



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

**Hugvísindasvið**

# **The Postmodern Princesses**

*In Illustrated Icelandic Children's Literature*

**B.A. Essay**

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**May 2014**

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## Abstract

Traditionally a princess story happens long time ago, in a faraway land where a beautiful princess awaits her brave prince to save her from an evil force and sweep her off her feet and marry her; however, there is nothing traditional with postmodern princess stories. Postmodernism subverts the classic and stereotypical princess and turns her whole world upside down. The princess is no longer the blond haired and blue eyed angel-like figure, who questions nothing and happily marries whomever it is that saves her. Moreover, the male saviour is emasculated and the importance of his role is questioned. This essay focuses on princesses in illustrated Icelandic children's literature and the importance of illustrations in postmodern fairy-tale based picture books as well as the positive effect it can have on readers whether they are children or adults. A comparison is made between the classic Icelandic princess story, *Sagan af Dimmalimm* ("The Story of Dimmalimm") and three early twenty-first century postmodern princess stories, *Sagan af undurfögru prinsessunni og hugrakka prinsinum hennar* ("The Tale of the Most Beautiful Princess and her Brave Prince"), *Prinsessan á Bessastöðum* ("The Princess at Bessastaðir") and *Askur og prinsessan* ("Askur and the Princess"). While the old fairy-tales and the old classics hold on to customs and norms the postmodern princess stories celebrate diversity. The archetypes such as the maiden and the hero that represent the princess and the prince in classic fairy-tales are replaced. The maiden has become a strong female figure that is completely self-reliant and in no need for a saviour. The hero is turned into a scrawny, blind prince with no sense of direction and a peasant boy who is in fact homosexual and has no interest in the princess or her kingdom.

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## Introduction

Princess stories have existed for centuries in fairy-tales, folktales and in children's literature. The setting of a princess story usually happens either faraway or long ago (or both), in a kingdom where there is an adventure seeking and heroic prince or a princess in need of a hero to save her from an evil force or her loneliness. The characters in princess stories have consisted throughout the history on repetitive Jungian archetypes such as the maiden, the hero, the shadow, the trickster (Cohen-Posey G.1) and more. The archetypes follow their true pattern as the hero (the prince) fights the shadow (the dark animalistic obstacle) in order to save the maiden (the princess). Although princess stories are tales about princesses or young maidens destined to become princesses those girls tend to live a rather uneventful or unsuccessful life up until the point their hero or Prince Charming, sweeps them off their feet and saves them. Without the male saviour there would be no climax in the story and most of all there would be no happily-ever-after ending to the story.

Fairy-tales such as the princess stories do not focus solely on the princess even though hero stories have tendency to focus solely on the male heroic protagonist. In fact the princess does not do very much in the typical princess story. Granted the female figure is noticeable and admired in princess stories but the hero shares in the spotlight. Hourihan describes the male hero as a superior character that subdues his feelings and sees opposition as inferior force of evil. He is both dominant and the embodiment of the western interconnected dualism (58). The princess, or the princess to be, seems to only have the purpose to become a bride. While the hero's personality is usually described in the stories as a strong and heroic the princess is usually described as Hourihan states; delicate, beautiful and small. She is: "The golden-haired bride who is the hero's reward is usually also slender, delicate and very young" (195). If her personality is described at all in the story she is usually described as sweet, loving, gentle and kind.

There are few instances where the princess saves the prince and when she does save the prince she does so without any heroic action. She saves him by being so loving, kind and gentle that the curse is automatically lifted. This scenario happens for example in *The Frog Prince* from the Grimm's fairy-tales where the princess kisses a frog, who happens to be a prince, and by doing so lifts the curse off the prince. The princess also saves the prince in *Sagan af Dimmalimm* (1921) by Guðmundur

Thorsteinsson where the prince is a swan and the curse is lifted because the princess is so obedient and kind. The most known example of this is though the story of *Beauty and the Beast* by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve where Beauty lifts the curse off the prince simply by loving him and because she is willing to marry him even though he is indeed a beast. This does not however change the patriarchal norm that once the curse is lifted or the princess has been saved, the male hero has earned his bride and she is his property regardless of which of them was the royal born and which of them was not.

