

# Stories animate human life english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Human beings need stories. We delight in the pleasure of hearing stories; we revel in the act of sharing stories. For as long as man has existed, storytelling has not only been a primary method of entertainment, but a fundamental tool of human survival; the art of storytelling has the power to teach us lessons, communicating knowledge and experience of our own human life. The genre of the fairy tale, in particular, is one of the most ancient, unique forms of storytelling which still survives today in the twenty first century. As Jack Zipes wrote: ' Fairy tales continue to pervade if not invade our lives throughout the world. They play an intricate role in acculturation, that is, in forming and reflecting the tastes, manners and ideologies of members of a particular society.'<sup>[2]</sup>Fairy tales, according to Zipes, are not only valuable as literary works of art, but, because they have the power to influence the reader, they are ideological documents which serve a specific function in communicating the values and the many preoccupations of different nations.<sup>[3]</sup>This dissertation is an examination of variations of the classic fairy tale Sleeping Beauty not only as works of art, but as artefacts of a particular time. The tale has been part of the international canon of literature long before one could possibly begin to trace. Owing to its oral roots, we cannot pinpoint exactly where it begins, and through the centuries, innumerable variations of the story have been told. The earliest known influences date back to the French romance Perceforest, in an episode titled ' L'Histoire de Troilus et de Zellandine' of 1528 and Gambatista Basille's Sun Moon and Talia of 1634. In particular, however, this dissertation will focus on three traditional versions which are predominantly considered to be the most well-known and used today in the

twenty-first century; Charles Perrault's *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* (1697), *Brier Rose*, by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (1812) and Walt Disney's film, *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). It will explore the fact that, although the stories have been adapted to suit different audiences, and different variations exist, the preservation of patriarchy has remained a constant factor and is the common denominator between these dominant traditional versions of the tale. It will then compare these traditional versions of *Sleeping Beauty* with modern feminist retellings, namely Anne Sexton's poem *Briar Rose* (1971) and a short story by Angela Carter, *The Lady of the House of Love* (1979). It will ultimately argue that, although the tale has been adapted, the essential themes of the ancient 'source' texts still remain preserved and are forever inherent in the story. The structure of this dissertation is progressive.

Chapter One will discuss the readership of traditional versions, examining how the tale has been censored and adapted to suit different audiences.

Drawing upon the critical theory of Jack Zipes and Rowland Barthes, it will argue that fairy tales are not only ideological documents, which present a land of social utopia to the reader, but they also exist as historical documents, as written preservation of the time in which they were written.

Chapter Two will then go on to look at the representations of the heroine in each of these versions. It will argue that although the tales have been adapted according to changing social values and significant changes have been made to the plot, the tale is very much stuck in a particular time; each version reflects the sexist mores and values of a patriarchal society. This chapter will argue that the representation of the Princess has remained a constant factor; elements of sexism are heavily promoted in these traditional

versions. Chapter Three will then focus on Anne Sexton's poem, Briar Rose and Angela Carter's short story, The Lady of The House of Love. This chapter will be a discussion of these new feminist versions and how they successfully draw the reader's attention to the sexism of traditional versions. However, it will argue that the elements of patriarchy are not eliminated; they are an integral part of the story. Even feminist adaptations of the story must acknowledge the time in which it was written. As Pamela Lindon Traverse wrote, 'Once we have accepted the story we cannot escape the story's fate.' [4] Sleeping Beauty is a tale which has always been, and always will be told Once Upon a Time. Chapter One. Tale as Old as Time: Versions of Sleeping Beauty as Historical Documents. Writing is an act of historical solidarity... Writing is a function. It is the relation between creation and society. It is the literary language transformed by its social destination. It is literary language transformed by its social destination. It is the form grasped in its human intention and thus tied to the great crises of history. [5] Roland Barthes, *Le degree zero de l'écriture* (1953) In the above words, Roland Barthes acknowledges that all writing serves a purpose. A piece of literature not only has the potential to communicate messages to its audience, but, as Barthes highlights, it exists as a historical relic, a reflection of the morals and values of the culture in which it was produced. How a piece of literature is adapted is inevitably influenced by the society in which it is born, and how one might read that piece of literature is inevitably influenced by the society in which it is read. This is particularly true when one looks at different adaptations of the story Sleeping Beauty. This chapter will examine how the tale has been adapted to suit different audiences, according to social values.

