

Archetypal Interpretation of “Sleeping Beauty”: Awakening the Power of Love

by Grace Hogstad

In *Die Walküre* (*The Valkyrie*), the second of Richard Wagner’s four-opera suite *The Ring of the Nibelung*, Wotan casts a magic spell on Brünnhilde, and she sleeps for a generation. Likewise, in the fairytale “Sleeping Beauty,” the princess is pricked by a spindle and magically falls asleep for one hundred years. Although the first print version of “Sleeping Beauty” (1528) is about 350 years older than *The Valkyrie* (1873), they both come from the same source, the *Völsunga Saga*, a thirteenth century Icelandic prose saga that tells of the origin and decline of the Volsung clan. Included in the saga is the story of Sigurd and Brynhilde and her magic sleep. Wagner acknowledges the Nordic saga as one source of his narrative, and he has written the poetry of *The Ring of the Nibelung* using the saga’s plot, stringing it through the four cycles of the opera. Likewise, fairytale scholar Maria Tatar calls this the source of the “Sleeping Beauty” story in her book *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* (233).

This study looks at different versions of “Sleeping Beauty,” reading seven versions of the fairytale historically. My interpretation begins with the oral tradition that circulated in the 1300s and ends with the 1910 version of the tale, including an undated adaptation that I consider to be a spin-off of the 1910 version. In doing so, a pattern or a story emerges out of the various iterations of “Sleeping Beauty.” The survey goes from the crudest version of the fairytale to the more developed Italian, French, German, and English versions, spanning six centuries of development. The story created by the historical reading of the tale provides a jumping-in point for this interpretation, as if the pattern created by the different iterations is one whole tale of “Sleeping Beauty.” Though contemporary retellings of the story abound, I include in this analysis only the traditional versions of the tale and discuss only what is different about each tale.

The earliest “Sleeping Beauty” fairytale appears in oral tradition around the 1300s as “Troylus and Zellandine.” In this tale, a disgruntled deity places a curse on the young Princess Zellandine that causes her to go into a deep slumber. Many years later, Prince Troylus happens upon the princess and rapes her in her sleep. As a result, she has a child. In 1528, the same story appears in print for the first time, in Paris, in a book of romances called *Perceforest*.

While “Troylus and Zellandine” is not presented as a “Sleeping Beauty” tale, the story contains many elements similar to the fairytale. Scholars debate the connection between the stories but generally agree that there are enough similarities to consider the tale included in *Perceforest* as the first print version of “Sleeping Beauty.” Tatar considers “Troylus and Zellandine” the earliest recorded version of “Sleeping Beauty” (233).

The Italian version comes over 100 years later (1636), when Giambattista Basile, an Italian nobleman, published *Pentamerone*, a collection of folk and fairy tales that includes one called “Sun, Moon, and Talia.” In their book *The Classic Fairy Tales*, Iona and Peter Opie note that in Basile’s tale the patriarchal system is entrenched: the “king commands the wise men of their country to assemble and tell him the future of his newborn daughter, named Talia. The wise men confer and agree that peril will come to her from a splinter in some flax” (81). The only parent in this tale is the father, as if he alone, without the help of the mother, is responsible for the birth of the child. He confers with wise men instead of the wise women of the later versions.

Because the wise men predict that peril will come to her from a flax splinter, her father forbids any flax, hemp, or any material of that sort to be brought into the house so she can escape her predetermined danger. But one day, while looking out a window, Talia sees an old woman spinning as she passes by. Pleased to see the twirling spindle and curious to find out about it, she approaches the woman and touches the flax, running a splinter under her nail and instantly

falling into a deep sleep. The father, grieving the loss of his beloved daughter, installs her in one of his country estates and leaves her alone until she is discovered by the prince.

A married king discovers the sleeping Princess Talia. When he sees her, he is overcome with desire for her and he “plucks from her the fruits of love’ while she is still asleep” (Tatar 233), after which he returns to his wife, the queen. Talia becomes pregnant from the rape and gives birth in her sleep to twins called Sun and Moon. One of the babies sucks Talia’s finger and removes the flax, which awakens her. When the queen learns about Talia and her twins, she is incensed and orders the babies’ death.

