

Title: Repudiating 'Sleeping Beauty'

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Publication Details: *Girls, Boys, Books, Toys: Gender in Children's Literature and Culture*. Ed. Beverly Lyon Clark and Margaret R. Higonnet. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. p11-24.

Source: *Short Story Criticism*. Ed. Jelena O. Krstovic. Vol. 144. Detroit: Gale. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Critical essay

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[(essay date 1999) *In the essay that follows, Knoepfelmacher centers on the resistance among later female writers to rework or adapt Perrault's male-dominated "Sleeping Beauty," whose source the critic maintains is Giambattista Basile's sexually-charged "Sun, Moon, and Talia," from his fairy-tale collection Pentamerone (1634-36).*]

## I

As Karen Rowe noted long ago, the "literary versions" of Continental fairy tales disseminated in England throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries "differed substantially for men and women" (69). Given their original emphasis on female empowerment, however, male retellings of stories such as "Cinderella" or "Aschenputtel" could be reclaimed by later women writers who adapted them for children's books or reworked them into adult romances. In contrast, texts that unequivocally embodied a male point of view, such as Charles Perrault's "**La Belle au bois dormant**," or "**The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood**," although also ending with the reinstatement of a dispossessed heroine, proved especially difficult for women writers to rehabilitate.

In his "Moralité," or epilogue, to "**The Sleeping Beauty**," Perrault betrays some discomfort when he jokingly calls attention to the unnaturalness of the princess's protracted waiting period for a mate. Although he holds that the hope for a rich, handsome, and gallant mate may be "naturelle" for all single women, the narrator contends that he knows of no husbandless damsel--or "femelle," as he calls her--willing or able to sleep so placidly ("si tranquillement") for an entire century (107). Perrault's mockery is extended by male translators of his *Contes*: "Many a girl has waited long / For a husband brave or strong; / But I'm sure I never met / Any sort of women yet / Who could wait a hundred years, / Far from fretting, free from fears" (A. Johnson 20-21). Presumably bothered by such male cynicism, Angela Carter gave a decided twist to this "Moral" in her own 1982 translation. Although she made no alterations in the story itself (having already reworked traditional fairy tales in her subversive *Bloody Chamber* [1979]), Carter rephrases Perrault's appended moral to call the narrative into question: "A brave, rich, handsome husband is a prize well worth waiting for; but no modern woman would think it was worth waiting for a hundred years" (20). The stance of a worldly male amused by the fretful eagerness of marriageable girls is here neatly turned into one that can be held by any mature "modern woman."

Yet more than *Sleeping Beauty's* excessive patience made this male fantasy a difficult one for women writers--or readers--to assimilate. Mid-Victorian adapters who reworked the story also tried to signify their distance from some of its contents. Thus, in *The Fairy Book: The Best Popular Fairy Stories*

*Selected and Rendered Anew* (1863), Dinah Mulock Craik follows the example of the Grimm brothers' "Dornröschen" ("Little Briar-Rose") by simply excising the second half of Perrault's story, with its abrupt and seemingly incongruous shift to a new plot involving the mother-ogress who wants to kill her daughter-in-law and eat her own grandchildren. In *Fairy Tales for Grown Ups* (1867), Anne Thackeray gamely tries to convert the old tale into a social satire that ridicules the stereotypical "female passivity" so essential to the Victorian ideology of separate spheres (see Auerbach and Knoepfelmacher, "Refashioning" 15). Jean Ingelow's use of the story in her *Mopsa the Fairy* (1869) also remains ironic: although Jack's kiss is responsible for changing a chubby sleeper into a queen, this human boy is not allowed to become her consort once she grows beyond him in maturity and power. The same reeds that "he had penetrated" earlier soon grow into the "long spear-like leaves" that will keep him away from Mopsa's castle (311). Unlike the thicket traversed by the prince in "**Sleeping Beauty**" or in "Dornröschen," this barrier proves insurmountable: woman and boy are now incompatible, destined to remain apart.

