

The Deconstruction of the Male-Rescuer Archetype in Contemporary Feminist Revisions of "The Sleeping Beauty"

Editor's Introduction

*Despite its international scope, fairy-tale studies has been relatively less attentive to Spanish and Latin American traditions, and generally unaware of the scholarship produced by specialists in these areas. In recent issues, *Marvels & Tales* has tried to address this imbalance and to open up new perspectives for English-speaking scholars by offering translations of fairy tales by Antonio de Trueba (12 [1998]: 351–630, Juan Valera (13 [1999]: 211–33; 15 [2001]: 202–16), and Cecilia Böhl Faber (15 [2001]: 192–201; 16 [2002]: 73–83). In addition to primary texts, fairy-tale scholarship needs to become more widely familiar with the significant research published by Spanish-speaking scholars. The following essay by Carolina Fernández Rodríguez provides an excellent example of this work, especially at the intersection of fairy-tale studies and women's studies. Translated by the author herself, the essay is a slightly modified version of a chapter from her 1998 doctoral dissertation from the University of Oviedo, "Reescrituras contemporáneas de 'La bella durmiente' en inglés y castellano" ("Contemporary Revisions of 'The Sleeping Beauty' in English and Spanish"), which was published in book form as *La bella durmiente a través de la historia* [Sleeping Beauty throughout History] (Oviedo: Universidad de Oviedo, 1998).*

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In the second half of the twentieth century the nature and function of the traditional fairy-tale rescuer have shifted dramatically. The aim of this paper is then to analyze the changes that figure has undergone in recent times. In order to do so, I have chosen the story of "The Sleeping Beauty" and have compared its most famous versions, that is, those of Basile's, Perrault's and the Grimm brothers', to some of the feminist revisions that have been produced in the last decades. Among these I have selected texts by women authors that belong both to Spanish-speaking areas, such as the Argentinean Luisa Valenzuela, and to English-speaking ones, as for example the English Angela Carter, the Irish Emma Donoghue, the Greek-American Olga Broumas, and the Indian Suniti Namjoshi, to cite but a few.

The former group of texts are responsible for the inscription of the male-rescuer archetype; in other words, they constitute a well-known corpus of tales where the rescuing agent is constantly presented as a male, thus conveying the idea that the redeemer is naturally a man. As opposed to this, feminist revisions attempt, on the one hand, to demythologize the traditional hero, and, on the other, to offer different alternatives to it. In this way they first prove that not all male figures are competent rescuers and also that female figures can sometimes perform the rescuing function more remarkably.

The Demythologization of the Male Rescuer

In traditional versions of "The Sleeping Beauty," the function of redemption is irremediably represented by a male subject. The only exception to this rule might be the case of Basile's "Sun, Moon, and Talia" (1634-36), since the princess Talia is not awakened by means of a man's intercession, but thanks to her son and daughter sucking one of her fingers. Nevertheless, in the rest of Basile's story the role of rescuer is indeed carried out by male characters: a male cook prevents Talia's children from being eaten; later on, the king throws his spouse and his secretary, the worst villains in the story, to the fire, in this manner helping Talia escape death. In Perrault's "The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods" (1697), the arrival of a prince after one hundred years brings about Sleeping Beauty's awakening. Once the rescuer becomes king, he liberates his wife from his mother's malicious schemes. Finally, in the Brothers Grimm tale "Brier Rose" (1812-57), the prince puts an end to the princess's dream with a loving kiss. Their hero, besides, is more perfect than the rescuers in previous versions because he is neither unfaithful to his first wife, like Basile's, nor the son of an ogress, like Perrault's, but a brave young man with no blemishes whatsoever on his character. Contemporary feminist revisions of "The Sleeping Beauty," however, offer an image of the male-rescuer archetype that puts into question the one seen in traditional versions of the fairy tale. This image is not homogenous, but at least we can say that in all the texts analyzed in this essay,

the hero is deprived to a greater or lesser extent of his mythical aura, at the same time that his function as rescuing agent is seriously questioned.

In Angela Carter's "The Lady of the House of Love" (1979), for example, the youth who arrives at the castle of Nosferatu's heiress manages to free Carter's special Sleeping Beauty from her vampiric role, one which she had always abhorred. However, this liberation must be carefully considered, since the fact that the protagonist becomes a human being implies the loss of her identity, and, eventually, her death. The male rescuer in Carter is therefore ultimately responsible for the disappearance of the Lady of the House of Love. In his favor one might say that the young soldier tries as hard as he can to help the Countess. Thus, when she pricks her finger and blood begins to flow from it he "gently takes her hand away from her and dabs the blood with his own handkerchief, but still it spurts out. And so he puts his mouth to the wound. He will kiss it better for her" (Carter 106). The next day, as soon as he wakes up, the youth begins to concoct plans to cure the Countess of all her illnesses: "We shall take her to Zurich, to a clinic; she will be treated for nervous hysteria. Then to an eye specialist, for her photophobia, and to a dentist to put her teeth into better shape. We shall turn her into the lovely girl she is; I shall cure her of all these nightmares" (Carter 107).