Postmodernism has however entered the world of children literature and had enormous influence on fairy-tales and princess stories. With the help of feminism, postmodernism has taken the old fashioned and stereotypical princess and her prince and subverted the whole concept of the princess and the prince. Through both text and illustration the princess and her environment is either criticised or met with irony to portray the absurdity of the things that we tend to take for granted because of old conventions. Geoff Moss states that artists tend to deliberately take conventions so that their readers can be more aware of the text and how it is operated (53). The primary audience for radical postmodernism is adults according to Moss (54) but that does not have to exclude postmodernism from children because they can extract just as much pleasure as any adult from the tales and even experience a new viewpoint and openness towards the predefined norms and customs that adults take for granted. They may not understand all of the irony which postmodernist writers and artists put in their work but instead of learning only fixed terms and norms they are offered a feast of endless possibilities and can question and criticize what they read and see from the text and pictures without there being any sole unquestionable truth. Whereas some older illustrated books for children portrayed the typical helpless fairy-tale princess, modern authors and illustrators have subverted that image with humour and satire, giving the princess more autonomy and Prince Charming has been replaced with types like a blind wimp and a heroic peasant who turns out to be homosexual.

In this essay I will use three Icelandic early twenty-first century, postmodern princess stories: *Sagan af undurföggu prinsessunni og hugrakka prinsinum hennar* ("The Tale of the Most Beautiful Princess and her Brave Prince," hereafter referred to as *The Most Beautiful Princess*), published in 2006, written by Margrét Tryggvadóttir

and illustrated by Halldór Baldursson, *Prinsessan á Bessastöðum* (“The Princess at Bessastaðir”) published in 2009, written by Gerður Kristný and illustrated by Halldór Baldursson, and *Askur og prinsessan* (“Askur and the Princess”) published in 2010, written by Smári Pálmarsson and illustrated by Sirrý Margrét Lárusdóttir, and compare them to the most famous Icelandic twentieth century princess story, *Sagan af Dimmalimm* (“The Story of Dimmalimm,” *Dimmalimm*) that was privately written and illustrated by Guðmundur Thorsteinsson for his niece in 1921, and posthumously published in 1942. All of those books are written in Icelandic and quotations and the English titles that are used in this essay from any of those books are of my own translation.

The essay will first explore postmodernism in children’s literature and then look at the typical fairy-tale princess and how the princess was presented in classic princess stories before postmodernism entered children’s literature. Then the subversion of the stereotypical princess is scrutinized before the role of the male saviour is questioned. The essay will end with critical view of the princess as a role model.

## 2. Postmodernism in Children's Literature

Postmodern princess stories are very different from the classic fairy-tale princess stories. They tend to add subtle changes to the fixed conventions the classic fairy-tales have repeated one after the other for years. This can be seen in postmodern stories both in the text and in the illustrations. For example, the text and the illustration combined can give us a story, but if the two is separated, the text by itself may give one representation of the story and the plot and the illustration a completely different view of the same story. Therefore in the case of a postmodern story a single story can in some cases be viewed in one, in two or in three different ways, depending on the presentation of the story.

Peter Hunt mentions Edward Salmon's surprise of parent's ignorance regarding the subject of the literature their children were provided with (xiv). Salmon wrote this in 1890 and Hunt wrote in 1994 that little had changed in this field since that time. Nine years later Mary H. McNulty wrote an essay about *Postmodernism in Children's Books*. She talks about adulthood and childhood and how the line separating the two is becoming increasingly blurred and has been for the past ten years. According to her it is not only children that read children's books but adults as well and it is estimated that "one third of all children's books sold never get into children's hands" (33). So it seems that the problem Hunt pointed out about parent's ignorance of what their children are reading is a decreasing problem. It is more likely that the child remains ignorant of what their parents are reading. Geoff Moss points out that the primary audience for radical postmodern texts is adults and that it is challenging for picture books commentators to know for certain who the actual picture book audience is. The genre of the picture books implies the audience to be of young age but the content calls for sophisticated adult interpretation (Hunt 54). McNulty quotes Perry Nodelman in *Postscript Volume XXI* where Nodelman attempts to answer the question to whom postmodern children's books belong to:

Our obligation is to allow [children] to know as much as possible about the world they share with us, to enrich their experience in ways that will allow them to develop deeper consciousness of who they are. And because literature and techniques of responding to it are not only a part of that world but windows

opening onto the rest of it, I believe that children particularly need and can be taught to share our own strategies for making sense of literature. (35)

Postmodern fairy-tales and princess stories have therefore the quality to be subject for both children and adults as it challenges conventions and norms. It can criticize our society by showing us what we may have thought was normal before by presenting it with irony and narcissism (Barry 88).