It will argue that fairy tales, as they developed, came to be highly valued as ideological texts, teaching the child reader to adopt and obey the values and messages which they portray. Furthermore, it will argue that each adaptation exists therefore as a historical relic, subconsciously symbolising the society of its own time. Of course, it would be wrong to assume that there is an 'original' version of the story. As is the case with most classic fairy tales, its roots lie in oral traditions, and are therefore impossible to trace.[6]Angela Carter points out: 'For most of human history, 'literature', both fiction and poetry, has been narrated, not written - heard, not read.'[7]In reality, there are a myriad of versions which exist and a multitude of variations between them. As Carter continues: 'The chances are, the story was put together in the form we have it, more or less out of all sorts of bits of other stories long ago and far away.'[8]One particular version dates back to 1697, by French author Charles Perrault. His telling, *La Belle au bois Dormant* or *The Sleeping Beauty in The Wood* could not be more different from the dominant classic version we tell today. His version was heavily inspired by the Italian Giambatista Basile's *Sun Moon and Talia*, released sixty-three years previously in 1634. Both tales follow the same plot, which is saturated with violence. In Basile's early version of the story, Talia (*Sleeping Beauty*) is raped, impregnated and forsaken by the King; she wakes when she gives birth to twins, not by a kiss from a long awaited prince. It is quite clear, from the graphic content here, that the story we know today was certainly not always intended for children. Although Perrault's version does delete the element of rape, both versions describe a section beyond the marriage of the Prince and the Princess, where the Queen, overcome with

jealousy, orders for Sleeping Beauty and her children to be cooked and burnt in a fire. However, as both stories go, the Princess and her children are fortunately saved in the end by the Prince, who is the hero in the story. Jack Zipes astutely noted: Almost all critics who have studied the emergence of the literary fairy tale in Europe agree that educated writers purposely appropriated the oral folktale and converted it into a type of literary discourse about mores, values, and manners so that children and adults would become civilized according to the social code of the time.[9] Charles Perrault's fairy tales were explicitly written with moral instruction in mind. This can be clearly observed even from the title of his collection, *Stories or Tales of Bygone Times with Their Morals*. The opening pages of his collection included a letter which states: 'The moral lessons they contain are all extremely sensible, and will be understood more or less easily according as my readers are more or less perceptive.' [10] There is some speculation as to whether or not Perrault himself wrote this letter; Christopher Betts credits P. Darmancour, Charles Perrault's son to the foreword. In any case, however, it is clear from the content of this letter that Perrault's work is justified purely because it complies with seventeenth century laws and regulations and it promotes these laws to the reader. Furthermore, the letter is dedicated 'To Mademoiselle'. Betts defines her identity as the King's eldest Niece, Elizabeth-Charlotte d'Orleans, and highlights the fact that Perrault was allowed to dedicate the contents of his publication to her shows that he was very much in favour of the monarchy.[11] Therefore, Perrault's work was published primarily because it encouraged its readers to adopt the laws and moral ideals of the time. It was not until 1812 where the story came to be

formed into the most commonly known version we know today. As Marie Louise Von Franz noted, ' It is amusing that the fairy tale underwent the same fate as the Sleeping Beauty herself, for the tale faded out of people's memories, then suddenly became alive again, and very popular.'[12]Jacob Ludwig Grimm and his brother Willheim Carl, often referred to as the Grimms or the Brothers Grimm, were German idealists who underwent the process of adapting the story for a child reader, and at the same time, ' they sought to establish the cultural unity of Germany via its cultural traditions and language...Their " Household Tales" became the second most popular and widely circulated book in Germany for a century, dominated only by the Bible.'[13]In their version, which is commonly told today, significant changes can be seen. As Jack Zipes summarises, it was largely feared that ' due to their symbolical and secular content the tales might have given children " wild ideas" that their lives need not conform to the governing norms of society.'[14]Therefore, the classic tales often went under implicit censorship, or " sanitization." [15]Zipes observes: They eliminated erotic and sexual elements that might be offensive to middle-class morality and added numerous Christian expressions and references, emphasised specific role models for male and female protagonists according to the dominant patriarchal code of that time, and endowed many of the tales with a ' homey' or biedermeier flavour by the use of diminutives, quaint expressions and cute descriptions.[16]It is clear from Zipes' observation that the Grimms not only censored the material for the child reader, but they purposely added subtle expressions and references according to the dominant social codes of the time in order to instil these moral values in the child. Comparing the

