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Source: *Marvels & Tales*, Vol. 28, No. 1, SPECIAL ISSUE: In Honor of Donald Haase (2014), pp. 142-158

Published by: Wayne State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13110/marvelstales.28.1.0142>

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MARIA TATAR

## Show and Tell

### Sleeping Beauty as Verbal Icon and Seductive Story

Feminists have targeted Sleeping Beauty as the most passive and repellent fairy-tale heroine of all, and many have done their best to make the story go away. Alerting us to the perils of the fairy tale, Madonna Kolbenschlag urges women to kiss Sleeping Beauty goodbye in her book of that title, and Jane Adams offers similar advice in *Wake Up, Sleeping Beauty*. Still, Sleeping Beauty and her German counterpart, Briar Rose, continue to turn up in locations both unlikely and obvious. Philosophers meditate on what they call the Sleeping Beauty problem in thought experiments about probability in coin tosses. In a bid to sell perfume, Lady Gaga spent twenty-four hours, immobile, in an installation called "Sleeping with Gaga." Psychologists from Bruno Bettelheim onward find wisdom in the story and conclude that Sleeping Beauty's passive state symbolizes a normal latency period for young girls. They recommend the story for therapeutic bedtime reading. Pornographers, hardcore and soft, have found in the story a deep well of sadomasochistic possibilities. Filmmakers, artists, writers, poets, fashionistas, and musicians alike keep responding to the call of the story, twisting and turning it, disenchanting it and restoring its magic, always managing to keep the fairy tale from disappearing.

Simone de Beauvoir was perhaps the first to alert us to the profound gender asymmetries in fairy tales: "Woman is the Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White, she who receives and submits. In song and story the young man is seen departing adventurously in search of a woman; he slays the dragons and giants; she is locked in a tower, a palace, a garden, a cave, she is chained to a rock, a captive, sound asleep: she waits" (318). Women are

*Marvels & Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2014), pp. 142–158. Copyright © 2014 by Wayne State University Press, Detroit, MI 48201.

frozen, immobile, and comatose. The very name Sleeping Beauty invokes a double movement between a passive gerund (*sleeping*) and a descriptive noun (*beauty*) that invites a retinal response. Beauty may be sleeping, but we want to look at her to indulge in the pleasures of her visible charms. As Laura Mulvey has instructed us, that “we” is gendered male, although without precluding women’s narcissistic pleasure at looking. What Freud called scopophilia, or pleasure in looking at something, is something natural to all humans. As curious children we subject everything to the probing gaze, exploring what surrounds us and trying to make sense of the world. That gaze continues to operate in multiple ways in adults, most dramatically as the basis for erotic pleasure (active looking). In the visual economy of twentieth-century cinema, Mulvey argues (in views that critics—including Mulvey herself—have challenged and contested since the essay appeared), the male has become the active “bearer-of-the-look,” whereas women have been relegated to the position of objects on display (“to-be-looked-at-ness”). These categories correspond perfectly to Simone de Beauvoir’s division between adventurous, active males and passive women who receive, submit, await, and are “sound asleep.”

Had Laura Mulvey turned to fairy tales for evidence to support her thesis about the male gaze, she would surely have singled out “Sleeping Beauty” as *the* story that captures, with a single stroke, the notion of woman on display, to be looked at as erotic spectacle. Mulvey describes cinema as presenting “a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically” and plays on the voyeuristic fantasies of spectators, giving them the illusion of “looking in on a private world” (9). Her phrasing could not be more relevant for the worlds of fairy tales, which were often told at nighttime, in the same dark spaces found in movie theaters. The flickering screen, with its play of light and shadow, can be seen as a modern analog of the hearth and the chiaroscuro effects created on walls and ceilings when blazing fires in dark rooms created light and shadows.

Of all fairy tales “Sleeping Beauty” is perhaps the most cinematic in its fashioning of a primal scene for visual pleasure. Curiosity and the desire to look mingle with a display that is both aesthetically and erotically charged. Our gaze is aligned with that of a prince stunned by the exquisite beauty of a woman who remains inert and on display for the enjoyment of a male viewer. Whether that gaze is ultimately voyeuristic or fetishizing depends on individual spectators, but we can say with some certainty that “Sleeping Beauty” provides us with an aesthetic program and training ground for the construction of heterosexual interactions in modern cinematic entertainments. It is no surprise that such filmmakers as Pedro Almodóvar (*Talk to Her*),

Julia Leigh (*Sleeping Beauty*), and Catherine Breillat (*The Sleeping Beauty*) continue to engage with the tale, taking it up covertly and also explicitly.