While the king is away, the queen sends a messenger who pretends to have been sent by the king to pick up the babies because the king misses them. She then orders the babies cooked as a meal for the king when he arrives. Fortunately, the kind cook, replacing babies with lambs, takes the babies home to his wife. The queen orders Talia’s death, but the king, arriving just in time to save Sleeping Beauty, thrusts the queen in the fire she has prepared and allows her to perish.

In this story, Sleeping Beauty sleeps through the violence of the rape, but awakens to the gentle sucking of her infant, which quickens her mother instinct. Responding to the infant’s instinctual love, and out of her own love for the babies, Sleeping Beauty attends to the needs of her twins. Of the tales included in this analysis, Basile’s is the only one that shows a connection between the cause of sleep and the awakening—the flax splinter and the infant sucking it out. Perhaps because all later versions do not feature rape—consequently, no babies are born during the princess’s sleep—the iterations that come after do not use flax. Instead, the bringer of magic sleep thereafter, when a disgruntled fairy places a curse on the princess, is a spindle.

The princes in the first three versions of “Sleeping Beauty” are crude and violent—all displaying animal instincts. It is not surprising that these tales correspond to a time when fairytales were told to or read by adults. In *The Feminine in Fairy Tales*, Marie-Louise von Franz notes that around the late seventeenth century, the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment, fairytales began to be read to children. “Their allocation to the nursery was a late development, which probably has to do with the rejection of the irrational, and development of the rational outlook, so that they came to be regarded as nonsense and old wives’ tales and good enough for children. It is only today that we discover their immense psychological value” (1). The first three versions of “Sleeping Beauty” are distinctly adult in nature, but the later versions are made more suitable for children.

The French version, “Sleeping Beauty in the Wood,” appears in 1697 in a collection of fairy tales published by Charles Perrault. In this tale, as in the subsequent versions except for the last, the princess is shown with both parents, the King and the Queen. It appears that with the protection of the feminine in her life, the princess is not abandoned on her own after she falls asleep as she was in the previous version. She falls asleep in the castle along with her whole court, which falls asleep with her and awakens when she does. This motif continues with the rest of the iterations. The prince in the French version awakens Sleeping Beauty when he kneels before her—a drastic change from the actions of his rapist predecessors. They fall in love, an affair that produces a daughter named Aurora and a son named Day. Although in this tale the prince is single and marries Sleeping Beauty, he leaves his family with his mother—who is an ogress with cannibalistic tendencies—when he is called to battle. The queen orders the cook to prepare for her meal first the children and then their mother. The cook, also compassionate in

this tale, hides the children and replaces them with animals. In the end, the king catches his mother in the act of trying to slaughter his family, so he has her put to death instead.

Even though Perrault has removed rape from his tale, it still contains the theme of cannibalism, which was deemed too dark for children. So in the next iteration, the German one published in 1812, the Brothers Grimm removed the motif of cannibalism. They subsequently revised it to the form commonly known now—no rape and no cannibalism. In his book *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to Modern World*, Jack Zipes notes that in the Perrault version, the presence of a man is enough to break the enchantment and revive the princess. The Grimms, however, added the kiss to bring her back to life (151). Though the prince's kneeling can also be seen as more respectful, dignified, and aristocratic—fitting traits of the time—the Grimms may have seen Perrault's prince as passive, for they replaced his kneeling with a kiss on the lips. But perhaps the kneeling before the princess is exactly what the prince needs to do to make up for the violence that has been imposed upon the princess in the earlier tales. The kneeling will return a hundred years later in the English version.

“The Sleeping Beauty,” the English version, is patterned after Perrault's tale sans cannibalism. This retelling is by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, illustrated by Edmund Dulac, in the book *The Sleeping Beauty and Other Fairy Tales from the Old French*, published in London and New York in 1910. Quiller-Couch's tale is the most idealized in form, emphasizing the importance of love and promising that true love will awaken the princess. The story even speaks of love between the king and the queen: “they adored one another, having married for love—which among kings and queens is not always the rule. Moreover, they reigned over a kingdom at peace, and their people were devoted to them” (25). When the prince sees the princess, he is overcome with emotion, then “trembling and wondering sank on his knees beside her [...] and

touched with his lips her little hand” (57). When she awakens he assures her that he loves her “better than his own self” (58). Here, the prince returns to kneeling, and he kisses her on her hand instead of the lips, a move that shows more respect for the princess.