Grimms' version to the Perrault text, countless examples of this can be seen. For example, their version was the first known text to introduce the element where the princess is awoken by a kiss, and the tale ends with the marriage of Sleeping Beauty and the Prince, completely eliminating the second half of Perrault's earlier text. Christopher Betts points out that ending the tale with the marriage of the couple ' makes it an ideal allegory of bourgeois mating rituals: children protected, sexuality reluctantly conceded but hidden, then a refusal to allow anyone except one worthy suitor to approach.'[17]Betts highlights that these elements were purposely added in response to the dominant Christian society, subtly championing the conventional modes of Patriarchal marriage, as Chapter Two will explore. As the civilizing process of the fairy-tale developed, Walt Disney adapted the tale into a film in 1959. Jack Zipes summarised, ' It is Walt Disney who became king of the fairy tale films in the twentieth century...his ghost still sits on the throne and rules the realm'.[18]He elaborates that Disney's work is ' A conventional reconciliation of conflicts and contradictions that engenders an illusion of happiness, security and utopianism.'[19]As Zipes denotes, Disney's version, even today is still very much widely acclaimed by audiences, but it ought to be condemned as it promotes an ' illusion of utopianism'.[20]Disney's work, of all three versions, is probably the one which is most guilty of explicitly promoting cultural ideals to the child viewer. The Disney version, which includes extra characters and motifs, elaborates heavily on the dominant Christian ideal of marriage by focusing heavily on the relationship between the prince and the princess as an ideal example of true love - a point which will be expanded upon in Chapter Two. Essentially, Disney's telling promotes



a utopian existence, a reflection of social ideals in the twentieth century. Therefore, it is clear that the story of Sleeping Beauty we know today has been adapted to suit different audiences for centuries, and each version promotes the social ideals of their own time. As Barthes acknowledges, 'writing is an act of historical solidarity', and so it can be stated that traditional versions of Sleeping Beauty exist as relics of these social ideals. Angela Carter states: Fairy tales, folk tales, stories from the oral tradition, are all of them the most vital connection we have with the imaginations of the ordinary men and women whose labour created our world...For the last two or three hundred years, fairy tales have been recorded for their own sakes, cherished for a wide variety of reasons, from antiquarianism to ideology. Writing them down - and especially printing them - both preserves, and also inexorably changes these stories.[21]Carter fundamentally agrees with Barthes here. In the re-telling of these tales today, we essentially preserve the only knowledge we have of our ancestors and the times in which they lived, but at the same time, when we reproduce it, because it is reproduced within a completely different context, it is unavoidably different from its predecessor version. The act of writing is a preservation of history, a process which is ever in evolution, as long as the story is told. Chapter Two. Once Upon a Dream Woman: Representations of the Heroine - Not the Fairest Of Them All. As Chapter One has stated, versions of Sleeping Beauty have evolved according to the social values and context in which the tale was produced. This chapter will examine will focus on the theme of gender as something, however, which was intentionally preserved in order to promote social ideals. The system of the proper feminine may be

represented by the following set of polarities (the list is by no means exhaustive): the domestic ideal, or angel in the house; the Madonna; the keeper of the domestic temple; asexuality; passionlessness; innocence; self-abnegation; commitment to duty; self-sacrifice; the lack of a legal identity; dependence; slave; victim.[22]Lynn Pykett, in her above description, defines the male Victorian ideal of womanhood. From her description, it is clear that, in order to fulfil the 'ideal', women ought to conform to number of contradictory expectancies. The male Victorian ideal woman is not only beautiful, but she displays passivity, patience and, above all, virginity. When Bruno Bettelheim wrote that Sleeping Beauty is 'the incarnation of the perfect femininity', he acknowledged that her character wholly conforms to this set of social ideals.[23]In essence, she exists more as a concept than a character. This chapter will examine the representation of the heroine in these versions of the story, namely Perrault's Sleeping Beauty, the Grimms' Briar Rose and Disney's Princess Aurora. It will argue that each appear to preserve and promote patriarchal codes and a somewhat debased view of women as the heroine always conforms to this 'perfect femininity'. As Lori Baker Sperry and Liz Grauerholz note, 'Children's fairy tales, which emphasise such things as women's passivity and beauty, are indeed gendered scripts and serve to legitimize and support the dominant gender system.' [24]When it comes to examining the transformation in representations of Sleeping Beauty, there is none. She has always been, and is still very much, in modern adaptations, portrayed as a passive damsel in distress. There can be no denying that Charles Perrault's version actively promotes this 'ideal femininity', and we need not look past the title of the