The scene of Sleeping Beauty in repose has been represented in many ways, but Charles Perrault captures it in its classic staging:

[The prince] traversed several apartments filled with ladies and gentlemen all asleep; some standing, others seated. Finally he entered a chamber completely covered with gold and saw the most lovely sight he had ever looked upon—on a bed with curtains open on each side was a princess who seemed to be about fifteen or sixteen. Her radiant charms gave her such a luminous, supernatural appearance that he approached, trembling and admiring, and knelt down beside her. (47)

Not only is Sleeping Beauty a woman of superlative beauty (“the most lovely sight he had ever looked upon,” “radiant,” and “luminous”), but also the chamber in which she resides appears to be a golden time capsule. The prince makes his way through the palace, “mounts” the stairs, and “pushes” on until he reaches the princess on display. In translation or not, the diction is highly charged in erotic terms, suggesting that penetrating the briars and entering the castle are forms of foreplay for the scene of beholding.

Although “Sleeping Beauty” so patently creates a gender divide between the comatose slumbering princess and the adventurous prince, Bruno Bettelheim argues that there are an equal number of tales in which the male figure sleeps and the female “marvels at the beauty she beholds” (226–27), as in “Cupid and Psyche.” Bettelheim may have a point, but our culture has worked hard to privilege sleeping beauties over handsome slumberers. Furthermore, Bettelheim’s interpretation of Beauty’s sleep makes a psychosexual claim that itself associates sleep and passivity with young women: “During the months before the first menstruation, and often also for some time immediately following it, girls are passive, seem sleepy, and withdraw into themselves” (124). The same is not true for boys, he tells us. Still, he concludes that there is no sexual stereotyping in fairy tales, short-circuiting his argument about the passivity of premenstrual girls: “Even when a girl is depicted as turning inward . . . and a boy as aggressively dealing with the external world, these two *together* symbolize the two ways in which one has to gain selfhood. . . . While some literal-minded parents do not realize it, children know that, whatever the sex of the hero, the story pertains to their own problems” (226). In many ways, Bettelheim, despite his efforts to rehabilitate the story, only succeeds in strengthening the case for wishing that it would just go away.

### Language and Storytelling

Before considering exactly how the history of “Sleeping Beauty” has enacted temporal compression to create for us a story whose words move us to construct images more than anything else, it is worth looking at how this history has unfolded in textual terms. From the medieval romance *Perceforest* (written down in the fifteenth century) to Perrault’s “La Belle au bois dormant,” narratives about sleeping beauties seem to have what Donald Haase refers to as “an underlying preoccupation with the power of storytelling” (293). They are self-reflexive narratives that, more than most fairy tales, display a deep concern with words, stories, and raconteurs. In *Perceforest*, one of the earliest recorded versions of a Sleeping Beauty tale, Troylus hears about Zellandine’s sleep from a skeptical sailor who describes the deep slumber as “une merveille sy grande qu’a paine est elle creable” (“such a great marvel that it is barely believable”) (Bryant, 58). He puts together bits and pieces of the story from other informants and is thereby inspired and enabled to enter the story himself in the lead role of rescuer. Troylus engages in what Paul Ricoeur would call an act of productive invention, creating in his mind a full plot that “grasps together” and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematizing the intelligible signification attached to the narrative as a whole” (*Time and Narrative*, x). Putting it all together allows Troylus to become the rescuer, to awaken Zellandine, and to indulge, together with her, in an orgy of storytelling, during which they each recount their own life histories.

Sleeping Beauties from medieval times appear as single way stations set in epics and romances with multiple adventures and feats. It was no doubt from these narratives that Giambattista Basile borrowed to tell his stand-alone tale “Sun, Moon, and Talia,” included in his lively collection known as the *Pentamerone*, or *The Tale of Tales* (1634–1636), published in Naples. Sharply different from popular versions of “Sleeping Beauty” printed today, Basile’s tale recounts the story of a princess destined to come to misfortune from a small flax splinter. When the splinter slides under Talia’s nail, she falls into a deep sleep, disturbed only by a king who discovers her in a castle and finds himself “on fire with love.” Basile coyly describes the king as gathering the “first fruits of his love.” Nine months later Talia bears two children. When the king’s wife gets wind of the affair, she lures the children to the castle and prepares to serve them up to her husband for dinner. A compassionate cook saves the children, and the queen ultimately suffers the punishment she planned to inflict on Talia.