### 3. The Typical Fairy-Tale Princess

Before we start subverting the classical princess it is noteworthy to study the most famous twentieth century Icelandic princess, princess Dimmalimm. *Dimmalimm* was both written and illustrated by Guðmundur Thorsteinsson. It is a story of a fair and kind princess who is so sweet and obedient that with her kindness and obedience she frees a beautiful prince named Pétur from a curse cast by an ugly witch. The story is very short and simple and portrays a very plain and stereotypical princess. She is blond haired and blue eyed angel-like princess figure who never does anything she is not allowed to do, nor does she question anything or anyone.

Dimmalimm is the perfect specimen of the classic princess stereotype everyone recognises and the emblem of the Jungian archetype, the maiden (Cohen-Posey G.1). She is innocent and pure but what makes the plot of the story *Dimmalimm* rather remarkable is that it is not Dimmalimm herself that needs rescue, but the prince. The plot is actually very similar to Barbot de Villeneuve's *Beauty and the Beast* where it is the prince who is cursed and it is Beauty (in *Dimmalimm* it is princess Dimmalimm) who rescues him. Dimmalimm being the pure maiden does not show a heroic deed when she breaks the curse and saves Prince Pétur. She saves him in the most passive way imaginable: by being so kind and caring and obedient that the curse is lifted by default.

Princess Dimmalimm's personality is only described with three words throughout the story, as "kind", "good" and "obedient" (my transl., Thorsteinsson 1). Her appearances are only described at the very end of the story as "genial" and "flushed" (my transl., Thorsteinsson 23) and yet although she is only described in so few words she fits Hourihan's description of the "beautiful brides of hero tales have compounded women's psychological oppression by providing a model of what they 'ought' to be like – in appearance, attitude and behaviour" (193). Both the text and the illustrations in this story maintain that model.

The illustrations are very beautiful but are just as shallow as the story is. Everything is so pure and beautiful that even though the prince is cursed by an ugly witch, he is only turned into a beautiful white swan that is so fair and lovable that the princess is unable to resist his charm. Like many princesses before her in other stories she is said to be a small princess. Hourihan states that the reason fairy-tale heroines are

so extremely young and slender in those old stories like in the Grimm's fairy-tales is because it reflects their marrying age (195) like it was at that time. Princess Dimmalimm is also described as small princess but the illustrations are not that of a slender young adolescent girl but of a very young child who does have quite few years ahead of her before she comes of age to become a marrying material. At the turn of the twenty-first century postmodernism has challenged that princess stereotype and subverted the idea of the princess altogether.

#### 4. The Subversion of the Stereotypical Princess

In this chapter the postmodern twenty-first century Icelandic princesses will be studied and compared to their forerunner princess Dimmalimm. Those three books are all written within the span of four years, from 2006 to 2010, and all represent very different types of princesses who do not fit the archetype of the maiden. None of them are picture perfect but they have a strong personality and characteristics that define them from other princesses whose main purpose in life used to be fair, gentle and passive, and most of all, personified trophies that show the success of their hero (Hourihan 199).

*The Most Beautiful Princess* was published in 2006 and is a wonderful postmodern bridge between the old stereotypical princess and the new, more modern princess. The text is written by Margrét Tryggvadóttir and it is a very similar to the old classic stories. The text is rather short and simple like the text in *Dimmalimm*, and it is about a beautiful princess who is rescued by a brave prince from a tower guarded by a fierce dragon. The postmodernist touch is very subtle in this book when it comes to the names of the characters. In fact there are no names given to any character in the story at all. The princess is only referred to as the princess or the most beautiful princess and the prince is only referred to as the prince or the brave prince. In this essay they will be referred to as the most beautiful princess and the brave prince like the title of the book, to avoid misunderstanding and complications when referring to any of the other princesses and princes in other stories, even though the other stories too have a beautiful princess and a brave prince.