In "The Prince's Progress" (1866), the title poem of Christina Rossetti's second volume of verses, an energetic and "strong" prince keeps straying from his avowed "progress" toward a princess who can be released only by his intervention. The poem's opening depicts the ostensible object of the young man's quest, an immured and drowsy bride: "The long hours go and come and go, / The bride she sleepeth, waketh, sleepeth, / Waiting for one whose coming is slow:-- / Hark! the bride weepeth" (1: 95, lines 3-6). The erotic prince evinces little interest in this languid and weepy inmate, preferring to be detained by the banter of a "wave-haired milkmaid, rosy and white," who meets him outdoors, seductively loitering by a stile (1:96, line 58). When he finally arrives at his destination, the elixir of life he brings with him proves to be useless. Whereas, in "Goblin Market," the juices that Lizzie brings back to a "dwindling" Laura remove this sister from "Death's door" (1:18, lines 320-21), the male protagonist of the later fairy-tale poem cannot revive one who has fallen asleep forever: "Too late for love, too late for joy, / Too late, too late! You loitered on the road too long. / You trifled at the gate: / ... / The enchanted princess in her tower / Slept, died, behind the grate" (1: 108, lines 481-88). Rossetti here not only subverts the masculinist emphasis of those who, like Perrault and the Grimms, had cast the prince as an animator of torpid female limbs but also goes beyond those male contemporaries who had a vested interest in the arrested femininity of aestheticized--and anesthetized--women.

By the start of the twentieth century, the repudiation of Perrault's text becomes even more pronounced. In E. Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle* (1907), two boys and a girl enter a maze that lies beyond a rose garden--"out of a picture or a fairy tale"--bordered with "thick, close-cut yew edges" (17). In a clearing at the center of this enclosure, they find a recumbent female figure attired in a "rosy gold dress." Given the setting and the veiled figure's royal garb, the children agree that she can be none other than Sleeping Beauty herself. But Gerald, the oldest, refuses to bestow a princely kiss on the young stranger; when his sister Kathleen takes on that role, the sleeper fails to stir. As a result, it remains up to Jimmy, the youngest and most skeptical of the three trespassers, to plant "a loud, cheerful-sounding kiss on the Princess's pale cheek"; yawning and stretching her arms, the veiled young Beauty theatrically exclaims, "Then the hundred years are over? How the yew hedges have grown! Which of you is my Prince?" (23). Yet this dramatic awakening turns out to be a mere ruse, for the "Princess" is only a playacting impostor, Mabel, the housekeeper's niece. Magic will have to be found elsewhere in a story that Nesbit tries to free from all antecedent fairy-tale encrustations.

In *The Secret Garden* (1911), Frances Hodgson Burnett also rejects "**The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods.**" She defies the earlier conventions by making a girl, rather than a young man, be the first to penetrate an overgrown, walled sanctuary and to animate that dormant female space. The garden at

first reminds Mary Lennox of "some fairy place," but she quickly notes a fundamental unlikeness: "The few books she had read and liked had been fairy-story books, and she had read of secret gardens in some of the stories. Sometimes people went to sleep in them for a hundred years, which she had thought must be rather stupid. She had no intention of going to sleep, and, in fact, she was becoming wider awake every day which passed at Misselthwaite" (88). Mary clearly speaks for Burnett when she dismisses as "stupid" the notion of a hundred-year female coma. For the novelist wants to dissociate *The Secret Garden* from the male fantasy of "**Sleeping Beauty**." Mary is no passive sleeper awakened by a masculine rescuer; instead, she is about to lead a boy-collaborator into the garden she has already begun to revive. Her handiwork is quickly praised by Dickon: "'Tha'was right,' he said. 'A gardener couldn't have told thee better'" (104-5). As caretaker of the garden associated with her cousin Colin's mother, however, Mary will do more than tend plants. In a deliberate reversal of gender roles, it is she who awakens Colin from the paralysis caused by his mother's death and perpetuated by his father's neglect.

Why did "**Sleeping Beauty**" seem unacceptable to both Nesbit and a Burnett who had nonetheless worked the old tale into *A Little Princess* in 1905?<sup>1</sup> Traditional fairy tales certainly had become more difficult to accommodate by the end of the Victorian era. Forced, like Mary Lennox, to weed and prune overgrown thickets in order to make "a place" for new growths and give them "room to breathe," women writers had become increasingly aware of endless layers of deformation in the tales. The scholarly work of folklorists such as Marian Roalfe Cox, whose 1893 compilation of 345 variants of "Cinderella" was introduced by Andrew Lang and is still considered a classic today, made these writers far better schooled in identifying narrative antecedents and their permutations. Thus, Sir Richard Burton's posthumous 1893 translation of Giambattista Basile's *Pentamerone*, recognized as one of Perrault's major sources, may well have magnified the long-standing antipathy women writers felt for "**La Belle au bois dormant**." Aiming at adult readers, Burton had no compunction in fully reinstating the "coarseness" that John Edward Taylor, Basile's mid-Victorian translator, had partly expunged in an attempt to appeal to a dual audience of the young and old (Taylor xvi).<sup>2</sup>

Basile's story "Sun, Moon, and Talia" helps account for the strange unevenness that makes Perrault's "**Sleeping Beauty**" story so much less polished than his others. Indeed, as we shall eventually see, this blatant story of rape, adultery, and cannibalism proved so difficult to suppress that Perrault might have been better off had he simply tried to de-eroticize his text and removed its entire second half, as the Grimms did in their brief and innocuous "Dornröschen." His decision to disguise the source of the sexual rivalry between the fierce ogress and a passive Sleeping Beauty only made the contest between aggressive and passive female figures more amenable to misogynist readings.

