



SLEEPING BEAUTY¹

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm

The Grimms' story of *Sleeping Beauty* is considered a truncated version of Giambattista Basile's "*Sun, Moon, and Talia*" (1636) and Charles Perrault's "*Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*" (1697). In Basile's story *Talia* (whose name derives from the Greek word *Thaleia*, meaning "the blossoming one") gets a tiny piece of flax under her fingernail and falls down dead. The king who discovers *Talia* in an abandoned castle is already married, but he is so overcome with desire for her that he "plucks from her the fruits of love" while she is still asleep. *Talia* is awakened from her deep sleep when one of the two infants to which she gives birth, exactly nine months after the king's visit, sucks the piece of flax from her finger. When the king's wife learns about *Talia* and her two children, *Sun* and *Moon*, she orders their deaths, but she herself perishes in the fire she prepares for *Talia*, and the others live happily ever after.

Perrault's "*Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*" is awakened when

1. *Sleeping Beauty*. The Grimms' title, "*Dornröschen*," is sometimes translated literally as "Little Briar Rose." Perrault's French title is "*The Beauty in the Sleeping Forest*." The theme of a person slumbering or hibernating until the time is ripe for awakening appears in many folktales and legends. *Snow White* lies in her glass coffin; *Brunhilde*, surrounded by a wall of fire, is awakened by a kiss in Richard Wagner's nineteenth-century opera *Siegfried*; *Frederick Barbarossa* slumbers in his mountain retreat, awakening every hundred years to see if Germany needs his help as a leader.

From Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "*Dornröschen*," in *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, 7th ed. (Berlin: Dieterich, 1857; first published, Berlin: Realschulbuchhandlung, 1812).

a prince kneels before her, and the two carry on a love affair that produces a daughter named Aurora and a son named Day. Although the prince marries Sleeping Beauty, he is soon summoned to battle and entrusts his wife and children to the care of his mother, who is descended from a "race of ogres." The mother's cannibalistic inclinations get the better of her, but a compassionate steward spares the lives of mother and children, substituting animals for the humans. In the end the queen, caught by her son in the act of trying to do away with his family, flings herself headfirst into a vat filled with "toads, vipers, adders, and serpents."

The Grimms' "Sleeping Beauty" has a narrative integrity that has made it more appealing than Basile's story and Perrault's tale, at least to audiences in the United States. The second phase of action in the Italian and the French versions features postmarital conflicts that, according to some folklorists, constitute separate narratives. It is not at all unusual for the tellers of tales to splice stories together to produce a narrative that charts premarital conflicts as well as what happens in the not so happily-ever-after.

The quintessential female heroine of fairy tales, Sleeping Beauty is the fabled passive princess who awaits liberation from a prince. Deprived of agency, she resembles the catatonic Snow White, who can do nothing more than lie in wait for Prince Charming. Yet this cliché about fairy-tale heroines overlooks the many clever and resourceful girls and women who are able to liberate themselves from danger. Anthologies by Kathleen Ragan, Angela Carter, Alison Lurie, and Ethel Johnston Phelps have resurrected older stories about strong, courageous, and resilient heroines who rescue themselves and others, thus providing weighty evidence that not all princesses wait passively for Prince Charming.

LONG, LONG AGO there lived a king and a queen. Day after day they would say to each other: "Oh, if only we could have a child!"² But nothing ever happened. One day, while the queen was bathing, a frog crawled out of the water, crept ashore, and said to her: "Your wish shall be fulfilled. Before a year goes by, you will give birth to a daughter."

The frog's prediction came true,³ and the queen gave birth to a girl who was so beautiful that the king was beside himself with joy and arranged a great feast. He invited relatives, friends, and acquaintances, and he also sent for the wise women of the kingdom, for he hoped that they would be kind and generous toward his child. There were thirteen wise women in all, but since the king had only twelve golden plates for them to dine on, one of the women had to stay home.

The feast was celebrated with great splendor, and when it drew to a close, the wise women bestowed their magic gifts on the girl.⁴ One conferred virtue on her, a second gave her beauty, a third wealth, and on it went until the girl had everything in the world you could ever want. Just as the eleventh woman was presenting her gift, the thirteenth in the group appeared out of nowhere. She had not been invited, and now she wanted her revenge.⁵ Without looking at anyone or saying a word to a soul there, she cried out in a loud voice: "When the daughter of the king turns fifteen, she will prick her finger on a spindle and fall down dead." And without saying another word, she turned her back on everyone and left the hall.