With its ornate language and baroque flourishes, Basile’s tale gives us a complexly layered narrative, one that moves in the mode of high drama, with a rape scene, a revenge plot, and theatrical punishments. Ending in a

lighthearted manner with verse that reads to us today as perverse (“Those whom fortune favors/Find good luck even in their sleep”), the tale quickly moves out of Talia’s bedroom, revealing almost nothing about her appearance: “The king beheld her charms” is followed by a harvesting of those fruits of love. The expansive narrative, with its breathless pacing, could easily accommodate descriptive details, but it avoids them. Noteworthy also, as Haase points out, is that the storytelling theme is situated in the frame for Basile’s *Tale of Tales*, a structural device for gathering stories that, like “once upon a time” or “happily ever after,” calls attention to its own constructed nature (281). The fairy tale, Jessica Tiffin reminds us—and one could make much the same case for narrative frames—shows an “awareness and encoding of itself as text, the classic opening . . . signaling a precise relationship with reality which makes no pretense at reality, but which is continually aware of its own status as story, as ritualized narrative enactment” (13).

It was Charles Perrault who began the process of slowing down the tale about Sleeping Beauty by displacing temporality and narrative with monumental stasis and frozen immobility. Perrault’s slumbering princess inhabits a palace in which a “frightful silence” reigns, and “Death” seems to be “everywhere,” with men and animals “apparently lifeless.” Much as there is a seductive appeal to sleeping princesses, their beauty immune to decay and corruption, the attraction mingles with dread and repulsion, for the 100-year sleep is surely also a proxy for death, which lurks at the borders of the castle in the corpses of the suitors entangled in the briars. Sleeping Beauty suddenly becomes the tale’s main feature—iconic in mingling beauty and death, desire and dread.

Still, Perrault’s story does not completely dispense with action. As Donald Haase emphasizes in his analysis of the tale, it is filled with self-reflexive meditations on the power of stories passed on from one generation to the next. The prince listens to rumors about the old castle he has discovered while hunting, a castle said to be haunted by ghosts, used as a gathering place by witches, and inhabited by a child-eating ogre. He feels himself to be “on fire” when an old peasant tells him, on the authority of his ancestors, that a beautiful princess is awaiting the arrival of a prince to awaken her from a 100-year sleep. Perrault does not hesitate to extend the time frame of the story beyond the kiss, and he includes an elaborate sequel describing the savagery of Sleeping Beauty’s cannibalistic mother-in-law and her efforts to cook her grandchildren and daughter-in-law, as well as her sensational end in a vat filled with foul creatures. Sleeping Beauty stands at the center of the tale, flanked on either side by monstrous appetites that seek to possess her, either through carnal knowledge or through physical incorporation. She is the object of all desires.

### Language and Living Metaphors

Tellingly, the Grimms used the title “Dornröschen,” or Briar Rose, for their version of what Perrault called “The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood.” The word *sleeping* contains within it the possibility of an awakening fraught with danger, as in the phrase *sleeping giant*, that colossus who threatens to make dramatic changes once aroused. Little Briar Rose, as the Grimms’ heroine is called, yokes together in her name pain and beauty, suggesting stasis rather than the potential for action. She becomes a figure of renown, diminutive (as the *-chen* suffix suggests) but powerful:

Throughout the land, stories circulated about the beautiful little Briar Rose, for that was the name given to the slumbering princess. From time to time a prince would try to force his way through the hedge to get to the castle. But no one ever succeeded, because the briars clasped each other as if they were holding hands, and the young men who tried, got caught in them and couldn’t pry themselves loose. They died an agonizing death. (Tatar, *Annotated Brothers Grimm*, 242)

Her still beauty is broadcast to the world and can take a deadly turn.

By 1812, when the Brothers Grimm published “Dornröschen,” the story emerges “clean, all essence,” as Pamela Travers puts it (53). The author of the Mary Poppins books had more to say in praise of the Grimms’ retelling of the tale:

In this latest, and best known, telling of the story it is possible to see how over the centuries it has been refined and purged of dross. It is as though the tale itself, through its own energy and need, had winnowed away everything but the true whole grain. By the time it was told to the Brothers Grimm, its outer stuff, worked on by time and the folkly mind, had become transparent and complete, nothing too much nothing too little. (53)

The Grimms trim, prune, and truncate, moving quickly to the pricking of the finger on the spindle and eliminating the episode with the cannibalistic mother-in-law. When it comes to awakening Briar Rose herself, the prince is all eyes after traversing the palace, with its immobilized inhabitants, and discovering a woman “so beautiful that he could not take his eyes off her.” Time has stopped in the castle, and the narrative flow is also arrested as our productive imagination is aligned with the prince and we construct a mental image of the magnetic Sleeping Beauty. Temporality ceases to be and, for a moment, we are in the realm of pure visuality, imagining Briar Rose.