## II

In distinguishing Perrault's version of "**Sleeping Beauty**" from that of the Grimms, Lutz Röhrich stresses the Frenchman's ironic realism:

The German Sleeping Beauty is as old the day she wakes up as the day she fell asleep; it does not occur to the German narrator to calculate the effect of the magical hundred-year sleep. Perrault's Sleeping Beauty has hard skin because she is 120 years old; "one would be hard pressed to find an animal in the zoo with skin as hard as hers." The musical instruments which wake her play outdated music, and Sleeping Beauty is wearing an old-fashioned dress: "But the prince was careful not to tell her that she was dressed like his grandmother and was wearing a high-necked dress." On the wedding night the princess doesn't sleep much because she is already thoroughly rested.(164-65)

Röhrich might have added that, unlike the Grimms, who need a waking king and queen to approve their young child's impending marriage, Perrault removes his Sleeping Beauty's parents and condemns them to grow older and die.<sup>3</sup> Yet more than Perrault's time-conscious realism is involved in all these examples. Whereas the German Briar-Rose remains a virginal teenager who has yet to consummate her marriage by the end of the story, Perrault has his fun with the nuptials he places at the midpoint of his narrative. The idea that a hundred-year waiting period may have appreciably increased the libido of a bride old enough to be her inexperienced young groom's grandmother affords an opportunity for a sexual innuendo that Perrault simply cannot pass up.

One of the chief differences, then, between the French and German texts is their treatment of sexuality. The Grimms want their fifteen-year-old *Dornröschen* to remain innocent and childlike to the end. Her very name--"little Briar-Rose"--infantilizes her, as does the androgynous "it" ("es") used to refer to her in the German original. There is no prediction about the sleeping girl's redemption through a male kiss, as there is in Perrault's version. The prince, who merely happens to arrive on the very day when the spell is to be dissolved, is as de-eroticized as Briar-Rose. Unable to avert his eyes, he shyly gives her a buss, whereupon she awakens "and looked at him quite sweetly" (Grimm, *Complete* 241), or, as the German phrasing has it, "*ganz freundlich*"--"in quite friendly fashion" (Grimm, *Grimms Märchen* 1: 347). Like two obedient children, the pair soon report to her parents. Their behavior thus befits a *Kindermärchen* designed for the young offspring of a Biedermeier bourgeoisie.

In contrast, Perrault's tale, intended for an older audience of teenagers and adults, seems far more prurient. His "trembling" young prince may also be somewhat immature, but the sexual excitement he exhibits as he kneels over the "radiant beauty" lying before him is unmistakable. And the waking princess, according to the narrator's gloss, "bestowed upon him a look more tender than a first glance might seem to warrant" (A. Johnson 13). Without the necessity of gaining approval from her parents, this princess and her eager lover can speedily consummate their desires: after eating and drinking in "an apartment hung with mirrors," they sleep "but little" on their wedding night (15, 16).

The parental authority that Perrault's Sleeping Beauty and her lover so easily evade in her castle comes to plague them as soon as the tale moves into its second half. The kingdom that was ruled by the princess's parents a century ago has "passed to another family" (9). Perrault's story also "passes" into a very different mode when the male offspring of this new "family" cannot bring himself to introduce his bride to his parents. For Sleeping Beauty's bold lover turns out to be a most timid son. To account for his escapade, the prince tells his father that he spent the night in the hut of a hospitable peasant who warmed and fed him. The "easygoing" king accepts this fiction, but the young man's more discerning mother is "not so easily hoodwinked" by the prince's "handy" excuses whenever "he slept two or three nights from home" (16).

When Perrault explains why this matriarch is to be feared far more than her complacent husband, he hardly exhibits the "French sense of reality" that Röhrich credits him with. The prince's periodic nighttime trips result in the production, first, of a daughter called Dawn and then of a boy named "'Day,' because he seemed even more beautiful than his sister" (16). One might expect the arrival of such a precious male heir to provide the prince with an olive branch to dangle before his parents; he has, after all, ensured the extension of the kingdom's ruling family. Yet the young man continues to conceal the existence of his wife and children. The reasons for concealment are made perfectly explicit in Basile's masculinist text, where, as we shall see in the next segment, the father of these children covers up more than a secret marriage. But in Perrault's story, the explanation for the prince's

reluctance to trust his mother "with his secret" is handled in a manner so self-consciously extravagant that it undercuts the narrative's coherence.