story in order to observe this. His title, *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* informs the reader from the outset that his protagonist is a female who is famous purely for her appearance. The fact that that she is 'sleeping' instantly connotes to the reader that she is also passive. Before the story even begins, Perrault's female is already in a state of submission. Perrault's version is the first known version to refer to the Princess as 'Sleeping Beauty', she remains unnamed throughout the rest of text, and he heavily focuses on this as the princess' most admirable characteristic throughout the tale. He narrates a moment, which is carried through to later Grimm's and Disney's versions, where wise women bestow gifts upon the child. In Perrault's version, we are told: She would be the loveliest person in the world; She would be as clever as an angel; she would do everything with all the grace imaginable; she would dance to perfection; she would sing like a nightingale; she would play beautiful music on all kinds of instruments.

[25]Endowed with these gifts a new-born baby, the princess, from her earliest days of existence, is 'bred to become the ideal aristocratic lady'.

[26]If, as Zipes theorised, Perrault's text was indeed adapted purely to instil moral values in his reader, in these words, he explicitly describes a pattern of regulations as to which females ought to conform. The sentence structure here is highly significant; Beauty comes before intellect, implying that it is the most important quality of the six virtues listed. Bettelheim reminded us that fairy tales present 'an essence of beauty in a most concise manner, in ways which can be comprehended by even the most naïve pursuer in literature'. [27]By placing the gift of beauty first, the author implies it is the principle virtue. Perrault's persistent references to beauty continue

throughout the text. In fact, every time the princess is described, the word beautiful is used: ' She was the most beautiful in the world'/'You would have said she was an angel she was so beautiful,' (Perrault, p. 88-89). The feminine beauty ideal is championed as one of women's most important assets and this can be seen clearly here. Further still, it is highly significant that beauty is the quality which attracts the prince to the heroine when her beauty completely overpowers him; After witnessing ' the most beautiful sight he had ever seen', he falls to his knees. (Perrault, p. 89) Therefore, if we are to acknowledge that there is a deliberate subtext running through these words, there can be no disputing the message which can be taken from this; in order to win the affections of men and meet the standard of ' perfection', women must be aesthetically pleasing. Not only is the Princess presented as beautiful in Perrault's text, but she is also championed for her passive and patient nature. Perrault's version explicitly includes a moral at the end of his story, implying that readers ought to be inspired by the Princess' example: The Moral of This Tale For girls to wait awhile, so they may wed A loving husband, handsome, rich and kind: That's natural enough I'd say; But just the same, to stay in bed A hundred years asleep - you'll never find Such patience in a girl today. Another lesson may be meant: Lovers lose nothing if they wait, And tie the knot of marriage late; They'll not be any less content. Young girls, though, yearn for married bliss So ardently, that for my part I cannot find it in my heart To preach a doctrine such as this. (Perrault, p 96-97) In these words, Perrault makes it unambiguously clear that the moral of his story concerns abstinence; ' For girls to wait awhile so they may wed/ A loving husband, handsome rich and kind'. The princess' sleep, therefore, is