Illustrators have clearly understood how the scene of enraptured vision in “Briar Rose” produces what W. K. Wimsatt and M. Beardsley called “iconic

solidity,” an effect achieved through what they call a “sleight of words,” the imitation of something “headlong and impassioned, less ordered, nearer perhaps to the subrational” (115). Through the “solidity of symbol” and “sensory verbal qualities,” poetic abstractions take on the sturdiness of real-life objects and are reified and made into “enduring things.” As Suzanne Langer argues (261), poetry, like sculpture, can turn language into matter, if not an actual material representation then at the least a mental image invested with what Ricoeur has referred to as “ontological vehemence” (*Rule of Metaphor*, 294). Briar Rose, at the moment when she is discovered fast asleep and frozen in time, hovers before us almost as vividly as she does for the prince. Yet the economy of means is astonishing. Often two words are all it takes—Sleeping Beauty or Briar Rose—to ignite the imagination and to see the woods, the roses, the thorns, the drapery, the hair, and the slumbering, supine body of the princess. Both the cultural matrix around the story—the profusion of hyper-texts generated by Perrault’s story—and its iconic status enable us to see well, just as we have little trouble envisioning Little Red Riding Hood and Rumpelstiltskin (although those figures, I would argue, are more of a challenge to visualize because they are in constant motion).

Briar Rose is part of a fairy-tale discourse that adheres to the rule of what storytellers from many different lands use to preface their tales: “It was and it was not.” She may have an iconic solidity but she also exists only in language, thereby creating what Roman Jakobson called a “split reference,” simultaneously existing and yet also not existing (qtd. in Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 265). Belonging to the regime of metaphorical figures and tropes (her name is a figure of speech), she both does and does not produce a real-world reference. She is and yet she also is *not*. Ricoeur describes the paradoxical logical economy of metaphorical truths, which capture “the critical incision of the (literal) ‘is not’ within the ontological vehemence of the (metaphorical) ‘is’” (*Rule of Metaphor*, 255). The iconic image of Briar Rose, like the tales told about her, takes on a self-reflexive quality—the metapictorial joins up with the metafictional—obliging us to “think more” as we use our imaginations to create Sleeping Beauty. “Metaphor is living by virtue of the fact that it introduces the spark of imagination into a ‘thinking more’ at the conceptual level. This struggle to ‘think more,’ guided by the ‘vivifying principle,’ is the ‘soul’ of interpretation” (*Rule of Metaphor*, 358).

Ricoeur’s words go far toward explaining exactly why Albert Einstein recommended fairy tales to parents, advising them to read fairy tales if they wanted intelligent children, and more fairy tales if they wanted more intelligent children (*Wilson Library Bulletin*, 678).<sup>1</sup> The thrifty use of poetic language in fairy tales can fill us with wonder but can also leave us wondering, challenging us to fill in all the descriptive and causal blanks—in short, as



Einstein recommended, to use our imaginations. With their witches and woods, roses and thorns, golden balls and slimy suitors, fairy tales create shimmering visuals, verbal icons—sleeping beauties, skulls decorated with flowers, homicidal birds with jewel-encrusted plumage—that oblige us to “think more” and “think harder.” In short, we have to interpret and backfill as well as listen and absorb.

### Briars and Thorns: Edward Burne-Jones Courts Sleeping Beauty

Ever since Snow White’s body was placed in a glass coffin on top of a hill for public viewing, feminist critics have suspected that her beautiful corpse, idealized and almost literally placed on a pedestal, elicits a purely aesthetic viewing of the female body, one that replaces the notion of decay and death with permanence and plenitude (Bronfen, 99–107). Seeing is privileged over touching (Perrault’s prince too only gazes at his sleeping beauty), and the prince’s prolonged gaze creates a reassuring moment in which aesthetic pleasure appears to displace anxieties about mortality. The beautiful corpses of Snow White and Sleeping Beauty have inspired art that ensures a double immortality, for the comatose women and for the works of art representing them.