But the soldier's intention of curing the Countess is, in truth, the wish to make her a passive and powerless woman with no character of her own. The soldier wants her without her "hysteria," without "claws" and pointed teeth. In other words, he does not really want the real Countess, the vampire who is physically endowed to suck the blood of young men who, driven by their innocence and unknowingness, dare to enter her house. He likewise rejects the strong and powerful woman who is in charge of all the evil powers. He desires a "lovely girl" instead. There is no need to explain the connotations of passivity and powerlessness that this implies. The soldier does not attempt so much a liberation of the Countess as a transformation, which he eventually achieves, since the protagonist ends up losing her vampiric condition and becomes a human being. In this process she is deprived of her identity, and consequently, of her life.

The Argentinean writer Luisa Valenzuela offers in "Príncipe II" ("Prince II") (1993) another kind of male rescuer. In her story we face a hero who rejects his function in the story of "The Sleeping Beauty," that is, having to wake up the protagonist who has been sleeping for a hundred years. The reason why the extremely handsome prince in Valenzuela's story refuses to kiss the Sleeping Beauty is that his kisses, says the narrator, have the ability to wake up all the damsels he has kissed throughout his life. The problem is that his kisses do not only wake them up, but also give them back their own will as well as their own wishes, which the prince detests: "The prince considers that his success is not

total and absolute, not because the princesses do not wake up, it is not that. On the contrary. He knows how to quietly get to the chaste bedrooms and when he finds the maidens profoundly asleep, he kisses them. And the maidens wake up. Too much. They become demanding, they wake up to life, to the world, to their own desires and cravings; their demands begin to be expressed. He does not want them like that" (Valenzuela, "Príncipe" 136).¹

For this reason, when he finds the real and authentic Sleeping Beauty, the prince is very careful not to put his lips near the princess's mouth:

Without kissing her or anything, not even taking her out of her crystal coffin, he gives orders that she be carried to the palace with infinite precautions. There he puts her in a closed room away from the sun and from far away he looks at her, both he and she are immobile, distant. She is a jewel. She is beautiful and is lying on her coffin as if she were asking for a kiss. The prince feels that his kiss dries up in his mouth, his own mouth dries up as well, all of his being dries up because he has not learned how to kiss a princess enough without awaking her completely. "I respect her," he tells those who want to listen to him.

And they nod. (Valenzuela, "Príncipe" 137)

This kind of behavior shows that Valenzuela's prince is a man who desires a woman only if she is a "beauty" and is "sleeping" or, in other words, if she is an artistic object, something which is absolutely passive and which does not have its own desires. In short, Valenzuela's prince is searching for and manages to find an immobile corpse which is nevertheless beautiful and thus able to embellish, from her crystal coffin, the palace room where she has been placed. In her presentation of the male rescuer as an ignoble and despicable person who is unable to respect the princess's desire, Valenzuela manages to deconstruct the male-rescuer archetype by unveiling his real goal—he does not generously rescue the princess for her own benefit, but tries to take advantage of her powerlessness and to benefit himself.

As opposed to this prince who wakes up the princesses "too much," we find others who can only wake them up partially. Such is the case of the prince in Sara H. Hay's "The Sleeper I" (1961), and also of the prince in Tanith Lee's "Thorns" (1972). Thus, in Hay's poem we hear the princess say:

But if he thinks that with a kiss or two
He'll buy my clearest privacy, or shake me
Out of the cloistered world I've loved so long,
Or tear the pattern of my dream, he's wrong.
Nothing this clumsy trespasser can do
Will ever touch my heart, or really wake me. (Hay, lines 9–14)

Hay's princess was happy in her "cloistered world" and considers the prince a "clumsy trespasser" who has brought uneasiness to her life. Protected by the wall of brambles, she enjoyed a hundred-year sleep and never wished the prince's intervention. He trod upon her life so as to impose a certain plot on her without taking into account her wishes. That is why she rejects the function of a male rescuer whose actions do not respect her desires and who has made her life much more uncomfortable than it was before his arrival.

In Tanith Lee's "Thorns" (1972) once more we find a prince who cannot fully awake the Sleeping Beauty. He does kiss the princess, but after his kiss something unusual takes place: "It was strange. He had never really been afraid until she woke, and looked at him. Then fear began" (Lee 47–48). Lee's tale is rather ambiguous and so it is difficult to understand the reasons why the prince is so frightened. Yet one reason might be the "century which was between them" (Lee 48), that is, the fact that they belonged to different generations. A more important one, in my view, would be that the princess, if awoken, may be active and may possess a scrutinizing female gaze. Let us remember that the prince's fear began when the princess "looked at him" (my italics). Unable to face that female gaze, the prince confesses he cannot live with the princess and so must leave her:

"Madam, I can't stay with you."

"This I know," she said. "I saw it in your face at once." She didn't weep, or frown, but she murmured: "After all, I am still asleep. I shall never be awake again."

He tried to comfort her, but it was no use and he saw it, and her pride, so he kissed her gently and went away as the sun was rising. (Lee 48)

Here the text is unclear as to why the princess will never awake again. But, in any case, it is obvious that the prince has been unable to perform his role satisfactorily, that is, to free the princess from the spell that was cast on her at her birthday party. The heroine's pride and independence in this revision are also worth noting.