It is not only in the names of the characters where the postmodernism shines through because the most vivid and ironic postmodern play is between the text and the illustrations. The illustrations are not only there for decoration purposes but as a crucial part of the book to complete the story. Halldór Baldursson shakes things up with his illustrations by portraying the opposite of everything Tryggvadóttir has written. Calling the princess for example the most beautiful princess who is loved by all is ironic because she is in fact not beautiful at all but an unattractive, fat and spoiled brat whom nobody in the kingdom can stand. Hourihan states that in the normal fairy-tales like in the classic Grimm fairy-tales: “Fairy tale heroines are always sweet and gentle” (196). But Baldursson challenges that norm and draws her as a rude and insufferable woman to anyone who looks upon her. Yet it is not only her looks that are frightful, she is noisy

and demanding as well. The text by Tryggvadóttir describes the classic fairy-tale scene of the princess being put up in a high tower, guarded by a fierce dragon so that she will be kept safe from lovesick suitors but Baldursson twists that scene as well as many other scenes. The princess was not locked up for safety but because the queen had had enough of her, and she and the king needed a break from her so that they could go on a vacation. In this story the picture perfect princess figure is shattered and turned into a monstrous and comical figure. Three years later Baldursson illustrated another postmodern princess story, *The Princess at Bessastaðir*.

This story is very different from *The Most Beautiful Princess* and so are the illustrations. The illustrations are a slight exaggeration of the text, like many children's books tend to be. The drawings present a golden haired princess with a tiara and in a pink dress, who looks very similar to Dimmalimm, only as a more modern version of Dimmalimm wearing woollen sweater over her dress and shoes made for walking, not dancing. The text was written by Gerður Kristný and it is not as extremely ironic story as *The Most Beautiful Princess* but is far more realistic story than most fairy-tale princess stories tend to be and far more real-like princess than the most beautiful princess and princess Dimmalimm. That princess is Margrét Elísabet Ingiríður Elísabet Margrét who will be called princess Margrét for short in this essay.

Princess Margrét is a young girl who visits Iceland with her grandparents, the king and the queen, who are on a trip to see all the waterfalls in Iceland. She is bored of her princess obligations and wants to do something other than exactly what the king and the queen want to do, like seeing the Icelandic hen and experience her own adventures. She is very down to earth and similar to a normal real-life girl. She does not strike as a cheerful and friendly girl at the beginning of the story and expresses her sadness and boredom without trying too hard to hide it. When the depressed princess however sees a chance to prove to herself what she is worth, her mood shifts. She takes on the role of the prince and goes on a mission with the president of Iceland to save a wedding by bringing a lost wedding cake to its rightful wedding. Margrét is a princess that children can relate to and even though she is a girl she is not bound to girlish activities and she even hires herself at a farm to shovel horseshit for a farmer while she is on her wedding cake quest. While dull princess duties make her depressed, activities and hard work give her a purpose and make her happy.

The third and the last Icelandic postmodern princess story to be discussed here is *Askur and the Princess*. It was written by Smári Pálmarsson and illustrated by Sirrý Margrét Lárusdóttir. It was published in 2010 and is by far the most subverted and modern princess story in contrast to the classic fairy-tale princess environment like the Brothers Grimm presented. It starts off like other classic princess stories, in a faraway land, but nevertheless it mirrors our modern society splendidly. The storyline is rather simple like so many other princess stories and is filled with magic and mystical creatures. The princess Lilja is kidnapped by a wizard and a peasant boy named Askur sets out to save her.

What makes this story modern and interesting are all the little details both in the text and in the illustrations. All the villagers are up to date with the latest fashion and good looks but Lilja, the princess, is a rebel. She does not see the point in fancy clothes and she questions the rules of patriarchy and asks her mother: “Why do I need a king? Isn’t it enough for me to be me? (my transl., Lárusdóttir and Pálmarsson 4). But instead of receiving any answers from her mother, her mother only scolds her. Lilja is determined in being who she is, which is neither a tomboy nor a porcelain doll, just Lilja: a headstrong and confident princess who is worth as much as any man. She struggles against the princess and feminine duties her mother and the society has thrust upon her and is forced to wear dresses even though she prefers pants. Lilja however makes the best of what she has under those rules and to her mother’s annoyance, she plays in the mud and with the animals regardless of how pretty her dresses are.

The bending of gender roles is not frowned upon in this book but celebrated. The wizard who kidnaps princess Lilja insists that she makes him some fine clothes because she always wears the most beautiful clothes in the kingdom and he himself has no idea how to sew. Lilja is not afraid to snap at her kidnapper that she herself neither has any idea as to how to sew and tells him that other people make her clothes for her. When Askur and his friend Starri arrive to rescue Lilja from the wizard they face the same task as Lilja, to make clothes for the wizard except they, regardless of their gender, actually know how to make clothes. When Lilja returns to the kingdom with her saviour Askur and his friend Starri and the wizard (Dofri) who is now their friend, her mother starts to plan the wedding. Princess Lilja however calls off the wedding and decides that she is just as qualified as any man to rule the kingdom and changes it into a queendom.