The Grimms’ “Briar Rose” gives us, as noted, a trimmed down version of the stories in Basile’s *Pentamerone* and Perrault’s *Tales of Mother Goose*. The brothers compressed the events leading up to the scene of disenchantment and eliminated the necrophiliac perversions of Basile’s tale as well as the complications of a meddling wife or mother-in-law determined to have Sleeping Beauty and her children for supper. Enshrining Briar Rose as the main attraction, the story inspired a robust visual culture, intensely focused on—what else?—the sensually stirring beauty of the slumbering princess. The proliferation of Sleeping Beauty images is a reminder of just how powerfully stasis becomes the thematic centerpiece of the narrative.

Edward Burne-Jones’s *Briar Rose*, completed in 1890, offers a consummate example of how aesthetic display comes to dominate depictions of sleeping beauties. The prince stands to the far left of the first painting in the series of four panels, his field of vision connecting with the last image depicting the sleeping beauty, reclining on a divan, surrounded by a trio of maidservants, all in various states of languorous repose. Ready to do battle, this prince is armed with sword and shield and is clad in armor as his gaze moves across five suitors who appear almost braided together, frozen in what appears to look more like voluptuous sleep than death throes. Pieces of armor may litter the landscape, but that landscape, with its entwined rose branches, has a quiet beauty of its own. The prince is armored, but there is

no dragon to slay and no villain to conquer, making his sword, shield, and helmet somewhat superfluous.

For the *Briar Rose* series, Burne-Jones took as his point of departure not just the Grimms' fairy tale but also Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem *The Day-Dream*, which includes five sections: "The Sleeping Palace," "The Sleeping Beauty," "The Arrival," "The Revival," and "The Departure." Burne-Jones concentrates his attention on the first half of Tennyson's poem, focusing on the first three parts and how they capture quiet stasis and morbid tranquility. "More like a picture seemeth all," Tennyson wrote in the early stanzas, and he sought to capture a sleeping beauty who is "a perfect form in perfect rest," before she is disturbed by the "sudden hubbub" described in "The Revival" (Ricks, 2: 50, 52, 54).

Burne-Jones paints the picture Tennyson describes, first showing the prince surveying a landscape littered with bodies twisted and contorted yet also with a serene, stately beauty. Situated in branches of briars, "thick as a wrist, and with long, horrible spikes," the suitors—Tennyson's "silent dead"—are nearly buried by the massive overgrowth of flowers, branches, and thorns (Wood, 110) (fig. 1). Yet these suitors are preserved perfectly and, unlike the young men in the Grimms' "Briar Rose," they do not seem to have died a miserable death but appear instead destined to be revived along with the sleeping princess and all other inhabitants of the castle. Remarkably, both prince and suitors share the same facial features, each of the young men mirroring the others (even their suits of armor and clothing make it challenging to distinguish one from another). Art historians have noted the influence of Michelangelo, but Burne-Jones's suitors are earthly and earthbound in ways that the Italian artist's muscular male bodies rarely are (Christian).



Fig. 1. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Briar Wood* from *The Legend of Briar Rose*, 1885–1890.

The servant girls in the third panel, *The Garden*, all resemble each other as well, anticipating the features of Briar Rose and her ladies-in-waiting. Their bodies seem to form a human chain, with each physically connected to the next: the arm of one touches the toes of the other, a head rests on a knee, or two figures share a pillar.

The proliferation of bodies on Burne-Jones's four canvases is all the more remarkable because the turbid mix of brambles and bodies distances the prince from Sleeping Beauty in profound ways, separating the two and keeping them apart as few other illustrators of the story have. Most illustrators linger on Sleeping Beauty just as the prince enters the chambers or right before the prince plants the storied kiss on her lips. Instead of a scene of reanimation, we are treated here to a tableau of suffocating aesthetic intensity, with briars and roses creating a painful bower first for the suitors and then for the king and his councilors, less so for the servant girls, and not at all for Sleeping Beauty. She slumbers peacefully in a reclining position, with roses providing little more than decorative background (fig. 2). As the eye moves from the prince across to the slumbering princess, the beautiful scenes of suffering modulate into a single iconic figure, preserved and pure, the sole image in which a body is truly at rest—ironically more dead than asleep.

*Briar Rose* offered Burne-Jones a title that signaled an opportunity to yoke beauty and suffering in ways that Oscar Wilde and other contemporaries would have appreciated. With its dark palette of smoky umbers, steely blues, and burnt sienna, the sprawling canvas gives us something monumental and



Fig. 2. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Rose Bower* from *The Legend of Briar Rose*, 1885–1890.

majestic, a *tableau vivant* full of figures that resemble corpses more than living beings. The inert bodies signal on a literal plane the leveling effects of death and on another plane the decorative beauty of bodies draped in settings that combine nature's invasive beauty with the stillness of human art. On the last canvas an ornately carved bed, mirrors encrusted with gold, fabrics artfully draped, intricately woven tapestries, and carved columns all stand in the service of elevating and adorning the princess, lying in a truly regal state. Even the otherwise wildly growing roses seem to have been pruned and trained for this Sleeping Beauty. The cult of death and beauty could not be pictured more clearly than in *Rose Bower*, the last in the quartet of panels.