A modification to the English tale appears at *Childhood Reading.com*. Though shorter, it is still very much like the classic English story and, like the English version, is also illustrated by Dulac. After the princess has fallen asleep, the queen asks the fairy what would awaken her, “‘Love’ replied the fairy. ‘If a man of pure heart were to fall in love with her, that would bring her back to life!’” (2). The queen is so broken-hearted that she dies a few days later. The fairy, however, sees to it that the princess is not alone when she wakes up, so the fairy makes the whole court sleep while the princess sleeps. The Internet tale bears no documentation—no source book, author, or publication date—only that it was posted on the site in 1997. I include this version because of the interesting contribution it makes in the overall pattern. “The Sleeping Princess (Sleeping Beauty)” starts with “Once upon a time there was a Queen who had a beautiful baby daughter” (1). The queen is the sole parent in the tale, and the prince appears to seek the feminine within himself: “He was the son of a king in a country close by. Young, handsome and melancholy, he sought everything he could not find in the company of other men: serenity, sincerity and purity” (3). The prince possesses tender or sensitive qualities associated with the feminine as shown in the passage. Here, as in the English version, the prince kneels and kisses her hand. This last iteration provides two pieces of the puzzle that complete the bigger picture created by the history of “Sleeping Beauty”: the queen as the sole parent and the prince as more sensitive and light years away from his predecessors who rape the princess.

The pattern of Sleeping Beauty’s parents—from only Lord, to King and Queen, to only Queen—shows a swing from the patriarchal to the matriarchal, while the pattern of the prince

shows a swing from princes being crude and violent to being respectful, kind, loving, and sensitive. The number of wise women does not seem to be important. They vary from three, to eight, or thirteen; but what is significant is that in the earlier version the court counselors were wise men, who are later replaced by wise women. Based on these patterns, it appears that masculine-feminine dynamics have something to do with the meaning of the fairytale, which I confirmed by analyzing other symbols present in the tales—the prince and princess, the flax or spindle as the bringer of sleep, and the hundred-year sleep.

Chevalier's *Dictionary of Symbols* states that "Princes and princesses are idealizations of men and women in terms of beauty, love, and heroism" (772). Tales about princes and princesses offer an insight beneficial to the relationships of men and women. The prince symbolizes the masculine energy, the aggressive side of the psyche. In the different versions of the tale, the prince changes through the centuries. In the earlier versions, he is like Zeus, or Wotan, who takes any woman he wants and is not beyond rape or cannibalism (Zeus—when Tantalus cuts his son Pelops into pieces, cooked his flesh in a stew, and served it to the gods). Over time the prince transforms from being violent and aggressive—a rapist—to one who knows what is needed to awaken the princess: love, respect, and a kiss. When, by his love, the prince awakens the princess, life in the castle comes to life with her, and the land is healed. Looking at the whole picture, it is as if consciousness is becoming aware of itself. As archetypes change humans change with them. The different iterations of the fairytales may very well serve as forerunners to cultural changes.

The princess in "Sleeping Beauty" is steadfast at awakening only to love, the ideal to reach. Who, then, is Sleeping Beauty that the prince should kneel down before her? In *The Feminine in Fairy Tales*, von Franz addresses this question:

. . . the mother of the Sun and the Moon is not an ordinary human being, so you could say it is a symbol. But if the children were Sun and Moon, or Day and Dawn, as in other versions, you are [. . .] in the realm of what we normally call the world of the gods. (5)

Sleeping Beauty is no mere mortal; neither is Brünnhilde until Wotan casts the magic spell on her, and Siegfried's kiss awakens her as a mortal woman. Sleeping Beauty symbolizes the archetype of the Feminine or a personification of Love, the gentle energy. The marriage of the prince and princess shows the marriage of opposites as in the literal marriage of man and woman, but also the union of opposites in the psyche.

Marriage is another symbol in itself, paralleled by Zeus's or Wotan's numerous unions with mortal women. In his interpretation of the fairytale "Bluebeard," Walter Odajnyk refers to the marriage of opposites as represented by the symbol of Yin and Yang:

I find it more in keeping with the psychological reality that fairy tales describe to keep in mind the Chinese equivalents of "feminine" and "masculine," yin and yang, when interpreting a fairy tale. In Chinese philosophy these are the two primordial principles that permeate all existence, from subatomic particles to cosmological phenomena. In Taoism, yin and yang make up the Tao, variously defined as the Way of the One and described as that "which exists through itself," [. . .]. In other words, the Tao is identical with our notion of God. (257)

The Buddhist Yab-Yum (Mother-Father) image carries the same symbolism as the Taoist Yin and Yang.