not merely a symbol of her passive nature, but of her patience as she awaits a hundred years for the right prince to awaken her. As Bettelheim theorised, the princess' sleep symbolises adolescence, the period of great passivity before sexual maturity is reached. The act of pricking her finger on the spindle and falling asleep may well be interpreted as the feelings of lethargy which come with the onset of female menstruation.[28]Alternatively, it may be a symbol of punishment for prematurely breaking one's virginity, and the spindle interpreted as a phallic symbol.[29]. Bettelheim goes on to point out that when several potential suitors attempt to reach Sleeping Beauty before her time of maturing ends, they perish in the thorns. He interprets: This is a warning to child and parents that sexual arousal before mind and body are ready for it is very destructive. But when Sleeping Beauty has finally gained both physical and emotional maturity and is ready for love, and with it for sex and marriage, that which had seemed impenetrable gives way. The wall of thorns suddenly turns into a wall of big, beautiful flowers, which opens to let the prince enter.[30]Bettelheim astutely observes the sexual connotations of Perrault's original. The reference to the wall of thorns opening is a subtle analogy for the female sexual organs, letting the male enter only when the female is ready and prepared for the act of intercourse. The story is an ode to female patience and abstinence; it essentially preaches the moral of no sex before marriage. The princess is praised because her sexuality remains repressed. Perrault's text therefore not only champions patriarchy, but female passivity and above all, patience as 'the perfect femininity'. Sleeping Beauty in the 1697 text was represented as the exemplary stereotypical female, submissive amidst the dominance of a

patriarchal society. When it comes to examining the representation of the heroine in the Grimm's version of the story, this 'ideal femininity' is developed upon. Their version continued to promote the male Victorian ideal of womanhood, and this can firstly be seen in the lack of dialogue given to Aurora. As Marina Warner notes, 'the Silent Woman was an accepted ideal', and the Grimms certainly champion this notion.[31]In the Perrault text, which continues beyond the marriage of the Prince and the Princess, Sleeping Beauty is given significantly more speech than in the Grimm's version, and every sentence she speaks is indicative of her inquisitive female nature; 'What is that you are doing there good woman?'/ 'How do you do it? Let me see if I can do it too' (Perrault, p. 86). Even still, we are told that after she is awoken by her prince, 'She was the less tongue tied...They spent four hours talking to each other and they still had not said half of what they wanted' (Perrault, p. 89). In the Grimm's version, however, this speech is significantly repressed, where the Princess only utters two sentences throughout the duration of the story: 'Good day, old Granny...What are you doing there?' / 'What's that thing bobbing about in such a funny way?'[32]This lack of speech adds to Perrault's notion of female passivity. Reducing her amount of dialogue essentially reduces her role in the story; she remains passive to the action, a mere vacant object in the background of the bigger picture. As Jacqueline Lew observed, 'the Grimms denied the princess an activity by stealing her voice'.[33]Additionally, it may well be noted that in the Grimm's version, her only two lines are spoken directly before the moment where the Princess comes to harm. The juxtaposition of these factors essentially associates the two, subconsciously suggesting that

women ought to remain passive for the sake of their own good. The element of stifled speech preserves and promotes the heavily misogynist view that women should be seen and not heard. Further still, the fact that the Grimms' version eliminated the entire second half of Perrault's story is worth noting for several reasons. Of course, as Chapter One outlines, the second half had to be removed owing to its violent content in order to comply with censorship laws as the story was adapted for children, but this in turn means that the princess sleeps for more than half of the story, reducing her role even further. Again, the princess is presented as a quiescent object for the most part of the action. Moreover, the removal of the second half also inevitably means that the entire story builds up to the marriage of the couple; the conventional institution of marriage is deliberately promoted as the 'Happily ever after'. As briefly outlined in Chapter One, Christopher Betts observes that 'this makes (the story) an ideal allegory of bourgeois mating rituals.' [34] As Lew's essay goes on to state, the Grimms' version of the tale presents women as completely helpless without men; the princess spends the majority of the story powerlessly waiting to be rescued by the male. [35] She is wholly dependent on his kiss (an element which the Grimms added) to bring her back to life. This connotes to the reader that women can only achieve true happiness when they obtain male desire. [36] Therefore, the Grimms' version not only championed the 'perfect femininity' by representing the Princess as passive, but they even developed upon this view by presenting her as wholly helpless and useless without her male counterpart. The princess, in the Grimms text, is 'the incarnation of the perfect femininity' because she is utterly vulnerable and helpless without a