For the prince knows that, far from melting a grandmother's heart, the beauty of his children will only stimulate in her carnal appetites quite different from his own: "Despite the affection which he bore her, he was afraid of his mother, for she came of a race of ogres, and the king had only married her for her wealth. It was whispered at the Court that she had ogrish instincts, and that when little children were near she had the greatest difficulty in the world to keep herself from pouncing on them." As if to call attention to the incongruity of this pseudoexplanation, the narrator cannot refrain from adding, tongue-in-cheek, "No wonder the prince was reluctant to say a word" (16). The prince's silence resembles the narrator's wordiness, for both greatly prefer female passivity to female aggression.

Upon the old king's death, the prince assumes that he can now safely bring home his long-concealed wife and children. Yet after deciding to make war "on his neighbor, the Emperor Cantalabutte" (sic!), the new king rashly appoints "the queen mother as regent in his absence" and foolishly entrusts his wife and children to her care. The mother is now free to indulge those ogrish appetites her son has inexplicably forgotten: she commands her steward to serve little Dawn with "piquant sauce" and, after enjoying the lamb the steward substitutes for the child, orders little Day and, eventually, Sleeping Beauty herself to be garnished in the same way. This last request poses a special problem for the well-meaning steward: "The young queen was twenty years old, without counting the hundred years she had been asleep. Her skin, though white and beautiful, had become a little tough, and what animal could he possibly find that would correspond to her?" (18). The narrator's gloss again borders on the burlesque. But his exaggerations do not, as Röhrich maintains, establish witty "connections to reality" (165). Instead, they are distractions designed to prevent the reader from demanding a more plausible explanation for the older woman's bizarre behavior. The narrator's humor discourages us from seriously speculating about the motivations that might make a matriarch want to devour her son's family.

The ogress who dominates the second half of "**The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood**" is clearly an analogue to the old, malevolent fairy who dominated the story's first half. The two powerful figures are linked in several ways. Both feel slighted by a patriarchal order: the fairy, by the king who failed to invite her to the christening party; the ogress, by the son who failed to acknowledge her primacy when he covertly married the young-but-old woman who promptly bore him two heirs. Though directed at male authority, each woman's enmity leads her to attack children and childlike adult women, since these innocents might perpetuate a royal succession. The fairy chooses to kill a girl who, having just passed puberty, is in a position to extend her father's lineage. Similarly, the ogress who acts as "regent" in the new king's absence decides to slaughter his offspring and wife because they threaten to undermine her dominance over her husband and son.

In this sense, the fairy who is denied a seat at the banquet and the ogress who is tricked into believing that she has devoured the prince's family are identical power-hungry, phallic women who are perceived as threats to a tenuous male rule. Both women also threaten the control over the narratives held by the two male storytellers, that is, the prince, Perrault's narrator, as well as Perrault himself as purveyor of tales he knows to have been authored by someone else. The spindle used by the old fairy as a weapon to kill Sleeping Beauty was associated, in real life as well as in folklore, with the powerful spinners of folktales whose authority Perrault acknowledges; yet there are more immediate female rivals, such as Marie-Catherine D'Aulnoy, whose recent adaptations of fairy tales Perrault seems far less willing to recognize.<sup>4</sup>

As a symbol of the very deflowering that the old fairy wants to prevent, however, the pricking spindle that draws blood from girls and makes them fall down in a "swoon" is clearly as masculine as its antidote, the prince's kiss that acts as a prelude to a true defloration. A similar gender reversal is at work when the ogress decides, after discovering that her victims are still alive, to throw them and the offending steward (and his wife) into a cauldron full of vipers, toads, and "snakes and serpents of every kind" (A. Johnson 20). Yet, in a feat rather difficult to execute, she ultimately chooses to be herself devoured by these "hideous creatures." No Perseus can slay the Medusalike ogress; instead, she overreaches even in her self-immolation by impaling herself on a bed of borrowed phalluses.