Incompetent rescuers find their epitome in Farida Shapiro's revision of "The Sleeping Beauty," a poem entitled "This Century of Sleep or, Brier Rose Beneath the Sea" (1995). In this text the female protagonist spends the one hundred-year sleep in the ocean. She is not constructed after the romantic stereotypes of the traditional versions in that, for example, she does not possess a charming beauty. Actually, "her breath hangs stale" (line 19). Besides, she is not powerless, like other Sleeping Beauties, but is able to defy the tides and, despite the fact that she has spent many years beneath the ocean, she is only slightly eroded. Most of her strength she has managed to keep, and

this strength is metaphorically represented by the "coral fires" that lie in her eye-wells (Shapiro, lines 9–10). This powerful woman needs no rescuer: "She knows / no kiss can lift the spindle's fall / within the witch's curse" (Shapiro, lines 16–18). That is why she is just letting time go by: "She waits to wake until the ocean thaws" (Shapiro, line 11).

Able or unable to perform their duties properly, several princes in contemporary revisions of "The Sleeping Beauty" show remorse for having contributed to the awakening of the Sleeping Beauties of their stories. Once again, they prove unworthy of belonging to any heroic category, in this case because they reject their roles themselves. Some examples of this group of princes are Sara H. Hay's male rescuer in "The Sleeper 2" (1961), where the prince states:

I wish I'd gone away that self-same hour,
Before I learned how, like her twining roses,
She bends to her own soft, implacable uses
The pretty tactics that such vines employ,
To hide the poisoned barb beneath the flower,
To cling about, to strange, to destroy. (Hay, lines 9–14)

Desie, the male rescuer in Carolyn Swift's "The Sleeping Beauty Wakes Up to the Facts of Life" (1985), also laments that he ever woke up Aurora. Here, though, the princess is likewise allowed to curse the circumstances that led them to marry:

"Sometimes," he remarked gratuitously, "I'm sorry I ever set foot in the wretched forest."

"And sometimes," Aurora snapped back, "I'm sorry that it had to be a selfish chauvinist like you that noticed the tip of the castle turrets above the tops of the trees."

"So that's all the thanks I get," Desie shouted, "for wearing myself out hacking my way through all the undergrowth! If I'd had any sense I'd have left you to sleep for another hundred years."

"At least I'd have had a little peace," Aurora shouted back. (Swift 45)

A final case of the demythologization of the male rescuer in contemporary revisions of "The Sleeping Beauty" concerns the narrator who undermines the figure of the hero. This takes place, for example, in Luisa Valenzuela's "No se detiene el progreso" (1993; "You Cannot Stop Progress"). In her revision, the narrator ridicules the prince for his pride. He firmly believes that it is he who is putting things right when he enters the forest and a path appears in front of him: "While he is advancing, he thinks that he is restoring order. The truth is order is finding its inner diapason on its own" (Valenzuela, "Progreso" 132).

By underlying the existence of an "inner diapason," the narrator ridicules the action of a rescuer who is actually doing nothing to rescue the princess. In this story, problems get solved by themselves when the right moment comes.

Alternatives to the Traditional Male Rescuer

Bereft of his heroic condition, unable to be an authentic rescuer, and rejected on account of his pride or his desire to impose his will on the princess, the prince of many contemporary feminist revisions of "The Sleeping Beauty" has been necessarily replaced by other figures, since he is no longer capable of performing his role satisfactorily. If the victim of the spell is female, there are basically three alternatives for this substitution in the feminist texts analyzed in this essay: first, female cooperation, which plays out in mother-daughter relationships, or simply relationships between two women who have no kinship; second, self-liberation; and third, homosexual relationships. There also exist texts where the victim is male. In these cases, the rescuing function is performed by a female character.

Female Rescuers

Ann Downer's "Somnus's Fair Maid" (1994) offers an example of the latter case, that is, of a male victim who is released by a female rescuer. Hyppolyte Dunsmore is the victim. He is head over heels in love with Persephone Aurora, but, considering himself too unimportant for her, he decides not to woo her, leaving instead for Egypt. There he receives the news that his best friend Knoyle has married someone. And since Knoyle had gone out with Persephone for a long time, Dunsmore concludes that he must have married her. Five years later, Dunsmore goes back to England. He has become an invalid and suffers from some strange illness—"sleeping sickness," his doctor calls it (Downer 82), as it makes him be almost constantly asleep. One day he is visited by Persephone and told that she is still single and in love with him. Things made clear, Dunsmore's illness vanishes, as his grandmother's words clearly indicate: "It had for some time been her advised opinion that there was nothing wrong with her grandson that could not be made right by a kiss. 'S-sleeping sickness! N-nonsense!'" (Downer 85). So it is Persephone's role as a female rescuer that liberates Dunsmore from his sleeping state. She is the one who has gone to him and kissed him, not the other way around. As opposed to what happens in traditional versions of "The Sleeping Beauty," not only is the rescuer a female in Downer's text, but also we find that the female protagonist does not end up marrying the hero, that is Knoyle, but Dunsmore, the antihero, who is neither rich nor healthy.

When it comes to performing the rescuing function in relation to a female victim, female cooperation can be seen at work in Carolyn Swift's "The Sleeping

Beauty Wakes Up to the Facts of Life" (1985). In this revision we find a Sleeping Beauty, Aurora, who has experienced the hardships of a conventional marriage, as well as the damage that patriarchy as a whole inflicts on women. This makes her wish a completely different future for her daughter. Aurora cannot solve her own problems, but she will make sure that they will not affect her child's life as they did hers. In order to do so, she asks her fairy godmothers not to give her daughter the traditional feminine graces she herself received at her birthday party. Instead, she wants practical abilities for her child, skills that will allow her to become an independent adult. So here we see a new incarnation of the figure of the donor: fairy godmothers are no longer accomplices in the perpetuation of female dependence, but provide the young woman with the weapons necessary to achieve total independence.