Those three postmodern stories show a new kind of diversity in princess stories. The change that has happened since *Dimmalimm* was published is tremendous. The development from the classic archetype characteristics of the princess and all the other characters around her is admirable. Like Guðrún G. Halldórsdóttir and Hrönn Bergþórsdóttir stated; children's literature is meant to educate children as well as please them. Children's literature helps children to stimulate their creativity and understand the society (Halldórsdóttir and Bergþórsdóttir 9, 11). Princess stories and fairy-tales may not be the first thing in mind when people think about social education literature for children but it should not be excluded because those are the stories among the ones that children read and are influenced by.

## 5. The Male Saviour

All princess stories have one thing in common and that is the role of the male saviour. Without the male saviour there would be no story because there is no climax or action without him. He is usually in the role of a prince or a knight or a peasant boy who with hard work and bravery saves the princess and as a reward he can keep her. The saviour's quest can vary from slaying a dragon, breaking a curse, killing a witch or fighting off some other dark power. The shadow archetype (Cohen-Posey G.1) is his enemy and opposition. He is the ideal man, a masculine figure, the white knight or Prince Charming. Whoever he is does not concern the princess because once he has saved her she is his property and she will fall in love with him – and they will live happily-ever-after. Postmodernism on the other hand does not see the importance of this masculine figure and instead of completely removing the saviour from the princess stories the importance of the male hero is questioned.

Baldursson mocks the role of the prince in Tryggvadóttir's story (*The Most Beautiful Princess*) with his illustrations by making the brave prince appear to us as a blind, skinny, rather geek-like and silly guy. The phallic symbol, the weapon, (Hourihan 3) has been altered from being a real masculine, strong and sharp object, like a sword, and has been turned into a white cane which he waves about as he travels around on his donkey. He is in fact completely defenceless if he were to meet a threat or go into a real battle. He somehow miraculously stumbles upon the tower the princess was put in and fortunately for the prince the friendly dragon who is sitting by the tower entrance is too busy reading a gossip magazine to notice the white cane accidentally striking his head. The saviour then tries to find the princess but after failed attempts to locate the princess it is the princess who finds him and marries him. Here the prince has been emasculated from the Prince Charming stereotype. He is scrawny and because he is blind there is very little he can actually do or detect that would otherwise be required of a real heroic prince. The princess however is big enough, strong enough and bossy enough for the two of them so it is actually she who literally picks him up and keeps as if he was a stray dog. The way she picks him up and carries him is remarkably similarly to the way the typical Prince Charming princes have done to princesses in countless other fairy-tales. They then live happily ever after in her kingdom where they have princes and princesses all of whom inherit their parent's looks and their mother's personality.

*The Princess at Bessastaðir* does not have this typical male saviour. The Princess does not have a prince nor does she have a peasant boy who rescues her from anything but she meets the president of Iceland who in a way fills the role of a male saviour. The story is different from the typical princess stories, because the main character is the president and the princess is only a secondary character that pays him a visit from abroad. Instead of the president saving the princess from some evil force they go on a mission together to bring a wedding cake to a wedding. Even though he does not strictly rescue her he saves her from the boredom of her life. She is sick and tired of her princess life and is in dire need of real life filled with action and fun. On their mission they have to set up a tent in the countryside and during the night the princess wanders off because she is unable to sleep. Then the real quest to find the princess starts and the president sets out to find her and intends to save her. When he finally finds her he notices that she has no real need for a saviour and that she can take perfectly good care of herself. She had taken a job at a nearby farm to shovel horseshit. There is no romance between the president and the princess, they are strictly just friends and there is no hint of anything other than friendship. When they finish their wedding cake mission it is time for the princess to go home and they part.

The president does not save the princess in the traditional Prince Charming way, but that does not however mean that he does not save her at all. Before he met her she was a sad princess who seldom smiled and was depressing to be around. Her grandparents, the king and the queen did not notice her need for attention and her need for a chance to do what it was that she wanted to do. She does not want to go with her grandparents and the president gets stuck with the princess at his home Bessastaðir. Things on the other hand change when the princess sees a chance to do something new and exciting. The president and the princess witness a wedding cake accident when a wedding cake slides off the roof of the president's friend's car and princess Margrét is determined that they must return the missing cake and she drags him along on a wedding cake rescue mission. The president may be male and the protagonist in the story, but the princess takes on the role of the heroic leader and the president as her loyal sidekick in this adventure.