Burne-Jones's *Briar Rose* reminds us, as few paintings illustrating fairy tales do, that a picture can be worth the thousand words (give or take a few) that it took Perrault and the Grimms to tell the tale. In capturing beauty and putting it on a pedestal, the British painter reveals that "Sleeping" is what can set Beauty off to the greatest advantage, showing how the story's title stages everything critical to understanding it. Like Pamela Travers, Burne-Jones falls under the spell of the story's core: the enchanted castle with a prince who has struggled to find a way through the briars and is captivated by the vision of a sleeping beauty. She is the Briar Rose, the woman who engages in a reciprocal metaphorical relationship with the thickets or roses and thorns encircling the castle and who incarnates in her stillness the seductive pull of beauty and death.

That the cult of beauty is entangled with suffering and despair becomes evident from Burne-Jones's efforts to penetrate the alluring thickets of his own work. He wrote: "Only this is true: that beauty is very beautiful, and softens, and comforts, and inspires, and rouses, and lifts up, and never fails" (Ash, n.p.). And yet at the same time, he drew, for Katie Lewis (the daughter of a friend), a sketch of himself trying unsuccessfully to enter the painted world of "Briar Rose." Poor Mr. Beak (Katie's nickname for the artist) continues work on his canvas as he watches his artistic alter ego crash through the painting and land in despair on his backside. In this allegory about art as something purely to behold, the prince penetrates the briars surrounding the kingdom but ends up a laughingstock who has shattered the beauty of the illusion he has created. Moving from contemplation to action in this case means disenchantment and loss, a grim reminder of how beauty fades and collapses when subjected to the ravages of temporality and plots. For that reason perhaps, Burne-Jones did not include the prince's disenchanting kiss: "I want it to stop with the princess asleep and to tell no more, to leave all the afterwards to the invention and imagination of the people" (qtd. in Dean, 22).

### Sleeping Beauties: Orientalized and Catatonic

Burne-Jones was not the only British painter of his time obsessed with the fairy tale canonized by Perrault and the Brothers Grimm and popularized in England by Tennyson. His contemporary, an artist with the unlikely name of William A. Breakspeare (1856–1914), gives us a Sleeping Beauty immune to the invasive power of nature. Self-contained in what appears to be a hermetic space, this fairy-tale figure rests in a state of serene voluptuousness. Reclining on a divan decorated with extravagant animal furs and artfully draped with fabrics in rainbow hues, she makes herself available to the gaze of spectators, with her right arm propping up her head to ensure full-frontal exposure. Bed, fabrics, fur, and body become one burst of color and beauty in a setting almost tomb-like in its contrasting sparseness.

A small bedside table with arabesque designs holds a miniaturized still life that chromatically mirrors the colors of the sleeping beauty's attire. The article of furniture adds an artistic touch that clinches the suspicion that the title figure of the painting has not only been anesthetized and aestheticized (like the still life) but also eroticized and Orientalized. The living embodiment of seductive beauty, she retains a touch of innocence in the white fabric wrapped around her torso. Breakspeare's painting discloses the sexual underside of the Sleeping Beauty story, taking us back to the necrophiliac charms of Basile's Talia. Unlike her many chaste cousins in illustrations for children's books, this beauty has been fashioned to attract the male gaze, remaining supremely removed, indifferent, and unresponsive to it.

Many contemporary observers gazing at this portrait would most likely associate it with the countless French paintings of odalisques that were all the rage in the nineteenth century. Those alluring beauties may have been draped with rich fabrics, but some were also often represented as reclining in a state of near nudity as they lounged in exotic harems. They too are the dark, obscured doubles lurking in the shadows of the chaste Sleeping Beauties found in illustrations for the fairy tales.

No artist seems more deeply invested in the nexus of beauty, sleep, and death than Maxfield Parrish, whose *Sleeping Beauty* of 1912 succeeds, like no other painting, in suggesting self-contained serenity in the trio of princesses and maids-in-waiting. Parrish creates an image that reveals the twin thematic engines of Sleeping Beauty images—*eros* and *thanatos*—but with classical elegance that keeps the sensual elements in check, creating an image that moves comfortably between the sphere of adult high culture and the culture of childhood.