Another case of how a female victim can be liberated by a female character is offered by Emma Donoghue's story "The Tale of the Needle" (1997). The tale's princess is absolutely ignorant of everything but her feminine graces. However, her encounter in an almost inaccessible tower with an old spinner leads the reader to believe that the princess's initial situation is about to change. The old woman offers herself as a teacher, someone who can allow the princess to learn all the things that, as a woman, she has been forbidden to think about. In a first phase, the youth rejects anything that goes against her father's law, but she then goes on to accept the old woman's first lesson, which is learning to handle the distaff. The result of her first attempt is an accident—the princess pricks her finger on the spindle. This, nevertheless, does not bring about the traditional consequence, since the youth does not end up sleeping for a hundred years, but is, on the contrary, brought to life. Thus, from being an excessively passive girl who seemed to be asleep all the time, she shows a tremendous capacity for action, or better yet, for violent action:

I [Sleeping Beauty] reached out and kicked her spinning wheel into the corner. Badness was running through my veins like wine. I hate you [the old spinner], I shouted. You sit here, in your dust, your foul mess . . . I'll have you punished. I could have your head chopped from your shoulders.

[. . .]

I stared at her. My eyes swollen with water. My head felt as if it were about to break open like an egg. (Donoghue 181)

The state of agitation the princess is in after pricking her finger is of vital importance to her recovery and eventual liberation from the curse of patriarchy. In fact, it is the first stage in her awakening. The final one comes later, once the princess has had time to consider the options she has—either embracing

the old spinner's lessons whatever their consequences, or going back to the peacefulness, the monotony, and the dullness of her life beyond the tower door: "I heard feet pounding the stairs, and a call that sounded like my name. I turned to the door and pulled the bolt across. All of a sudden I felt quite awake. I bent over for the spinning wheel and set it back in its place. I sat down on the stool and said, Please. Show me how" (Donoghue 182). So we see that after discovering action, a metaphor for life, the princess has realized the necessity of the knowledge she had been denied thus far. This realization constitutes her real awakening, one which sharply contrasts with the traditional awakenings, which are of a literal nature—a young woman profoundly asleep is awoken by the intercession of either a man or her children. Donoghue's protagonist, on the contrary, is not literally asleep, only figuratively since she is ignorant of everything. Most importantly, Donoghue's princess's awakening is not achieved with the help of a male rescuer, but with the cooperation of an old spinner who lives far removed, even insulated, from patriarchal law. She teaches the girl how to spin and everything else a patriarchal system considers inappropriate for a woman to know.

In Jane Yolen's "The Thirteenth Fey" (1985) we find one more case of female cooperation in performing the redeeming function. Here the fairies are the victimized figures, while their champion is the traditionally wicked fairy—the Thirteenth Fey, the one who casts the evil spell on the Sleeping Beauty in conventional versions. In Yolen's tale, the fairy's name is Gorse, who explains the victimization of her fairy companions: "It was not until I reached my thirteenth year that I understood what my dear mother and her mother before her knew and grieved for but could do nothing about. It was then that I discovered that we are tied to that small piece of land circling the pavilion, tied with bonds of magic as old and secure as common law. We owe our fortunes, our existence, and the lives of the children to come to the owners of the land. We are bounden to do them duty, we women of the fey. And during all the time of our habitation, the local lords have been a dynasty of idiots, fornicators, louts, greedy guts, and fools" (Yolen 31–32). For years and years, then, as Gorse explains, the fairies have been subdued by a group of landlords and no one has been able to liberate them. Gorse, the Thirteenth Fey, will be the one to carry out such a liberation.

Gorse spends her childhood instructing herself in her father's library, reading voraciously anything that comes into her hands, but particularly books on democracy, her major interest. What she learns about politics is precisely what gives her the key to put an end to the problems of the women of the fey, problems that ultimately derive, she finds out, from the patriarchal monarchy they live in. Her liberating plan, however, does not include Talia, the sleeping princess in the story, but only the women of the fey:

When, in a hundred years, some young princeling manages to unravel the knot of wood about Talia's domain, I plan to be by his side, whispering the rote of Revolution in his ear. If my luck holds—and the Cloth of Invisibility works just long enough—Talia will seem to him only a musty relic of a bygone era whose bedclothes speak of decadence and whose bubby breath of decay. He will wed the scullery out of compassion, and learn Computer Science. Then the spell of the land will be broken. No royal wedding—no royal babes. No babes—no inheritance. And though we fey will still be tied to the land, our wishes will belong to us alone. (Yolen 44–45)

Self-Liberation

Apart from examples of female cooperation, contemporary feminist revisions of "The Sleeping Beauty" offer cases of self-liberation as well. Instances of the latter can be found in Gwen Strauss's "Sleeping" (1990), in Jill McCorkle's "Sleeping Beauty, Revised" (1992), and in Ann Claffey's "The Plastic Princess" (1985). Strauss's poem, for instance, presents us with the story of Sleeping Beauty in two parts. These are not obvious in the formal layout of the text, but can be differentiated from a semantic point of view. In the first part the princess herself explains how the hundred-year sleep has gone by, while the second part is focused on the kiss that put an end to her sleeping. If we take into account the fact that her awakening is provoked by male intervention, it then seems contradictory to include Strauss's revision within this section devoted to self-liberating princesses. The first line of the second part of the poem, "When I woke to his caress" (stanza 7, line 39), seems proof enough that it is the prince's love that breaks the princess's spell. Yet there are enough reasons to consider that Strauss's adaptation of Sleeping Beauty is indeed a tale of self-liberation.