While both the most beautiful princess from the story *The Most Beautiful Princess* and princess Margrét from *The Princess at Bessastaðir*, have rather

untraditional saviours, one being a blind wimp and the other being no more than a platonic friend and a sidekick rather than a hero, Askur from *Askur and the Princess* treads more traditional heroic paths along with his friend Starri. He is a young peasant boy who is sent out to rescue the princess by his parents who are anxious for him to find a girl to marry. He meets Starri as he heads off to the journey but instead of making Starri his sidekick like other heroes tend to make of their helpful friends he treats Starri as a friend and an equal. On their way to save the princess from the wizard, Dofri, they come across shadow archetypes such as black-elves, a sleeping troll, and a dragon. Hourihan describes the traditional hero as the symbol of “white culture” and dominating “white power” in the western world (58) but even though Askur is a blond haired and blue eyed western looking hero, he does not act like the dominating white power male even though he is in the social position to act on it. Hourihan further describes the hero as a man who

strives towards his goal never doubting the rightness or the primacy of his cause. He regards any opposition as evil, or at least as ‘wild’ and inferior, and he struggles to subdue it. His mode is domination – of the environment, of his enemies, of his friends, of women, and of his own emotions, his own ‘weakness’. (58)

Lárusdóttir and Pálmarsson, the illustrator and author of *Askur and the Princess*, use those traditional heroic features for the hero in their book but with the help of his friend Starri (and postmodernism), Askur learns to use his head instead of his weapon.

Through their quest together they learn that things are not always what they appear to be and dominating is not the answer when they meet the opposition of unknown creatures and difficult situations. They treat everybody and everything around them with respect and kindness, even the troll and the dragon whom they were at first afraid of. By subverting the dragon and the troll from frightful otherness into rational and thinking creatures like the protagonist the story celebrates diversity and openness towards new and different experiences and situations instead of nurturing fear for other and the need to smother it before something unknown happens.

*Askur and the Princess* is an extraordinary princess story because of how conscious the characters are of their surroundings and they criticize out loud in the story things they feel are either wrong or should be questioned. Askur questions the

patriarchal rules that state that whoever saves the princess will receive the whole kingdom as a reward and of course the princess as well. His parents, who represent the ways of the olden times just like princess Lilja's mother, scold him for questioning the ways of the kingdom and send him off to save the princess. Once Askur and Starri arrive to the wizard's cabin they find out that Lilja and the wizard Dofri have become friends and that it is not she who needs to be saved but the fashion-deprived Dofri who has no clothes fitting the latest fashion. After they have saved Dofri and are on the way back to the kingdom Askur and Lilja talk. They share the same opinion, that neither of them have any interest in marrying each other even though they respect and like each other.

Lárusdóttir's illustrations are very beautiful and just like Baldursson's illustrations in *The Most Beautiful Princess* they tell a story that is not in line with the text. Her illustrations are not as extreme as Baldursson's but they contain a controversial issue that is not common in children's literature: homosexuality. The text only mentions Lilja and Askur's lack of interest in marrying each other and that Lilja feels that she herself completely capable of ruling her own kingdom as queen. The illustrations on the other hand show a story between Askur and Starri that is not written in the text. Their friendship grows on their mission to save the princess and they become very close friends. During the royal wedding Starri is positively heartbroken as Askur and Lilja stand before the priest, but because of their lack of interest in each other Lilja cancels the wedding and as her subjects carry her out of the church as their new queen Askur and Starri are seen happily holding hands. They move into the forest together and in the last two pictures in the book they are seen together, on one picture with a pink heart floating between them symbolizing their love and on the last picture they are cuddling together with a heart shaped pink butterfly flying above them.

The sense of equality is strong in both *The Princess at Bessastaðir* and *Askur and the Princess*, and it is not the Aristotelian equality that consists only of equal treatment between similar people (172) but of absolute equality. Those stories teach that everyone should be treated equally regardless of looks, social status and gender and in the story of *Askur* homosexuality is presented and accepted.