Perrault purports to side with the young and weak against such aberrant and overbearing female figures. Aware that she can hardly "undo all that my aged kinswoman has decreed," the young fairy who counters the spell can at best commute a death sentence into a century of "slumber" and place her hopes in the agency of a "king's son" (5). But the redeeming prince's own powers of protection seem far more curtailed than those of the young fairy or the kindhearted steward. Despite his brash military campaign against Emperor Cantalabutte, the young monarch seems almost as paralyzed and volitionless as Sleeping Beauty. And this Griselda figure takes female passivity to hyperbolic extremes when she asks the steward to slice her throat: "'Do it! Do it!' she cried baring her neck to him; 'carry out the order you have been given! Then once more I shall see my children, my poor children that I loved so much'" (19). (As Perrault's narrator quickly notes in accounting for Sleeping Beauty's death wish, "Nothing had been said to her when the children were stolen away, and she believed them to be dead." But why had the kindly steward not confided in her? Because this child-woman could not be entrusted with a dangerous secret?)

Sleeping Beauty's inability to defend her children, or to avenge them after supposing them to have been slaughtered, only helps to magnify the fierceness with which the old fairy and the ogress meet any challenge to their supremacy. Her lack of volition, however, parallels her husband's own reluctance to assert his and her interests. Perrault pretends that the young man's filial feelings prevent him from upholding his domestic rights against his devouring mother. Since matricide is something this dutiful son would never allow himself to consider, the ogress's suicide proves highly convenient. Perrault's ironic last sentence reinforces the young monarch's weakness by calling attention to his dubious grief: "The king could not but be sorry, for after all she was his mother; but it was not long before he found ample consolation in his beautiful wife and children" (20). There seems to be some consolation, too, as Perrault slyly hints, in the young king's certainty--and ours--that his tenuous control over her waking life will never be challenged by so utterly self-effacing and compliant a wife.

### III

Both Perrault's ironic self-consciousness and the resistance to his text by later women writers are greatly clarified by a closer look at the major antecedent he tried to rework in "**La Belle au bois dormant.**" For Perrault's tale must be read as a bloated version of "Sun, Moon, and Talia," the Fifth Diversion of the Fifth Day of *Lo Cunto Deli Cunti* (later known as the *Pentamerone*) that Giambattista Basile had published in Naples in 1636 for an adult readership. Retaining Basile's privileging of female passivity, Perrault embroiders a plot that Basile tells far more directly and compactly. Unlike Perrault, however, who feels compelled to protect a precarious male order from the threat of female usurpation, Basile unambiguously equates strength with masculine opportunism. Thus, whereas the gifts and curses of fairies determine Sleeping Beauty's fate at the outset of Perrault's story, Basile chooses to have the fate of his young sleeper foretold by divining male "seers": "These wise men, after many consultations, came to the conclusion that she would be exposed to great danger from a small splinter in some flax" (2: 129). Still, in a world ruled by chance, these

soothsayers can offer no preventives or antidotes. The removal of all spindles by Perrault's king was a foolish attempt to forestall the irresistible mandates of matriarchal fate. But when undertaken by the "great lord" who tries to protect his motherless daughter in "Sun, Moon, and Talia," the same action can at least help to reduce the odds.

This ideological discrepancy accounts for each writer's almost antithetical handling of his narrative. Perrault's authorial uneasiness, conveyed by his diversionary wit and his reliance on excrescent detail, makes him as evasive as the young prince who finds it so difficult to tell a straightforward story. Basile, on the other hand, proceeds with the brash self-confidence shown by his own ruthless male protagonist. That hero turns out to be not a prince at all, but rather a lustful king who is already married before he stumbles upon a chance to rape and inseminate a sleeping beauty. Named Talia by her father (there is no mother who finds, as the queen finds in the opening of Perrault's tale, "that her wishes were fulfilled"), this young woman succumbs to the accident the wise men predicted. After being pricked in the manner of Sleeping Beauty and *Dornröschen*,<sup>5</sup> she falls into a seemingly irreversible coma. In Basile's erratic universe, there is no time limit of a hundred years or promise of future princely redemption. Bemoaning "this bucketful of sour wine," Talia's "stricken father" promptly deserts his inert child: "He locked the door and left for ever the house which had brought him such evil fortune, so that he might entirely obliterate the memory of his sorrow and suffering" (2: 130).<sup>6</sup>

Left unattended for "some time," this daughter of a luckless man is now ready to be repossessed by a more fortunate king, a hunter who accidentally follows his falcon into Talia's room. Like a falcon himself, he immediately pounces on his prey, carries her to a couch, and "having gathered the fruits of love, left her lying there" (2: 130). As uninterested in Talia's fate as her oblivion-seeking father, the rapist returns to his kingdom, "and for a long time entirely forgot the affair." One day, however, the king's memories of "the adventure of the fair sleeper" are somehow rekindled, and he decides to take "the opportunity of another hunting expedition" to press his luck a second time. To his surprise, he finds Talia awake and accompanied by "two prodigies of beauty," Sun and Moon, the twin children born during his yearlong absence. These heirs, a son and daughter (though twice called "sons" by the translator, Benedetto Croce), raise Talia's value in the king's estimation. He now remains in her company for "several days" and, upon returning to his palace, crassly brags about Talia, Sun, and Moon to his wife (2: 131).