Everyone was horrified, but just then the twelfth in the group of women stood up. There was still one wish left to make for the girl, and, although the wise woman could not lift the evil spell, she could make it less severe. And so she said: "The king's daughter shall not die, but she will fall into a deep sleep lasting one hundred years." The

2. "Oh, if only we could have a child!" The inability to conceive often leads fairy-tale couples to make reckless promises or to strike outlandish bargains. In "Sleeping Beauty," the parents' lack of foresight appears only at the festivities celebrating the birth of a daughter.

3. *The frog's prediction came true.* In the Grimms' first version of the story, a crab makes the prophecy, hence the hazards of reading too much into the fact that a frog makes the prediction about the birth of a child and is therefore a symbol of fertility in fairy tales.

4. *the wise women bestowed their magic gifts on the girl.* In Perrault's version and in the Grimms' early version, fairies provide the gifts. The gifts promise to turn the Grimms' Sleeping Beauty into an "ideal" woman—virtuous, beautiful, and wealthy. In Perrault's version the girl is given beauty, an angelic disposition, grace, the ability to dance perfectly, the voice of a nightingale, and the ability to play instruments.

5. *She had not been invited, and now she wanted her revenge.* The resentment of the slighted wise woman calls to mind the wrath of Eris, goddess of discord, who, when not invited to the wedding feast of Peleus and Thetis, exacted her revenge by throwing the notorious Apple of Discord, marked with the words "For the Fairest," among the assembled wedded guests. The elaborate debates and negotiations over the Apple of Discord led, eventually, to the Trojan War.



EDMUND DULAC,
"Sleeping Beauty," 1912

"Her head nodded with spite and old age together, as she bent over the cradle." The wicked fairy, who looks more like an angry granny than a disgruntled fairy, prepares to put a curse on the princess, as horrified parents and courtiers look on helplessly.



EDMUND DULAC,
"Sleeping Beauty," 1912

"I am spinning pretty one," answered the old woman, who did not know who she was." Up in the tower room, an overdressed Sleeping Beauty is fascinated by the spinning paraphernalia she discovers and by the old woman's subversive activity.



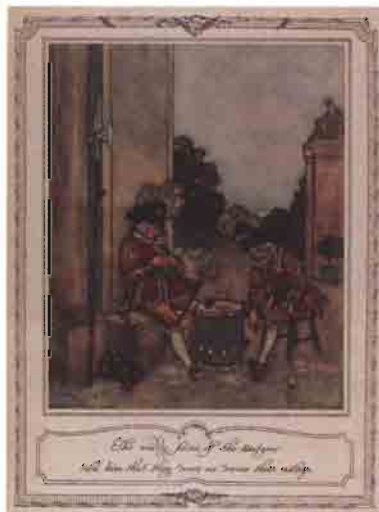
EDMUND DULAC,
"Sleeping Beauty," 1912

"They grew until nothing but the tops of the castle towers could be seen." A laborer with a boy surveys the impenetrable foliage surrounding the castle. The instrument he carries seems powerless to pierce the thick forest surrounding the castle.

6. *a little door with a rusty old key in its lock.* Note that Sleeping Beauty's curiosity, her desire to see what is behind the door and her fascination with the spindle, gets her into trouble. By contrast, the prince is rewarded for his curiosity, which takes the form of the desire to find the fabled castle in which Sleeping Beauty slumbers.

king, who wanted to do everything possible to guard his dear child from misfortune, sent out an order that every spindle in the entire kingdom was to be burned to ashes.

As for the girl, all the wishes made by the wise women came true, for she was so beautiful, kind, charming, and sensible that everyone who set eyes on her grew to love her. On the exact day that she turned fifteen, the king and the queen were not at home, and the girl was left at home all alone. She wandered around in the castle, poking her head into one room after another, and eventually she came to the foot of an old tower. After climbing up a narrow winding staircase in the tower, she ended up in front of a little door with a rusty old key in its lock.⁶ As she turned the key, the door swung open to reveal a tiny little room. An old woman was in it with her spindle, busily spinning flax.



EDMUND DULAC,
"Sleeping Beauty," 1912

"The ruddy faces of the switzers told him that they were no worse than asleep." The military musicians and palace guard have been so frozen in their positions that, but for their skin color, they resemble the statue towering above them. The reds and blues are uncharacteristic of Dulac's pastel palettes.