## 6. The Princess as a Role Model

Girls have been brought up for many years with the classic princess to look up to. She is beautiful, kind, lovable, quiet and above all obedient. She is fragile and should not have to do anything because Prince Charming will find her and take care of her and they will live happily ever after. Such is the case with Grimm's *Snow White* for example, where the princess is a threat to the queen because of her beauty so the queen makes several attempts to murder her. After the last attempt everyone believes she is dead but she is too beautiful to burry so she is put in a glass coffin and when the prince comes across her body he falls in love with her beauty and insists on having her and taking her back to his kingdom even though he as well thinks she is dead. The title of another Grimm's fairy-tale, *Briar Rose*, was later changed by Walt Disney when it was animated to the title *Sleeping Beauty* which underlines once again the important link between a princess and her beauty. In Barbot de Villeneuve's *Beauty and the Beast* the female character's name is Beauty, who incidentally is also an immensely beautiful girl. The female characters that are to become princesses are valued for their beauty and their kindness and that is about it. There seems to be no need for them to possess an exciting personality to display, only their looks.

Nevertheless the princess icon has been idolized by girls and that may derive from the lack of other women's presence in adventure tales that tend to focus only on male protagonists and male readership. There are three types of women that may appear in traditional hero stories and those are the mothers (usually the mother of the hero), "golden-haired brides" and ugly women, who are without exception evil (Hourihan 156). This being said it leaves very few characters for girls to idolize and the fair maiden is far more preferable than an ugly and evil witch or an old mother who experiences no adventure or excitement.

In *Prinsessan á Bessastöðum*, princess Margrét meets a boy and a girl on her wedding cake mission. They are curious about her looks and tell her that she looks like a princess and want to know if her tiara is real so she allows them to try it on and as Matthildur, the girl, puts it on she tells them: "'I have always wanted to be a princess,' says she with a dreamy look, like the one girls get when they imagine they are princesses" (my transl., Gerður Kristný 28). Princess Margrét however tells them that being a princess is not as glamorous as they think it is and throughout the story princess

Margrét is far happier in the role of a normal, hardworking and adventurous child than in the role of a princess. It is important that children's books include fairy-tales with realistic characters that can be used as role models or someone they can relate to in one way or another with more diversity than the traditional one-sided, personality lacking princesses. In her discussion on illustrated children's books, Janet Adam Smith states: "Physically, children's picture-books can be horribly short lived; but the impressions they leave may last a lifetime" (8). And we perhaps do not realize just how strong influence those children's picture books can have on the readers. A classic fairy-tale that remains uncriticised presents narrow-minded and unquestionable norms for the children while a postmodern fairy-tale maintains critical thinking at all times and can broaden the reader's senses. Smith also points out that a child's earliest experience of the world is through picture-books (7) so the presentation the children's books have to offer can have lifelong influence on children and their vision of the world. It is therefore no wonder that pretty and decorative books are enjoyable for children (Smith 21) and illustrations can as well be used as a tool to capture children's attention to what is in reality noteworthy in the story.

In *Dimmalimm* the illustrations underline the western blond-haired and blue eyed beauty, as well as woman's virtue in softness and kindness. The princess is completely selfless and shows more care for others than she does for herself. In the tale of *Askur and the Princess* those beauty standards are turned upside down. Princess Lilja is described as the most beautiful girl in the whole kingdom but she is the opposite of Dimmalimm in every way in the illustrations. She has brown skin, brown eyes, brown hair and instead of the soft and kind princess features, Lilja is an energetic and feisty princess. The princess from *The Most Beautiful Princess* is described as a great beauty but she is in fact illustrated as an obese woman with fuzzy red hair and a temper that mocks Aristotle's statement that woman's glory is silence (21). We may not take everything for granted in those postmodern princess stories, but at the same time we have to realize how much the old and classic princess stories have been taken for granted without any criticism at all.

The most critical postmodern princess story by far of the ones in this essay is the story of *Askur and the Princess*. It begins innocently enough with a kingdom in a faraway land and the very traditional mission to save the princess but as the story

develops we can see that it criticises everything that has been presented in earlier princess stories. The story of *Askur and the Princess* makes the bridge visible between the old generation of fairy-tales and the new generation of fairy-tales. There is no pure evil in the story, be it a troll, dragon or a wizard. There is only different points of view and understanding. Although Dofri is a misunderstood wizard he is not evil. We are told that his parents were evil like the ugly witch in *Dimmalimm* and that they did not want to raise Dofri so they decided to abandon him to be able to do more evil, but they are distant ghosts that do not appear in the story. The adults in this story are like shadows from the old classical world. The old queen insists that Lilja be more princess-like and Askur's parents scold him for questioning the kingdom. The younger generation heroically resists the old rules and the old ways of the generation before them and show courage to make their own rules. This is a great metaphor for what Lárusdóttir and Pálmarsson are doing with their book, *Askur and the Princess*. They are resisting the rules and conventions of the old fairy-tale stories and are laying ground with the other postmodern authors for new era in children's literature, a field for strong and independent female characters, freedom of sexuality and celebration for diversity. It is important to remember that "The books that are to survive are decided, not by what the child likes now, but by what as a parent, uncle or godfather he will remember he once used to like" (Smith 50). And since postmodern texts have a primary audience of adults (Moss 54) the likelihood that children are handed a postmodern princess story instead of a classic princess story is increasing.