If we consider most of the traditional versions of "The Sleeping Beauty" once more, we realize that the prince is not the only benefactor of the princess. The wall of brambles is another element of the narrative that contributes to the princess's well-being, since it prevents inappropriate men from reaching the sleeping maiden. In those traditional tales, the wall of brambles is brought into existence either spontaneously or as the result of a good fairy's protective attentions toward the princess. In Strauss's poem, however, the immense mass of undergrowth that surrounds the palace where the enchanted princess lies springs up as the materialization of one of Sleeping Beauty's wishes:

I willed the rose briar hedge to grow
Because I couldn't bear all those princes
Blushing, kissing, fumbling with my body.
[. . .]

I wanted instead a room, my pain, the pin prick, and time alone,
So I stopped watching.
I became a small watery thing
Holding my knees and keening.

I had spun my cocoon
Of water and blood and there I slept
Until my fear wore itself smooth as an eyelid,
As anything that's lived in an ocean. (Strauss stanzas 4–6, lines 15–29)

As these lines clearly demonstrate, the briar hedge is not the product of one of the clauses of the spell, or of a well-intentioned fairy, but has been willed by Sleeping Beauty herself. Thanks to it the young girl manages to keep undesirable men at a distance. Most importantly, she prevents those men from imposing their wills on her. Whereas traditional Sleeping Beauties could do nothing to avoid being raped (as in Basile's version, for instance) or at least touched (the rape develops in due course into a chaste kiss, as in the Grimm's tale), Strauss's heroine has a creative capacity that allows her to preserve her own will intact, her body untouched. By building the briar hedge she presents unwanted men with an insurmountable obstacle, while securing her autonomy within a territory that is inhabited only by herself. In that space she can enjoy the sensations her body constantly experiences: the pricking of her finger, time going by, water surrounding her, and so on. The important thing is that, in this particular phase of her life, the princess wishes to be alone, to benefit from her territory, without having to endure the unbearable presence of all those men who want to impose their wills on her. Above all, it is of greatest interest that she is capable of providing for herself the solitude she desires by making use of her creative capacity. In this sense, then, there is no doubt that she well deserves the title of self-liberating Sleeping Beauty.

Jill McCorkle's tale "Sleeping Beauty, Revised" (1992) is likewise marked by the presence of a self-liberating heroine. McCorkle's protagonist, though, is not a "Sleeping Beauty" in the strict sense of the phrase, since she is neither waiting for the coming of a Prince Charming, nor is she actually asleep or, at least, inactive. She is the narrator of the story, so it is through her that we learn about her life, although she never confesses her name. She is a teacher, the ex-wife of a man called Nick and the mother of Jeffrey. Ever since she divorced Nick, some nine years ago, she has not gone out with anyone. But right at the beginning of the story, we are told that a friend of hers has arranged a blind date for her with a computer salesman named Phil. She tries to cancel the date after finding out that she does not have a babysitter for the night, but Phil assures her that this is no problem for him, and that they can take Jeffrey with them to a restaurant. The date is an absolute disaster. Phil shows no interest in the

narrator, and cannot stop looking at and talking to Betsy, one of the waitresses at the restaurant. Besides, the narrator ends up quarrelling with some women who are dining next to her, and, as a result of this, Phil decides the three of them must leave. He drives his companions home and says goodbye to them, after which the story ends with a scene in which we see the protagonist playing with her son.

That is the story as far as the action is concerned. But McCorkle's tale is also full of fragments that offer us the protagonist's mental digressions and thoughts, all of which are basically related to marriage, her condition as a divorced woman, and her role as mother. The latter is of major interest for my purposes here, since it will be precisely her maternal function that will help her cope with and finally achieve her liberation. If she is another self-liberating Sleeping Beauty, then what is Phil's function in the narrative? Physically speaking, at least, he might count as a redeemer: "Phil is tall and fresh-looking, crisp as a stalk of celery. He extends his hand in a firm and cool shake and steps inside, navy wool socks and loafers, khakis and an oxford cloth shirt, narrow knit tie, circular brown frame glasses; he's the kind of man I always wanted to date in college" (McCorkle 200). This quotation tells us that Phil is the typical man an American adolescent might want to date: tall, very clean, well dressed. He leads others to believe that he is a good guy, in other words, a Prince Charming: "He is freshly shaven and not a scratch on his face. He looks like someone (a good guy or prince) out of one of Jeffrey's books" (McCorkle 201). It is precisely that princely connection that the narrator underlines on several occasions: "Phil is still looking at Betsy. He looks like he's in a trance, like the Prince when Cinderella enters the ballroom, the Prince when he finds Snow White in her glass coffin, the Prince when he makes his way to Sleeping Beauty's bedside. [. . .] Phil apologizes over and over on the ride home but I tell him there's no reason. I shake his cool hand and thank him for dinner. I imagine his picture ripped from a storybook [. . .]" (McCorkle 208-12).