man to rescue her. However, no other version of the story presents the male Victorian 'ideal feminine' more explicitly than Walt Disney's film adaptation in 1959. In fact, Disney includes other characters who promote this role. The three fairies (formerly known as the wise women in Perrault's tale) look after the Princess during her sixteen years, hiding her from the evil villain Maleficent. During her time of residency at the cottage, the faeries actively encourage Princess Aurora to partake in conventionally 'feminine' activities. She is constantly taught to fit the mould of the feminine ideal. Jack Zipes observed: If the mother, queen or fairy godmother appears in a more active role than the male (in the fairy tale), she still acts in favour of a patriarchal society. Whether she be good or evil, her actions lead a young woman to seek salvation in marriage with a prince. To prove her worth, the young girl must display through her actions such qualities as modesty, industriousness, humility, honesty, diligence and virginity. Moreover, she must be self-effacing and self-denying.[37]The faeries in the film thoroughly encourage Princess Aurora to embody all the characteristics of 'the perfect femininity', which she faithfully obeys. In fact, even the fairies themselves set an example, when they are shown as maternal women, caring for the baby. [38]M. Keith Booker wrote that 'The treatment of gender is even more problematic in Sleeping Beauty than in most Disney films.'[39]Booker notes that not only is she famous primarily for her beauty, but she is also 'staggeringly stereotypical', partaking in other feminine accomplishments such as singing and dancing.[40]This observation is supported even from the very first moment we see the princess in the film as a sixteen year old girl, she is shown dusting the windows whilst singing. If we consider Perrault's



and the Grimms' Brier Rose as stunningly stereotypical, Disney's Princess Aurora is epitome of every cliché. The film, like its predecessor versions, champions the ideals of abstinence and passivity, but in an even more explicit way. In the moments before the princess touches the spindle, she is seen walking up a long spiral staircase towards the spindle itself. Freudian theory outlines that ' Staircases, or walking on them, are clear symbols of sexual intercourse...the rhythm of walking up them- perhaps too the increasing excitement and breathlessness the higher one climbs.'[41]Additionally, moments directly before she touches the spindle she is pictured removing her cloak, a clear allusion to the removal of one's clothes before the act of sex. The film, it seems, supports Bettelheim's theory that touching the spindle is a symbol of the act of breaking her virginity. In doing so, it emphasises the moment where the Princess comes to harm when she breaks the ' ideal' female constraints. The film promotes the ideal that women ought to remain asexual and virginal. Futhermore, just as the Grimms' version of Sleeping Beauty severely condensed her dialogue, in Walt Disney's film, she does not speak at all after scene where she is married to the prince. It seems almost as if their marriage renders her into his power; when she enters into the patriarchal constraints of marriage, she loses her voice. Disney's representation of men as powerful and dominant only adds to Perrault and Grimm's promotion of the ' perfect femininity'. The Disney version actually extends the story, by adding the interaction between the Prince and evil villain Maleficent, he is shown in a struggle with evil, which he powerfully overcomes. In both earlier versions examined, the thorns around the castle disappear on their own, allowing the Prince to easily

access the Princess in the tower. Disney's version, on the other hand, depicts the Prince's physical struggle, as he battles through the thorns and courageously defeats a dragon to win his princess. The male is represented as strong, powerful and heroic. Again, this only adds to the notion that the Princess would not be saved without his heroic rescue and is therefore dependant on his male strength and courage to save her. Henry A. Giroux outlines: As far as the issue of gender is concerned, Disney's view of women's agency and empowerment is more than simply limited: it reproduces the idea that a child born female can only realise a gendered incarnation of adulthood and is destined to fulfil her selfhood by becoming the appendage, if not the property, of a man.[42] We witness the princess pining for a male companion throughout the story. She sings: ' I wonder why each little bird has a someone to sing to, sweet things to.'[43] It becomes a major theme, as is sang at numerous times throughout the film, that true love conquers all. In the moment that Aurora meets Prince Philip for the first time, they sing a song called ' Once Upon A Dream', an obvious pun on the Grimms classic fairy tale introduction ' Once Upon a Time', in which she talks of how she met her prince in her dreams. Disney presents an overtly romanticised notion of the Princess longing for love before she finds it, again depicting her as deprived of happiness when she does not have a Prince to love. The Disney version is perhaps the most explicit example of all three versions in which the Princess is represented as a vulnerable damsel in distress. It can therefore be concluded that, although the versions of the story have changed over time, the representation of the heroine has remained constant throughout. There may have been minor changes to the