None of the postmodern stories presented in this essay mock the famous classic *Dimmalimm* but all of them introduce a new version of princesses who although are extremely different, and some even more exaggerated than others, show in whole more realistic image of princess than princess Dimmalimm. All of the postmodern princesses have in common a strong personality and none of them allows anybody to tread on them. They are the heroes and makers of their own adventures and do not care for being silent, pretty and obedient.

## Conclusion

Princess stories in Icelandic children's literature have changed immensely since the publication of *Dimmalimm*. Since that time cultural norms of female and male roles has changed along with the idea of standardized female beauty. The fair, blond haired and blue eyed beauty has been replaced with the dark, brown haired, brown eyed beauty and then subverted into a fat, fuzzy redhead with real temper. The princess is no longer appreciated for her looks and her virtue of silence but for her bravery and characteristics. She is valued like the men and is treaded by them as an equal.

Princess Lilja of *Askur and the Princess* and princess Margrét of *The Princess at Bessastaðir* are not as reliant on their male saviours as their predecessors, princess Dimmalimm of *Dimmalimm* and the most beautiful princess of *The Most Beautiful Princess*. Granted both of them had a male saviour in their story that help them from a difficult situation, but they learn that they are not, and should not, be dependent on them. Princess Margrét who is far too young to look at the president of Iceland as anything other than a friend goes back home with all her Icelandic experience as a happier girl while princess Lilja and Askur are simply not interested in each other. Besides, Lilja has a whole new mission to attend since she took over the kingdom herself and turned it into a queendom.

We have the first real feminist princess, Lilja, who smashes the patriarchy in the story because she sees herself as just as important person as any man can be and capable of running her own queendom. She has no interest in fancy clothing and is completely incapable of sewing her own dress but that does not matter because the saviours appears with his friend and they know a thing or two about fashion regardless of their gender.

Pictures play equally important roles in fairy-tale based picture books such as these. They captivate the audience and can dictate which parts of the stories the audience should pay closer attention to. The pictures can be used for fun ironic play of words like it is done in *The Most beautiful Princess* where the illustrations do everything against the classic norm. The pictures can also be used for social purpose like they are used in *Askur and the Princess* where the female beauty is transferred from bright and fair to dark and beautiful. The same story uses the medium of art to insert the politically controversial subject, homosexuality, into the story without writing it into the

text. Through beautiful imagery, love and the acceptance and openness towards homosexuals between the male protagonist and his male friend is celebrated.

Postmodernism has brought a positive change in the field of children's literature. It has taken the old stereotypes and subverted everything they could think of to subvert, both for the fun of it and to cast a light on a new side of the same object. It is not only the princess and the prince that have been viewed in new perspective but the shadow creatures as well. They are no longer viewed as frightful monsters and beasts that should be slaughtered before they harm anyone else. They are characters for themselves just like the humans and can be reasoned with. The dragon in *The Most Beautiful Princess* is a kind and lovable friendly being who reads gossip magazines as it sits at the tower's entrance waiting for guests to offer entrance. He never raises his temper, not even when he is wacked on the head, but continues to sit with his friend the sheep and plays cards as he waits for the headache to subside. In the story of *Askur and the Princess* the heroes come across two frightful creatures that change their view of the world. On one hand it is a dragon and on the other it is a troll. They learned that the creatures are not the frightful beings, but that it is they themselves, who are armed and vicious looking, and therefore scared the creatures. Both the dragon and the troll are rational creatures that can participate in a rational discussion and are both vegetarians.

The biggest change has positively been the shift of the princesses' attitude. The princesses are no longer porcelain dolls meant for viewing and keeping locked away and they have proven themselves to be just as qualified to be the leaders of their own lives like men have for the past centuries. Princesses have been removed from their standardized form they were put in and show now just as much diversity and character as any male hero has in hero stories and they are completely self-reliant.

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