EDMUND DULAC,
"Sleeping Beauty," 1912

"And there, on a bed the curtains of which were drawn wide, he beheld the loveliest vision he had ever seen." Dulac's princess reclines on her bed, with cherubim floating above her. A cat sleeps on Dulac's signature cushion with tassels.



GUSTAVE DORÉ,
"Sleeping Beauty in the Wood," 1861

A curious Sleeping Beauty reaches her hand out to touch the spindle that will put her to sleep. The bird perched on the chair suggests a sinister moment in this scene of domestic tranquility. The door in the background connects this scene with the opening of a forbidden door in Perrault's "Bluebeard." Note also the unusual position of the cat, a figure connected to curiosity, crouched in such a way as to draw attention to the door.

"Good afternoon, granny," said the princess. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm spinning flax,"⁷ the old woman replied, and she nodded to the girl.

"What is that thing bobbing about so oddly?" asked the girl, and she put her hand on the spindle, for she too wanted to spin. The magic spell began to take effect at once, for she had pricked her finger on the spindle.⁸

Right after touching the tip of the spindle, the girl collapsed on a nearby bed and fell into a deep sleep. Her slumber spread throughout the castle.⁹ The king and the queen, who had just returned home and were entering the great hall, fell asleep, and the entire court with them.

7. "I'm spinning flax." The spindle or distaff is associated with the Fates, who "spin" or measure out the span of life. Spinning is also an activity that fostered female storytelling, and the spinning of flax often crossed over from the storytelling context into the story itself. The German term for spinning has a secondary meaning associated with fantasizing and building castles in the air. As standard symbols for female domesticity, the spindle and distaff were sometimes carried before the bride in wedding processions of an earlier age. The Grimms' *German Mythology* points out the powerful connection between spindles and domesticity.



GUSTAVE DORÉ,
"Sleeping Beauty in the Wood," 1861

The prince is given directions to the castle in which Sleeping Beauty slumbers. The dominance of the vegetation makes the castle appear inaccessible to the tiny figure anchored in a craggy landscape. While others hunt and gather, the prince goes in search of adventure.



GUSTAVE DORÉ,
"Sleeping Beauty in the Wood," 1861

The prince from Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty in the Wood" marches under a dark arch of trees toward the steps of the castle. The light at the entrance to the castle reveals a figure asleep on the stairs, a male counterpart and precursor to Sleeping Beauty.



GUSTAVE DORÉ,
"Sleeping Beauty in the Wood," 1861

The prince passes the figures of sleeping dogs, horses, and courtiers, all of whom were stopped in their tracks when the princess pricked her finger on the only spindle in the kingdom. Vines have grown over some of the figures.

8. *she had pricked her finger on the spindle.* The story of Sleeping Beauty has been thought to map female sexual maturation, with the touching of the spindle representing the onset of puberty, a kind of sexual awakening that leads to a passive, introspective period of latency.

9. *Her slumber spread throughout the castle.* The whimsical elaboration that follows this statement was added by the Grimms to the first edition of their collection.

The horses went to sleep in the stables, the dogs in the courtyard, the doves on the roof, and the flies on the wall. Even the fire flickering in the hearth died down and fell asleep. The roast stopped sizzling, and the cook, who was about to pull the hair of the kitchen boy because he had done something stupid, let him go and fell asleep. The wind also died down so that not a leaf was stirring on the trees outside the castle.

Soon a hedge of briars began to grow all around the castle. Every year it grew higher, until one day it surrounded the entire castle. It had grown so thick that you could not even see the banner on the turret of the castle. Throughout the land, stories circulated about the beautiful 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



GUSTAVE DORÉ,

"Sleeping Beauty in the Wood," 1861

"The prince walked along a little farther, over to the great hall, where he saw the entire court fast asleep, with the king and the queen sleeping right next to their thrones." The prince makes his way through the rooms of the castle to the chamber of Sleeping Beauty. On his way, he encounters an eerie scene in which a lavish repast, halted by the spell, lies in ruins, crisscrossed by gigantic spiderwebs.



GUSTAVE DORÉ,

"Sleeping Beauty in the Wood," 1861

The prince rushes toward Sleeping Beauty, whose "radiant beauty" is described as having "an almost unearthly luster" in Perrault's version of the tale. How she was transported from the chamber in the tower to her bedroom is unclear. The "bower" in which she sleeps combines elaborate architectural detail with lush natural growth.