As Perrault emphasized to his readers, his Sleeping Beauty was wide awake on her wedding night as well as during the renewed connubial intercourse that resulted in the successive births of Dawn and Day. Basile, however, keeps Talia asleep both during and after her defloration, for, like Thomas Hardy, whose Tess is also impregnated while asleep, he wants to stress the "purity" of his subject. She is still in a coma when her two children are born, having been kept alive by invisible fairies who act as friendly midwives and nursemaids rather than as powerful fates. Significantly, Talia's awakening is induced not by an erotic kiss but by the action of one of her own babes: unable to find her breast, the infant sucks her finger and "drew out the splinter" (2: 130). As a virgin mother, Talia is understandably puzzled about the possible origins of the "two splendid pearls" nestled beside her. She has no memory of a lover. As even the unsentimental king begins to grasp, this innocent is herself a pearl who may be more desirable than his legal, but childless, wife.

In his efforts to soften this crass tale of rape and adultery, Perrault converts Basile's determined king into a tremulous young prince and changes the revengeful actions of a wronged wife into the obsessions of a ravenous mother. The ogress's appetite for children, however, remains far more contrived than the enmity Basile's queen understandably shows toward her husband's illegitimate

children. This betrayed woman is not an insatiable flesh-eater, but rather someone who has good reason for wanting to destroy rival claimants to the throne. Luring Talia and her offspring to the court, she decides not to eat the children herself but rather to feed them to her philandering mate. When she urges him to take more helpings--"Eat away, you are eating what is your own"--her husband cruelly uses the occasion to remind her of her barrenness: "I know very well I am eating what is my own; you never brought anything into the house" (2: 131). Despite the king's obtuseness, however, the joke is on the queen. Thanks to a tender-hearted cook's maneuvering, the meats consumed are mere animal flesh.

Stung by her husband's "anger," the queen now vents her wrath on Talia, who, after all, may well bring more children into the king's "house." She has this rival hauled in and berates her in a manner more befitting a fishwife than a queen: "Welcome, Madame Troccola [Miss Busybody]! So you are the fine piece of goods, the fine flower my husband is enjoying! You are the cursed bitch that makes my head go round! ... I will make you pay for all the harm you have done me!" (2: 131). The psychological realism that Röhrich attributes to Perrault is more evident here. There is no need to assign an ogress appetite to this enraged queen. Not only the reader, but Talia herself, fully understands the grounds for the queen's excesses. Talia even tries to "excuse herself, saying that it was not her fault and that the King had taken possession of her territory whilst she was sleeping" (2: 131). The queen understandably refuses to listen to any tall tale about a catalepsy induced by spindle splinters.

Whereas Perrault's ogress tries to eat her daughter-in-law, Basile's wronged wife wants to burn to death the woman who so enflamed her husband with passion and pride. At this point Basile reintroduces the story's earlier erotics. To delay her execution, Talia asks to be allowed to undress before being thrown on the bonfire. She engages in what amounts to a striptease bound to bring back the nearby king: "Talia began to undress, and for each garment that she took off she uttered a shriek. She had taken off her dress, her skirt and bodice, and was about to take off her petticoat, and to utter her last cry," when the king, undoubtedly stimulated by the little shrieks, comes bounding in "to learn what was happening" (2: 132). Upon being reproached by his wife "for his betrayal of her" and informed that she has fed him his children, he orders that she be thrown into the fire (2: 132). This monarch has none of the delicacy of Perrault's squeamish young king, who cannot bring himself to execute his mother. His will is paramount, curtailed only by the erratic turns of the wheel of fortune and not by any woman stronger than he. Yet, unlike Talia's father, this king turns out to be quite lucky, after all: his children are restored to him and his first wife has been conveniently supplanted by a fertile and pliable spouse. Rape can have its rewards, as Basile makes clear in the cynical couplet he deploys as the final "moral" for his amoral tale: "*Lucky people, so 'tis said, / Are blessed by Fortune whilst in bed*" (2: 132).