Despite these physical descriptions of Phil, the fact is that he is only an ideal date for a romantic and inexperienced girl. For the narrator, however, that is, for a mature woman who has gone beyond the adolescent phase and no longer believes in the coming of a Prince Charming who will free her of her boring life and will take her to a dream world, he appears as someone quite insipid. As Nancy Walker has pointed out, McCorkle's protagonist is experienced enough to find out "the insubstantiality of the princely image" (61). This realization is plainly demonstrated in the narrator's remark: "I keep expecting him to turn to the side and become the flat straight edge of a picture page or maybe just blow away and join the ankle-deep leaves as we walk through the yard" (McCorkle 201). And once more in the following quote: "I imagine his picture ripped from a storybook—a two-dimensional prince" (212).

McCorkle's protagonist has not only discovered the insubstantiality of Phil, that is, of the male-rescuer archetype, but also feels utterly repelled by it. Thus, she states: "I'd rather stretch out full length on the sidewalk and slip into a coma than to get in this man's car and try to carry on a conversation" (McCorkle 210). For her, Phil lacks the condition of being human, which is necessarily marked by its tridimensionality. He is but a trivial image torn out of an illustrated fairy-tale book. Thanks to her maturity, she is not blinded by the outwardly appearance of the traditional male rescuer, but is capable of getting a glimpse into the vacuity of this kind of redeemer whose existence can only be materialized on a piece of paper, never in the real and tridimensional world.

The protagonist of "Sleeping Beauty, Revised" is a woman who has serious problems in her life. Among them, the most important one is the fact that she has to face maternity by herself. On top of that, she often has to endure her mother's and her aunt's criticisms. Both relatives blame her for her divorce and keep raising doubts about the way in which she carries out her maternal duties. Their attitude has led the protagonist to a state of insecurity and low self-esteem to the extent that, although she has never thought herself responsible for her divorce, she does question her behavior as a mother and has even considered that she is not performing her role as she should.

One of the situations that has led the protagonist to doubt herself is the fact that, when she is playing with her son, they both enact different roles taken from fairy tales. The boy chooses for himself the roles of the good characters, while he makes his mother impersonate the bad ones. The protagonist comments more than once on how both Lenora, her aunt, and her own mother see in that pattern the proof that she is not a good mother. In connection with her aunt's attitude, she says: "I always get the sinister roles: witches and ogres and evil stepmothers. [. . .] I indulge my child's fantasy life despite the recent comments I've received about how this might not be healthy. My aunt Lenora has suggested that this is how he's (she leans close to whisper) *dealing with divorce, these violent games*" (McCorkle 199). And, later on, she relates the kind of pressure that she has got from her mother: "Still, in spite of my mother's loyalty, Lenora has planted the seed, and doubts are beginning to flourish. Just the other day my mother turned, her eyes narrowed in Lenora fashion, and said, 'Doesn't it bother you that you always get the *negative* parts? You know, do you ever wonder if Jeffrey blames you, if he sees you as the *antagonist*?' That was Lenora's word for sure. Lenora had once made it perfectly clear that though Nick had left me, she thought I was the one to blame. *A man who is not well cared for will up and leave*" (McCorkle 200).

These two passages help us realize the extent to which the protagonist is being coerced by her mother and aunt, whose commentaries have led her to seriously wonder whether she is causing irreparable damage to her son. Thus,

after leaving the restaurant where she and Phil dined, she thinks of Betsy, the waitress with whom Phil was flirting, and she envies her, not for having gotten the prince's attention, but because she is childless and therefore does not have to worry about whether or not her behavior is appropriate: "There's [. . .] no fears about having done (or doing) *irreparable damage to a young psyche*, and not just *a young psyche*, but *the young psyche*, the person you love more than anyone else on earth" (McCorkle 212). The anxiety that the protagonist has due to the possibility that, just as her mother and aunt suggest, she is not a good mother, as well as the seed of culpability that both relatives have planted in her, have transformed McCorkle's heroine into a victim of the patriarchal system, whose aim is to subdue women by means of its peculiar maternal discourse. According to this, the good mother must always sacrifice herself for her child; should anything go wrong as far as the child's education is concerned, it is the person in charge of the child's upbringing, that is, the mother, who is deemed responsible. There are no other options in the patriarchal discourse on maternity: women have the children, they sacrifice their lives for them, and if there is any problem, they are the only culprits.

The protagonist's mother and aunt have perfectly assimilated patriarchal discourse and have attempted to transmit it to their younger relative. The latter, however, ends up liberating herself from the influence of that ideology, that is, she frees herself from its weight and, above all, from the anxiety and guilt complex that it generates in the mother. As she accomplishes this on her own, by constantly meditating on her life and problems, I consider McCorkle's protagonist to be a self-liberating Sleeping Beauty.