The object that puts the princess to sleep is either a flax splinter or a spindle. Flax is an erect annual plant with a blue flower and is a fiber used in spinning. A spindle is an erect structure around which spinning revolves: an instrument and an attribute of the fates, it symbolizes death—when thread runs out in spinning. If one looks up the Internet for images of "spindle" and not just spinning spindle, one finds a plethora of images that are unmistakably phallic in shape. Von Franz in *Feminine in Fairy Tales* (44) and Tatar in *The Annotated Grimm*

(236) associate both symbols with femininity because of their connection with the domesticity of spinning. But the very structure of a spindle, for spinning or otherwise, is masculine; and flax, that “erect” plant with blue flower, the raw material used in spinning, symbolizes the substance used in spinning life—the “sperm” from the phallic-like flax without which there is no new life. If one accepts these symbols as masculine, then the flax or spindle pricking the princess to sleep means the masculine principle putting the feminine principle to sleep.

The hundred-year sleep of the princess is evocative of the long disappearance of the Goddess when the patriarchal gods appeared and dominated in the cultures, and her awakening shows her return. Robert Graves, in *The White Goddess*, writes about the absence of the Goddess and considers her disappearance the cause of the woes of the modern world. The swing from the patriarchal to the matriarchal seems to be another signal for the return of the feminine archetype and the return of the Goddess in the culture.

In *The Valkyrie*, Wagner shows the loving and destructive aspects of Wotan, who represents the masculine or patriarchal energy. Act II opens with Wotan and Brünnhilde armed for battle. Wotan calls Brünnhilde, “Go bridle your horse, / warrior maid! / Seize your shield; / battle is near, / Brünnhilde’s off to the fight, / the Walsung is victor today!” (96). The scene shows a warm exchange between father and daughter—not unlike a father calling his daughter to go to the park with him to spend time together. Wotan’s son, Sigmund, is supposed to win. But after Wotan fights with his wife, Fricka, and she wins the argument, Wotan shares a moment of vulnerability with his daughter as he tells her the new verdict that Sigmund must die. Brünnhilde listens with compassion as Wotan opens his heart fully to her, for she understands him completely and loves him unconditionally. Unlike Fricka, who is burdened with thoughts of

revenge from being wounded by Wotan's infidelities, Brünnhilde has no hidden agendas other than Wotan's agenda.

Brünnhilde begs Wotan to change his order of Sigmund's death: "Him, you have always / taught me to love / for his noble courage / and valor you love him; / if you ask me to kill him, / then I shall refuse!" (112). Wotan convinces her to do as he commands. He must kill Sigmund for the sake of power, of trying to take control of the ring. Though Brünnhilde has agreed to obey Wotan's order, love moves her at the scene of battle, so she attempts to save her brother. Wotan catches Brünnhilde in the act and undoes her magic protection so Hunding can kill Sigmund, and punishes her with magic sleep.

Wotan imposes absolute authority upon his daughter. He also shows jealousy toward Brünnhilde and fear of her, for she has become more powerful than he, as shown by her greater capacity to love and her ability to defy his order. Before facing Wotan's wrath, Brünnhilde risks herself to save and send away Sieglinde, who bears Sigmund's child. In the moving final scene, Brünnhilde asks Wotan if what she has done was so shameful that he must punish her with endless shame (144). In fact, Wotan punishes Brünnhilde for loving! Brünnhilde surrenders to her father to accept the kiss of sleep on her eyes. Like Sleeping Beauty, Brünnhilde is pricked by the masculine principle and falls sleep. But by then, Brünnhilde is no longer just Wotan's daughter. She has become a symbol of universal Love, also known as the Eternal Feminine.