Illustrators of "Sleeping Beauty" in editions designed for children emphatically resisted, for the most part, representing any trace of the slumbering

voluptuousness in the odalisque figures haunting the European imagination. Instead, their princesses are swaddled in white serenity, radiating innocence and purity even as they invite desire in the quiet beauty of their features and the soft curves of their bodies. Thomas Ralph Spence (1855–1918) painted a Sleeping Beauty that exemplifies the cocooning effect in twentieth-century portraits, and his image sets the tone for illustrators of the story in children's books. The slumbering princess lies in a bed more like a sarcophagus than a plush divan, but her flowing locks, mingled with the vitality of the rose vines, are a reminder that she can still come back to life.

Walter Crane, John Duncan, Ann Macbeth, Henry Maynell Rheam, Herbert Cole, Margaret Tarrant, Jennie Harbour, and many other artists portray Sleeping Beauty with sepulchral splendor, laid out and ready for the tomb in her white or pastel-colored shroud. Gustave Doré's prince is drawn to Sleeping Beauty in part because the sun's rays guide him to the radiantly white princess enclosed in the coffinlike box that is her bed. Burne-Jones envelops Briar Rose in white gauze as well, giving us once again more of a sarcophagus scene than a seraglio.

### The Afterlife of the Living Dead

It took Angela Carter to demythologize "Sleeping Beauty" and break the magic spell that has taken us all in ever since Basile, Perrault, and the Brothers Grimm codified the fairy tale. "In a faraway land long ago": Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* begins with words that remind us of the drive to preserve the mythical power of tales from times past, to perpetuate the cult of the beautiful corpse that is the fairy tale in the form told in times past. Just as Carter's Sleeping Beauty in her story "The Lady of the House of Love" repeats "ancestral crimes," so the fairy tale enables us to lose ourselves in a mindless cycle of repetition compulsion that reproduces and reinforces social norms (93). The house of fairy tale, like the House of Love, degenerates into ruins—"cobwebs, worm-eaten beams, crumbling plaster"—when left to its own devices, visited only by sycophantic suitors driven more by the lure of beauty than the desire to reanimate.<sup>2</sup> Without the right suitor, Carter's somnambulant beauty has become "a cave full of echoes," "a system of repetitions," "a closed circuit." Leading a "baleful posthumous" existence, she feeds on humans to sustain her dark existence (93).

Myths naturalize ideology, and, according to Richard Slotkin, they are "stories drawn from history" (70) to provide a cohesive sense of tradition and cultural identity. What is at stake in Carter's rewritings is nothing less than what the author famously referred to as "demythologizing business" (Carter, 93) denaturalizing myth and reframing old stories in new terms.

Instead of purveying false truths, the fairy tale can be repurposed to convey true lies, narratives that take us deep into ancient woods and lead us back out again, not necessarily into sunshine but into a space removed from the dark depths of a castle in ruins.

Carter introduces history into the myth of Sleeping Beauty. Her prince is a man who will learn “to shudder” in the trenches, a fellow whose regiment will “embark” for France the night after he bestows his transformative kiss. Rather than locating the story in a timeless “once upon a time,” Carter situates the tale during a “hot, ripe summer” in the early part of the twentieth century. The prince is described with a specificity unknown to most fairy tales. An officer in the British army, he is “blond, blue-eyed, heavy-muscled” and plans for himself an “adventure” on the roads of Romania. Riding a bicycle rather than a steed, he is both pragmatic, using “the most rational transport in the world,” yet also “unknowing” in ways reminiscent of the blockheads, simpletons, and dummies in fairy-tale collections. What Carter stages here is nothing less than the collision of a *historical* being, “rooted in change and time,” with a mythical monster, “the timeless gothic eternity of the vampires, for whom all is as it has always been and will be, whose cards always fall in the same patterns” (97). And, interestingly, it is precisely at the moment when the young officer is introduced that the text shifts into the past tense—the tense of history—moving from the (eternal) present tense used for nearly four pages to describe the Countess of the castle.<sup>3</sup>

Once the possibility opens up of reading Carter’s tale as allegorical and metafictional, revealing that this is a fairy tale about fairy tales, it becomes evident that history’s attempt to invade and inhabit the domain of myth spells the doom of the vampiristic princess. Unlike most sleeping beauties, this “beautiful somnambulist” is also “queen of the vampires” and “mistress of . . . disintegration.” Her beauty, we are told, is a symptom of her “soullessness.” She has a “weird authority” and plays cards that “always” show the “same configuration.” Everything about her is “beautiful” and “ghastly,” yet she is *horribly* “reluctant” to play the role she has assumed. As we read the story, it dawns on us that this gothic vampire is not just a life-sapping mythical tale told to support hegemonic structures but also woman herself, destined to be without volition or identity, condemned to inhabit “a no-man’s land between life and death, sleeping and waking.” The “beastly forebears on the walls,” the ghosts of her ancestors, condemn her to lead a life dictated by their desires: “a perpetual repetition of their passions” (103).