plot, but, in all three versions, the common factor is the sexist representation of the woman, as the heroine thoroughly conforms to this Victorian male ideal of 'the perfect femininity'. Chapter Three.' Can a bird sing only the song it knows?' - *Sleeping Beauty, Awakened in a Feminist Light*.' As the literary fairy tale emerged in the course of the nineteenth century, both male and female Victorian writers developed entirely new tales that showed just how well they understood the fairy tale's complicity in the ideology of gender.'[44]Donald Hasse's words highlight that there was a clear awareness of the sexism of traditional versions of the story, as Chapter One displayed. He elaborates that 'Women have -for three hundred years at least - quite intentionally used the fairy tale to engage questions of gender to create tales spoken or written differently from told or penned by men.'[45]This chapter will focus on two new versions of the story in particular, Anne Sexton's poem *Briar Rose* (1971) and Angela Carter's short story *The Lady of the House of Love* (1979). It will examine the ways in which these new versions have adapted the story *Sleeping Beauty* to address and combat sexist perceptions. However, it will argue that even although these elements have been addressed, they can never be eliminated; they will forever be preserved in retellings of the story. Anne Sexton is widely acclaimed for her Confessional Poetry, a genre which reveals and draws upon intimate and often disturbing details about the poet's life; it is often viewed as a mode of self-therapy for the poet.[46]However, as Janice Markey notes, the motivation behind her poetry is 'not simply attributable to any egocentricity, but instead to a real wish of Sexton's to communicate something meaningful to her audience.'[47]Adrienne Rich once commented:

' Her poetry is a guide to ruins, from which we learn what women have lived and what we must refuse to live any longer.'[48] Briar Rose was written as part of Sexton's Transformations (1971), a collection of the Grimm's fairy tales, revisited and adapted by Sexton into ' contemporary and shocking parodies'[49]. The poem itself can be summarised in sections; the first two sections comprise a re-telling of the story of Sleeping Beauty in third person narrative, and in the third section we hear the voice of Princess herself; the reader hears the tale from the female heroine's point of view. As Angela Carter wrote, ' Narrative in the first person implies a specific relation of intimacy and trust between reader and writer...It's supposed to make you say: " Yes, that's how it is"'[50]Sexton, in employing this first person narrative, positions the reader on the side of the female, exposing the sexism of the traditional tale. Sexton's poem draws the reader's attention to the sexism of the early version from the outset. The opening lyrics: ' Consider/A girl who keeps slipping off,/Arms as limp as old carrots,/ into the hypnotist's trance' instantly describes a female in a state of passivity.[51] Her ' arms as limp as old carrots', connote that the character is weak and utterly helpless, and the fact that she is ' in a trance' informs the reader that she is in a state of suspension from the beginning. Sexton's use of the word ' Consider' also draws the reader's attention to the girl as a hypothetical concept rather than a character, as previously discussed in chapter two. Furthermore, as Carter pointed out that first person narration brings the relationship between the reader and the character closer, then by employing third person narration, she therefore distances the reader from the character and her experience. The reader can therefore view the character's story

objectively, as if it is, like the girl she describes, suspended in time. It could be argued that this is also a reference to the representation of the character in the story; she is suspended in time, forever trapped in the grip of a patriarchal society. This point will be expanded upon later in this chapter. One of the most notable things Sexton does in this story is eliminate all references to the character's beauty. As Chapter Two described, this is the most prominent feature of the heroine in traditional versions. Instead, the narrative focuses on the girl's emotions; it describes her feelings of fear, and her fear of sleeping, perhaps an allusion to the common human fear of death: ' She could not nap/ or lie in sleep/ without the court chemist/ mixing her some knock-out drops' (Sexton, lines 105 -108). What Sexton essentially does, is give the character the human quality that is eliminated in traditional versions. Drucilla Cornell wrote that ' Feminism has, at its heart the demand that women be treated as free human beings.'[52]Sexton draws our attention to the woman as a human, not a concept or an object. The objectification of the female body is a prevailing theme in Briar Rose, and indeed in The Lady of The House of Love, as this chapter will later discuss. Sexton's description of the evil fairy tells us that ' her uterus an empty teacup'( Sexton, line 34) inevitably mocking the idea that the female's only purpose is restricted to her body; women should not be viewed as mere objects of sex and childbearing, as all earlier versions of Sleeping Beauty have portrayed. We are also told that ' Each night I am nailed into place/and forget who I am' (Sexton, lines 150-151). These words describe Sleeping Beauty as a victim of sexual abuse, intensifying role as an object, existing purely for male manipulation. Steven E. Colburn elaborates: ' Her allusion to