On the last occasion the reader has access to the protagonist's thoughts, it becomes clear that she has revised her understanding of the significance of her playing the bad roles with her son: "His [Jeffrey's] trust in me is complete. If it weren't, he'd never give me the *bad parts* to act out. And what's wrong with acting out the bad parts? What's wrong with Jack getting rid of the giant? And why shouldn't Hansel and Gretel kill the witch in self-defense? Hooray for Dorothy, the wicked witch is dead. Then you just turn the page and start all over" (McCorkle 213). Immediately after these meditations comes the last scene of the story, where mother and son play together and enact several fairy-tale roles. The protagonist notices the harmony and understanding that characterizes their relationship, the shared feelings that have evolved after so many hours of playing together; in short, the trust, as she puts it, that each one has in the other. Having realized all this, McCorkle's protagonist is able to liberate herself from her mother's and aunt's theories, so, by the end of the tale, she can rewrite all the stories, give new and opposite meanings to old functions, and, most importantly, feel self-assured and proud of how she is performing her role as a mother. Maternity plays a major role in "Sleeping Beauty, Revised."

However, two vital nuances must be taken into account. First, the fact that it is not a traditional model of motherhood, but a new version of it: a woman faces the upbringing of her child on her own, without a male's economic support or the obligation of having to follow his principles on questions related to feeding, education, and so forth. Secondly, we must point out that motherhood is not the factor that triggers the protagonist's liberation. The latter is actually brought about by the change in mentality undergone by the heroine, who abandons patriarchal ideology and then goes on to gain self-assuredness and to conclude that the mutual understanding between her son and herself in their games is the decisive proof that she is a good mother.

The third self-liberating Sleeping Beauty that I would like to discuss here is the protagonist of Ann Claffey's "The Plastic Princess" (1985). In fulfillment of her destiny, Claffey's protagonist falls in love with a prince and eventually marries him. But she soon discovers that the conjugal happiness the evil fairy had predicted for her is, in truth, a phase of desperation. Despair is brought about by the princess's realization that she is only wanted as a producer of regal heirs. Unfortunately, she ends up having seven sons before seeing through her husband. Besides, she also notices that the life she is leading is no good for her, for it has destroyed her nervous system and has made her addicted to tranquilizers. Above all, her conjugal experience has meant the abandonment of her identity, which, as a single woman, was symbolically represented by her sports clothes and her spiky hair, both of which are replaced by elegant clothes, high-heeled shoes, and conventional hairdos once she is a married woman.

The princess's true identity, however, is never totally obliterated, thanks to the fact that her fairy godmothers had given her a number of practical gifts at her birthday party. For years, those gifts were kept in a state of hibernation due to the sedative effect of the matrimonial phase dictated by the curse. Nevertheless, there comes a moment when they regain their power, thus allowing Claffey's princess to wake up. This awakening, in its turn, implies her putting an end to her marriage. Divorces are not easy for members of royal families, though, which is why she needs to contrive an ingenious stratagem to obtain her freedom: "This time it was *alleged* that the Princess was no longer living at the palace but had run away with one of her ladies in waiting to join a women's commune in a neighboring country. What the people saw on the balcony of the palace was, in fact, a perfectly constructed model" (Claffey 26). This quote shows the way in which Claffey's princess leaves the palace on her own initiative by making good use of the means at her disposal. Her escape is preceded by the careful construction of a dummy that looks exactly like her. Once she has placed it on the balcony of her ex-husband's palace, she can leave and be sure that no one will miss her. This is how she, too, becomes a member of the club of self-liberating Sleeping Beauties.

"The Plastic Princess" adds another twist to the Sleeping Beauty story that the other feminist revisions do not: that of homosexuality. Claffey's princess has not only escaped her prison by herself, but has also joined a women's commune and has begun a homosexual relationship with a maid. After her disastrous heterosexual experience within the realm of marriage, her lesbianism takes on a most positive connotation—it actually appears as a liberating force that contributes to helping the heroine recover her identity.

Homosexual Relationships as Liberating Forces

Homosexual relationships are often offered as satisfactory alternatives to heterosexuality in contemporary feminist revisions of fairy tales. While heterosexuality is the accepted norm in patriarchy, homosexuality is one of its greatest taboos. Therefore, homosexual relationships are sometimes put forward in revisionist texts not only as a fulfilling option, but also as an efficient way of attacking the establishment. On other occasions, though, writers are not so optimistic as to the possibility of leading a happy homosexual life in a context that is compulsorily heterosexual. There are several revisions of "The Sleeping Beauty" that deal with the problem of homosexuality from different perspectives, notably Suniti Namjoshi's "Thorn Rose" (1981) and Olga Broumas's "Sleeping Beauty" (1977). The former represents a pessimistic view of the question, while the latter copes with it in a much more optimistic way.

The narrator of Namjoshi's "Thorn Rose" (1981) tells the story of an ambitious princess who fights her brother in an unsuccessful attempt to gain power. She then adds a coda to it in which she relates the tale of the princess's sister, whose fate is likewise a miserable one: "And yes, she had a sister who didn't like men, preferred women. She clambered to the attic of her own accord, and when she fell asleep, nobody woke her: no women available" (Namjoshi 10). It is obvious that, being a lesbian, the Sleeping Beauty we find in Namjoshi's text would need a female rescuer so that she could be awoken by a woman's kiss. However, this revision stresses the fact that rescuers of this kind are nonexistent in traditional versions of "The Sleeping Beauty": "no women available," the narrator says. For this reason, Namjoshi's Sleeping Beauty will have to continue sleeping forever. Her revision does not consider the possibility of making up an unconventional rescuer. But, at least, it does prove that traditional deliverers cannot manage the whole casuistry of heroines in need of a liberating intervention.