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.¹⁰

After many, many years had passed, another prince appeared in the land. He heard an old man talking about a briar hedge that was said to conceal a castle, where a fabulously beautiful princess named Briar Rose had been sleeping for a hundred years, along with the king, the queen, and the entire court. The old man had learned from his grandfather that many other princes had tried to make their way through the briar hedge, but they had gotten caught on the briars and died horrible deaths. The young man said: "I am not afraid. I am going to find that castle so that I can see the beautiful Briar Rose." The kind old man did his best to discourage the prince, but he refused to listen.

It so happened that the term of one hundred years had

10. *They died an agonizing death.* Wilhelm Grimm added descriptions of the death throes of the suitors to the first printed edition of the tales.



EDWARD BURNE-JONES,
"Briar Rose," 1870–90

Entitled *The Briar Wood*, this painting shows the prince preparing to hack his way through the woods in which lie the dead, but physically preserved, princes who were unsuccessful in their quest.



EDWARD BURNE-JONES,
"Briar Rose," 1870–90

In *The Garden Court*, the servant girls have fallen asleep over the loom and on tables. Their delicate hands, bare feet, and perfect visages stand out from the architectural background covered with flowering briars.



EDWARD BURNE-JONES,
"Briar Rose," 1870–90

The Council Chamber shows the slumbering monarch and his courtiers, along with the briar branches pushing their way into the palace.



EDWARD BURNE-JONES,
"Briar Rose," 1870–90

The Rose Bower displays Sleeping Beauty as an icon of aesthetic perfection. Surrounded by sleeping figures, she lies in a richly decorated setting in which the briars figure as ornaments rather than perils.

11. *They opened to make a path for him.* This prince does not have to kill any giants or slay any dragons in order to win his bride. His timing is, however, impeccable, illustrating how good fortune often trumps heroic feats in fairy tales.

just ended, and the day on which Briar Rose was to awaken had arrived. When the prince approached the briar hedge, he found nothing but big, beautiful flowers. They opened to make a path for him¹¹ and let him pass unharmed; then they closed behind him to form a hedge.

In the courtyard, the horses and the spotted hounds were lying in the same place fast asleep, and the doves



WARWICK GOBLE,
"Sleeping Beauty," 1923

Sleeping Beauty appears as if on display, with draperies behind her, a canopy above her, and a richly embroidered blanket covering her. The prince is about to wake her up by kneeling before her, while a small dog watches with anticipation in the foreground.

were roosting with their little heads tucked under their wings. The prince made his way into the castle and saw how the flies were fast asleep on the walls. The cook was still in the kitchen, with his hand up in the air as if he were about to grab the kitchen boy, and the maid was still sitting at a table with a black hen that she was about to pluck.

The prince walked along a little farther, over to the great hall, where he saw the entire court fast asleep, with the king and the queen sleeping right next to their thrones. He continued on his way, and everything was so quiet that he could hear his own breath. Finally he got to the tower, and he opened up the door to the little room in which Briar Rose was sleeping. There she lay, so beautiful that he could not take his eyes off her, and he bent down to kiss her.

No sooner had the prince touched Briar Rose's lips



MAXFIELD PARRISH,
"Sleeping Beauty," 1912

For the cover of *Collier's* magazine, Parrish produced a sensuous *Sleeping Beauty*, draped across a staircase topped by classical columns. The two ladies-in-waiting, with their floral wreaths, contribute to the extraordinary compositional balance of the painting. Fusing the classical with the gothic, Parrish produces an eerily beautiful tableau.

12. *No sooner had the prince touched Briar Rose's lips than she woke up.* In Perrault's version Sleeping Beauty is awakened when the prince drops to his knees. Many versions of "The Frog King" now end in the manner of "Sleeping Beauty," with the princess kissing the frog (and thereby transforming him into a prince) rather than hurling him against the wall.

than she woke up,¹² opened her eyes, and smiled sweetly at him. They went down the stairs together. The king, the queen, and the entire court had awoken, and they were all staring at each other in amazement. The horses in the courtyard stood up and shook themselves. The hounds jumped to their feet and wagged their tails. The doves pulled their heads out from under their wings, looked around, and flew off into the fields. The flies began crawling on the walls. The fire in the kitchen flickered, flared up, and began cooking the food again. The roast started to sizzle. The cook slapped the boy so hard that he let out a screech. The maid finished plucking the hen.

The wedding of Briar Rose and the prince was celebrated in great splendor, and the two lived out their days in happiness.