to deconstruct some of the genre's narrative patterns and assumptions. As this paper sought to demonstrate, it is "both doubling and double" (Bacchilega 1997, p. 22) in regards to the female role and fate, making it self-consciously both a "product of and producer of ideology' (Hutcheon 1989, p. 34). It has to be acknowledged that with regards to analysing contemporary culture there is no single type of critical practice, and any text can be read in many competing, at times "diametrically opposed" (Gill 2007a, p. 38)

ways. While looking at one character in particular may have imposed certain limitations on the outcomes of this research, it has nevertheless provided insights into contemporary discourses of femininity.

Regina's story typifies the complexity of identity construction in postmodernity, as she both adheres to and rejects traditional gender canons. The types of narratives she is written into, such as a marriage, motherhood and a heterosexual relationship, undoubtedly remain quite gendered, and in this sense the show is affirming the presence and relevance of such discourses within society. Despite this claims, rather than prescribing them as disputed elements of a woman's existence that govern their identity construction. Once uses them to offer psychological insights into the anxieties and tensions they impose. Throughout her journey, Regina encounters characters, such as her mother and Tinker Bell, who in some way serve as the voice of the fairy-tale canon. While the first promotes materialistic desires and in herself mirrors the demonic (step)mother figure of the past, the second offers the deceitful traditional myth of female happiness: a bond with a man as "the ultimate in emotional security of existence" (Bettelheim 1991, p. 11). What Regina demonstrates in dealing with both is an ultimate desire to define herself on her own terms, and exercise her "freedom ... in life to be a fully autonomous individual" (Wilde 2014, p. 148). In acknowledging these tensions, Once thus does not distance itself too far from fairy tales' main functions of guiding choices, alleviating fears, or helping deal with psychological crises (Bolaki 2010), but rather suggests new ways of doing so.

"The sin of postmodernity is to abandon the effort and to deny the belief" (Bauman 1992, xvii). The theme of a struggle in making 'right' choices and maintaining an identity is one that runs throughout Regina's narrative. Through presenting her as a character with depth and moral ambiguity, and illuminating the complexity of her life, Once takes her away from the simple good girl/bad girl dichotomy that dominates traditional tales, and arguably succeeds in disassociating 'goodness' with passivity and innocence. Being 'good' is ultimately constructed based on pro-social behaviours, and, in this sense, Regina becomes celebrated for her deviance from 'traditional' gender characteristics. Moreover, as Regina's early years demonstrate, adhering to canon does not guarantee one a particular outcome, and it is the decisions you make towards your future that ultimately define it. In embracing her difference and all aspects of herself, Regina finally finds her own path to happiness. In a postmodern world where there is no such thing as a universal truth or standard and diversity is celebrated (Bauman 1992), such examples serve to prove that women "need not walk the same paths as their foremothers in order to reach the story's happy ending" (Williams 2010, p. 270). And as Regina's story works to demonstrate, "the ending is actually the true beginning" (Zipes 1999, p. 4) of a life that is governed not by canon, but self-acceptance.

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