Olga Broumas's poem "Sleeping Beauty" (1977) goes beyond Namjoshi's text in that it defends the role of homosexual relationships as liberating forces by offering a textual example of how these relationships can actually function and achieve their goal of redemption. In fact, all the poems of *Beginning with O* (1977), the volume where "Sleeping Beauty" was included, work in a similar

way. As Ellen C. Rose has pointed out, they "force us to consider the possibility that lesbianism is not deviant but a natural consequence of the undeniable fact that a woman's first love object, like a man's, is her mother" (221). Nancy Walker directs her words toward the problem of the male-rescuer archetype and how it is dealt with in Broumas's poems: "Broumas's revisions reverse the central gender relationships of the traditional tales. Men are not rescuers, but rather intruders; women are lovers and nurturers of each other instead of jealous competitors" (60).

I would tend to agree with both critics that lesbianism is positively depicted in *Beginning with O* and that it plays a vital liberating role in it. These lines from "Sleeping Beauty," among many others, have inspired that idea:

City-center, mid
traffic, I
wake to your public kiss. Your name
is Judith, your kiss a sign

to the shocked pedestrians, gathered
beneath the light that means
stop
in our culture
where the red is a warning, and men
threaten each other with final violence; *I will drink
your blood.* Your kiss
is for them

a sign of betrayal, your red
lips suspect, unspeakable
liberties as
we cross the street, kissing
against the light, singing, *This
is the woman I woke from sleep, the woman that woke
me sleeping.* (Broumas, lines 35–53)

There is a great contrast between these lines, which constitute the third part of the poem, and the two previous sections. In them there is an interior setting, which is replaced by the street, the city center, until the poem reaches the third part. The intimate atmosphere that presides over the beginning of the text, where only two women are present, is replaced at the end by a space full of pedestrians. The drowsy state that characterized the poetic persona (Broumas's particular version of Sleeping Beauty) at the start vanishes in the lines quoted above: "I wake to your public kiss" (lines 36–37; my italics). In this last section, too, the poetic persona's lover is given a name for the first time. To be precise,

she receives the emblematic biblical name of "Judith," the Jewish heroine who took advantage of Holofernes's drunkenness by stabbing the Assyrian leader to death, thus liberating her people. It is therefore not a coincidence that the poetic persona's lover, whose essential redeeming role in the poem will be commented on in short, is named after a female rescuer as brave and reckless as the biblical Judith.

In the lines transcribed above, the male gender is characterized by its extreme violence: "and men / threaten each other with final violence: I will drink / your blood" (lines 43-45). The patriarchal system as a whole is presented as a web of oppressive norms, of prohibitions that attempt to denaturalize homosexual relationships by labeling them as sinful. Those rules and constraints are symbolically represented in the text by means of a red light that regulates the movement of pedestrians. When the poetic persona and her lover come to the traffic lights, the red light literally compels them not to cross. Figuratively speaking, however, it denies them access to society. Opposed to that red light that implies *stop*, Judith's lips are shining with a carmine lipstick. In this case the red color suggests conscious and shameless transgression. In fact, her mouth is a sign of her determination not to comply with the social laws but to follow her own principles.

Judith and the poetic persona end up crossing the street, while uttering "unspeakable / liberties" (lines 48-49). This euphemistic expression refers to their homosexual relationship. According to the decorum of a patriarchal system, lesbianism is not a good topic for conversation but is even worse as a sexual practice. Regardless of this, Judith's mouth proclaims her homosexuality and her kissing lips put it into practice. Her kisses possess the liberating power that many princes lack in other revisions of "The Sleeping Beauty." Hers are public kisses—she does not hide from the crowd. Above all, they are defiant and transgressive, for they are not intimidated by the symbolic red color of the traffic lights. With those kisses, it is not surprising to see that the awakening of Broumas's *Sleeping Beauty* is complete, and not simply partial as in the case of Sara H. Hay's and Tanith Lee's princesses, or even worse, impossible, as in that of Namjoshi's protagonist.

A journey from Basile's seventeenth-century version of "The Sleeping Beauty" to the late twentieth-century rewritings of the same tale I have commented on in this paper clearly demonstrates that there has been a major change in the characterization of the fairy-tale rescuing agent. The redeemer indeed has traveled from compulsory maleness to a world of many possibilities, which, in my view, has enriched both the character and the fairy tale.

One would think that it all has been brought about by the empowering process that feminist ideology has gone through in the second half of the twentieth century. Such ideology has given way to a new reality of powerful women

who are educated and hold important positions in society. This might have permeated through the covers of fairy-tale books, thus radically transforming the characters and their roles. But it might well be the other way round: feminist revisions of "The Sleeping Beauty," among rewritings of other fairy tales, offer examples of assertive heroines who can help real women feel self-assured and capable of emulating their fictional sisters. Real men can benefit from them too, since they no longer feel the pressure that traditional stories exerted on them. Whatever the case may be, whether it is fiction or reality that comes first, the transformation of the rescuing agent is manifest and, in my opinion, has numerous benefits.

Note

1. All the translations from the Spanish language into English are mine.

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