#### IV

A reading of Basile's uninhibited and nearly pornographic ur-text not only casts new light on "**Sleeping Beauty**" but also illuminates the resistance to Perrault's text by later women writers. Any interpretation of the texts by Craik, Thackeray, Ingelow, and other women writers whom I discussed at the beginning of this essay requires a double gender analysis, for in responding to Perrault these authors were also processing his own response to Basile. Instead of rejecting outright a text unsuited for his younger and largely female readers, the Frenchman preferred to dilute the amoral, aristocratic perspective of his Italian forerunner. His avoidance of rape, adultery, and wife murder notwithstanding, Perrault retained Basile's masculinist perspective. The uneasiness of his avuncular

relation to the young women he coyly addresses at the end of each of his *Contes* is most evident in his handling of narrative detail in "**La Belle au bois dormant.**"

Perrault's introduction of a passive sleeper erotically revived by a male kiss and his steady antagonism toward powerful older women expose a relation to the feminine that is considerably more complex, yet also far more equivocal, than Basile's overtly cynical sexism. Even his jokes about the prince's tough-skinned, centenarian bride betray discomfort. Perrault seems disturbed by the notion that the young *naïves* he so jocularly patronizes might grow up into monstrous crones such as the cackling old fairy who tries to kill an innocent girl and the wronged wife he converts into a ravenous mother-ogress, killed by the deadly snakes she has unleashed.

There is little doubt that Perrault's fascination with virginal sleepers and furious female monarchs had an impact on later male fantasists. Lewis Carroll's drowsy dreamchild, after all, must, like Sleeping Beauty and Talia, confront the ire of those red-faced matriarchs who would cut off her head or spoil her own coronation. To be sure, a few male writers, such as George MacDonald, used "**Sleeping Beauty**" as a foil for their own constructions of femininity by comically exploiting the tale's many narrative incongruities.<sup>7</sup> But the repudiation of "**Sleeping Beauty**" was undertaken mostly by women writers. The authors whose work I briefly examine at the outset of this essay had reasons to be doubly offended. Perrault's surreptitious retention of so many elements of Basile's plot as well as his alterations and additions fueled their revisions, inversions, and subversions.

The erotic kiss central to Perrault's sexually charged version of the story becomes a focal point in the revisionist narratives by women writers. As soon as Ingelow's matured Queen Mopsa stoops down to kiss the little boy she has outgrown, the doors of her castle shut and Jack knows "that he should never enter them again" (311). Her action is maternal. Were he to stay with her forever after, Jack would be prevented from growing up. By returning the quasiparental kiss he gave her when she herself was still a tiny toddler, Queen Mopsa forecloses any possibilities of a sexual union. The boy kissed by his own mother before being sent to bed at the end of Ingelow's fantasy is still much too small to become a princely mate. The strawberries Jack has eaten replace his memories of an immured queen. He has no erotic dreams.

Nor can there be a sexual awakening or consummation in most of the other texts I introduced at the start of this essay. Even when the role of the kissing prince is not played by small boys such as Jack or Nesbit's Jimmy, fulfillment remains impossible: Rossetti's black-bearded prince is fully eroticized, but the bride he finally reaches has become a corpse. The very authenticity of the kiss can become questionable when a woman writer challenges the authority of male transmissions. Craik's retelling of "**Sleeping Beauty,**" which dispenses with the story's second half, puts a very different spin on Perrault's boudoir scene: "Trembling, the prince approached and knelt beside her. Some say he kissed her, but as nobody saw it, and she never told, we cannot be quite sure of the fact" (6).

In a further attempt to do away with male domination, Craik allows her Sleeping Beauty to regain her own throne and to survive, as Queen Victoria would, the loss of her consort. Indeed, as her last sentence suggests, there may have been a gain in such a loss: "She lived a long and happy life, like any other ordinary woman, and died at length, beloved, regretted, but, the prince being already no more, perfectly contented" (7). Florence Bell's dramatic 1908 version of the story introduces yet another put-down of male authority, undermining not the prince, but his father. Defying Perrault by having Sleeping Beauty's parents survive, as in the German "*Dornröschen,*" Bell deviates from her source even further by denying the old king the power of narrative closure. When the monarch proclaims that he "joyfully give[s] my consent to the union" of the young lovers, he is sharply put down by his wife, who claims to be a much better judge of their daughter's worth: "Nobody asked you

for it. I joyfully give mine. My daughter, Prince, is a peculiarly gifted girl. The only thing she can't do better than anyone else in the world is to spin" (329).