Carter not only gives us a meditation on the cultural repetition compulsion inspired by fairy tales, she also exposes the perverse desires at the heart of the Sleeping Beauty story. Taking us back to Basile’s “Sun, Moon, and

Talia,” with its staging of necrophiliac desires, she moves us inside the mind of the blue-eyed British soldier invited into the bedroom of the Countess. As he crosses the threshold, the officer recalls the “jaded appetites” of a colonel in his regiment. The “old goat” had given him the visiting card for a brothel in Paris, where ten louis guaranteed “a lugubrious bedroom, with a naked girl upon a coffin . . . and, amidst all the perfumes of the embalming parlour, the customer took his necrophiliac pleasure of a pretended corpse” (105). The macabre scene at the castle is nothing more than the gothic staging of banal, everyday erotic practices.

Moved by pity rather than desire, the young soldier observes the “disordered” young woman as she struggles with her glasses. When the Countess drops the glasses used to block light, the “mundane” noise of shattering glass “breaks the wicked spell in the room.” But it takes more than that to exorcise the demons in the haunted castle. The soldier uses the “innocent remedies of the nursery” to stanch the flow of blood from a splinter lodged in the Countess’s thumb from her shattered glasses, and life comes back to the castle, as the Countess turns from vampire into human. The story may end happily with the exorcising of demons, but the soldier, who retains a souvenir from his adventure—a “dark, fanged rose” plucked from between the thighs of the Countess—discovers that the souvenir has turned into a “monstrous flower” just before he embarks for France. The sexual politics of the Sleeping Beauty story, in a stroke of deep irony, spill over into the combat zone, with a military machine that shares the relentlessly cruel appetites of the Countess, devouring its victims in the dark machinery of war. The same psychosexual mechanism that creates a cult of love and death in times of peace is at work in the martial ecstasies of men who throw themselves into the glories of battle.

Sleeping Beauty and Briar Rose, with their magnetic beauty and supremely passive status, remain hauntingly seductive figures in our cultural imaginary, reminding us of the pleasures of beauty but also of the attractions of morbidity. They may be immobile, but they also migrate with ease into new media as counterparts to mercurial tricksters—all the warrior women who hunt, shoot, and seek revenge in today’s cinematic refashioning of fairy-tale figures (Tatar, “Sleeping Beauties”). That their stories have been resurrected and are constantly reimagined is a stark reminder that the emergence of a female trickster does not necessarily signal a seismic shift in our understanding of female agency, even if trickster tales frame new perils and possibilities for postmodern heroines, challenging us to rethink the ancient archetypes. Sleeping Beauty, a true hermeneutic puzzle in her many cultural incarnations, preserves the magical, mythical elements of fairy tales, even as she cries out for disenchantment. We not only want to talk to her but also talk about her and make sense of her story.



As Donald Haase puts it, we are, like the prince, “driven by stories—driven to them by desire and driven by them to desire” (294). “Sleeping Beauty” not only makes us wonder—wonder how and why—but also leads us to become curiouiser and curiouiser.

### Notes

1. The full history of the story and the Einstein quotation that grew out of it can be found at [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Albert\\_Einstein#Disputed](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Albert_Einstein#Disputed) (accessed November 10, 2013).
2. Katherine A. Hagopian explores how the tale inverts the relationship between Cupid and Psyche, with a monstrous bride residing in a house of love rather than a “winged serpent” residing in the “house of Eros.”
3. Jessica Tiffin points out that “from the moment he enters the village, and despite his characterization both in heroic motif and active, masculine past tense, the cyclist’s historical nature is subsumed into the unreal space of fairy tale and the Gothic” (85). The shift from the descriptions of the countess in the present tense to the narrative past begins with the words, “One hot, ripe summer day in the pubescent years of the present century, a young officer in the British army, blond, blue-eyed, heavy-muscled, visiting friends in Vienna, decided to spend the remainder of his furlough exploring the little-known uplands of Romania” (Carter, 97).

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