In Chevalier's *Dictionary of Symbols*, the Eternal Feminine is equated with Divine Love and considered to be what attracts people to transcendency, the force that draws humankind to the heights (374). Beatrice is an example of the Eternal Feminine. In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Beatrice guides Dante from *Purgatorio*—where she takes over from Virgil, who has guided Dante through *Inferno*—all the way to the highest heaven in *Paradiso*, where Dante receives his

illumination. Another example is the Virgin Mary, who, according to the *Dictionary of Symbols*, is the most perfect embodiment of the Eternal Feminine: “The genuine and pure Feminine is, above all, a chaste and bright Energy, which brings with it courage, idealism and happiness. [. . .] The feminine symbolizes the aspect of being which draws together and unifies” (375).

Love, the Eternal Feminine, is the core component of “Sleeping Beauty” and the heart of this interpretation of the fairytale. Yet there are other interpretations of the fairytale. In *Once Upon a Time on the Nature of Fairy Tales*, Max Luthi offers a mythological interpretation of “Sleeping Beauty”:

Our fairy tale tells of death and resurrection. The flowering of the hedge of roses and the awakening of the sleeping maiden suggest the earth in lifeless repose which, touched by spring, begins to live anew and blossom as young and beautiful as ever. It suggests also the awakening of sleeping nature at the first glimmering of a new day. (24)

Tatar offers a Freudian take on this tale, a personal and psychological interpretation. “The story of Briar Rose has been thought to map a female sexual maturation, with the touching of the spindle representing the onset of puberty, a kind of sexual awakening that leads to passive, introspective period of latency” (236). Tatar cites Joseph Campbell, “who insists that fairy tales are for children [and] notes that the tales are often about girls who resist growing up. At the crisis of the threshold crossing she’s balking. So she goes to sleep until the prince comes through all the barriers” (236). Zack Zipes, commenting on the human existential condition, says that “Sleeping Beauty” “is not only about male and female stereotypes and male hegemony, it is also about death, our fear of death, and our wish for immortality” (153).

While I do not disagree with Luthi, Tatar, or Zipes—theirs are well-grounded interpretations of the tale—I see something more in “Sleeping Beauty” after tracing the pattern revealed by the historical reading of the fairytale. Namely, I believe the story is about the

awakening of the power of Love in the masculine and feminine relationships, be it between the archetypes or between men and women.

In “Sleeping Beauty,” the princess, symbolizing Love or the Eternal Feminine, has guided the prince from the coarseness and gross violence in the earlier versions to transcendence in the later versions. Exhibit I, at the end of this essay, shows the dates of the different iterations of the tale, starting at the bottom with the earliest version and rising to the top with the latest version. The seven iterations, with the first three involving rape, seem to correspond with the seven chakras of the Hindu tradition. The first three versions line up with the first three chakras and represent the animal instincts. The fourth chakra—situated in the heart, the seat of Love—represents the birth of compassion, separating humans from animals. This is the beginning of the prince loving the princess first and treating her with respect by kissing her hand. The top iterations represent the transcendence of the prince. Love brings about the transformation of the prince. His seeking of Love within himself and in the other, the princess, has awakened Sleeping Beauty, which causes the land to be healed.

Like Brünnhilde, Sleeping Beauty represents the feminine principle of Love through whose awakening the land is healed. As *The Valkyrie* shows, choosing power over love destroys people and relationships, causing the world to become ill, and ultimately bringing cataclysmic consequences as shown in the last of the four operas, *Twilight of the Gods*. At the end, Brünnhilde brings order to the universe by giving back the stolen golden ring to the river though at a great cost—her life and the end of the immortals in the opera. The message seems to be that men and women must seek Love to heal the relationship between them and thereby heal the land. The message can also apply to the union of opposites within.

“Sleeping Beauty” represents the awakening of the feminine principle that was pricked to sleep by the masculine principle. The awakening of the feminine, Love, does not supplant the masculine, but guides him to his transcendence and to “live happily ever after” in the dance of life and love. Her return is shown in men and women who seek Love within and in each other, embracing the essence of the Goddess and thus her return in the culture.

Taking an historical perspective when interpreting “Sleeping Beauty” aids in understanding the fairytale and shows its connection to the changing archetypes of contemporary culture. “Sleeping Beauty” applies to the feminine and the masculine archetypes as it does to men and women. Awakening the Love within and in each other honors the Goddess and promotes a healthy balance between the feminine and the masculine, for as shown in the Yin-Yang image of Taoism or the Yab-Yum embrace of Tantric Buddhism, the psyche consists of both energies.

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Exhibit I

The History of "Sleeping Beauty"

The Seven Chakras