It is Burnett's *The Secret Garden* that most radically subverts not only Perrault but also Basile. Burnett's consciousness of her predecessors, as I have already suggested, even colors her characterization of figures other than Mary, Colin, and Dickon. Thus it hardly seems coincidental that the first boy on whom Mary so fiercely turns after he has invaded her female sanctuary should be named Basil. Moreover, as husband of the dead Lilius, Archibald Craven reenacts the roles of both Talia's absenting father and a feminine sleeper in need of awakening. A maternal ghost must penetrate his defenses and lead him back to a son released from his own paralysis. Even the masculine ending of *The Secret Garden*, in which the embracing father and son repossess Misselthwaite Manor can, paradoxically, be read as a further distancing from Basile and Perrault. For the exclusion of Mary from this final tableau at least avoids the possibility that a strong "Mistress Mary" will turn into the submissive bride of the new "master" of garden and house. Whereas several film versions suggest that Colin and Mary will marry (and others suggest that she will become Connie Chatterley to Dickon's Mellors), Burnett avoids that inference. Like Ingelow and Nesbit, she prefers to de-eroticize her narrative.

Perhaps the most resounding subversion of "**Sleeping Beauty**," however, came in a text that was published much earlier and has been retold and adapted by a long succession of women writers: it is, after all, the kiss of a determined young woman that revives a torpid male in Marie LePrince de Beaumont's 1757 "Beauty and the Beast." Even the Disney version of this narrative seems to respect its long lineage of female antecedents. And it adds the figure of Gaston the hunter, a latter-day version of Basile's lustful hunter-king, only to undercut his male presumptions. But this, as the old story spinners liked to say, is another story to be told elsewhere and at another time.<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

1. When Ram Dass enters the attic room of the sleeping Sara Crewe, he assumes the role of princely awaker and also acts as a surrogate for Carrisford, the debilitated millionaire who will become Princess Sara's avuncular consort.
2. By alluding to the precedent of the Grimms in his preface to *The Pentamerone; or, The Story of Stories, Fun for the Little Ones* and by enlisting George Cruikshank as his illustrator, John Edward Taylor clearly intended to capitalize on the success of the Cruikshank-illustrated edition of the Grimms undertaken by his namesake, Edgar Taylor, in 1823-26. He invokes "Dr. Grimm" on the "philosophical character and worth" of Giambattista Basile's tales, yet adds, "At the same time, this volume will, I hope, likewise prove attractive to my younger readers, who may derive pleasure and amusement from a ramble in the Fairyland of the south" (xvi).
3. The fairy causes "everybody" in the household to fall asleep, "except the king and queen," who "kissed their dear child, without waking her, and left the castle," entering into a world of mutability and death (A. Johnson 9, emphasis added).
4. For discussions of Perrault's uneasy relation to D'Aulnoy and other women writers of his time, see Zipes, *Fairy Tale*, and Harries.
5. Although dramatic and cinematic adaptations of "Sleeping Beauty" often suggest that the malevolent fairy and the old woman with distaff and spindle are identical by having the same actress play both roles, there is no such identification in either Perrault or the Grimms. Basile, who stresses

fortuitousness rather than fairy power, calls attention to the old woman's unwitting part in "this terrible catastrophe" and has her guiltily run away (130).

6. Burnett, as suggested above, may well have known Basile's story: Archibald Craven, who locks the garden he equates with *his* "evil fortune" and who reminds Mary Lennox of such fairy-tale figures as Perrault's Ricky of the Tuft, similarly deserts his own paralyzed offspring.

7. MacDonald reverses Perrault's emphasis in "The Light Princess" when he has the determined young princess, aided by an experienced older woman, revive the seemingly dead prince they have lugged into her bedroom. (Earlier, the immobilized prince begged his female counterpart to give him a parting kiss.) MacDonald also has fun with Perrault in "Little Daylight," both in the early scene in which the fairies give their gifts to the princess and in the final scene in which the prince kisses not a desirable young woman, but exactly the sort of wizened "mother" Perrault finds so difficult to accept.

8. "Wakeful Belles and Torpid Beasts: Retellings of 'Beauty and the Beast,'" a lecture I gave at the Northeast Victorian Studies Association and at Skidmore College, will eventually become a companion piece to this essay.

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### Source Citation

Knoepfelmacher, U. C. "Repudiating 'Sleeping Beauty'." *Girls, Boys, Books, Toys: Gender in Children's Literature and Culture*. Ed. Beverly Lyon Clark and Margaret R. Higonnet. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. 11-24. Rpt. in *Short Story Criticism*. Ed. Jelena O. Krstovic. Vol. 144. Detroit: Gale, 2011. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 11 Nov. 2011.

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