the crucifixion reveals her feelings of deadened existence.’[53]Furthermore, as Basile’s Sun, Moon and Talia, describes the scene where the princess is raped by the King, Briar Rose, in fact, describes a scene where the princess is raped by her father. Sexton revisits the violence of the early versions to address their sexism: Daddy? That’s not another kind of prison. It’s not the prince at all, but my father, drunkenly bent over my bed, circling the abyss like a shark, my father upon melike some jellyfish. (Sexton, lines 152-159). The act of incest in this scene is a symbol of male dominance. It is a symbol of male control, of male superiority and female subordination. Essentially, it is a symbol of the mechanics of a patriarchal society and a woman’s fear as she is vulnerable within it. Sexton’s heroine is afraid of sleep, and she is also afraid of male dominance. She is afraid of falling asleep in this male dominated society, afraid that she should be imprisoned and trapped there forever. The line ‘ That’s not another kind of prison’, it could be argued, is Sexton’s reference to the constraints of the male/female relationship in marriage, which are so fervently promoted in earlier versions of the story. Her reference to marriage as a prison connotes that it is a social entrapment, where the female is forever bound to be subordinate under male rule. In comparing the mechanics of a patriarchal society and marriage to incest, Sexton exposes patriarchy, as something which from which females must escape. In summation, Anne Sexton’s Briar Rose astutely displays an awareness of the dangers of a patriarchal society and highlights these dangers for her reader to ponder. Turning to the work of Angela Carter, many parallels can be made, for, as Lorna Sage and Merja Merkin states, ‘ Carter’s work has consistently dealt with representation of women in

phallogocentric cultures, of women troubled, even powered by her own violence.'[54]The Countess, in *The Lady of the House of Love*, is certainly a character to whom this description applies. Carter's version of *Sleeping Beauty* was published in her collection of short stories, *The Bloody Chamber* in 1979. Unlike Sexton's *Transformations*, which were explicit re-writing of the fairy tales, Carter insisted that her intention was 'not to do "versions", but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories to use as beginnings of new stories.'[55]And this is exactly what Carter did. *The Lady of The House of Love* is set in early twentieth century Europe and tells the story of the Countess, a vampire who resides in a deserted castle, surrounded by Ghosts. Wearing a blood-stained antique bridal gown, she spends her days asleep in a coffin and her nights reading tarot cards before feasting on her prey. One evening, she predicts that she will fall in love and it will be the cause of her death. When a young officer arrives, she plainly states her intention to kill him, but she cuts her finger on a piece of glass which consequently kills her after the officer kisses her bleeding hand. Of course, it is clear from the plot that this story was not intended to be a re-telling of the original. In fact, Carter's version takes the commonalities of traditional versions and completely reverses them. For example, we are told that the female is beautiful, but she is 'so beautiful it is unnatural...her beauty is a symptom of her disorder, of her soullessness'[56]. In this short adaptation, her beauty is not a gift, but a defect. Carter introduces radical reversals in her version. As Linden Peach outlines, her work is driven by 'de-familiarisation, making the literary and familiar strange.'[57]Carter takes the classic tale of *Sleeping Beauty* and presents it to her reader in an

overwhelmingly unfamiliar light. Like Sexton, she addresses the sexism of traditional fairy tales, but she does so in a completely different way. Firstly, Carter's retelling of the tale completely inverts conventional gender roles in order to mock stereotypes and patriarchal norms. In Carter's version, it is the male who displays all the characteristics which traditional versions of Sleeping Beauty describe the heroine to possess. He has blonde hair, he has blue eyes and, most importantly of all, ' he has the special quality of virginity, most and least ambiguous of states: ignorance...and furthermore, unknowingness, which is not the same as ignorance,' (Carter, p. 112.) Contrary to stereotypical expectation, it is he who displays the feminine naivety; it is he who is unknowing. Carter continues to mock patriarchy in the following paragraph when we are told ' Although he is young, he is also rational. He has chosen the most rational mode of transport in the world for his trip' (Carter, p. 112). In a thoroughly sarcastic tone, Carter mocks the stereotype that men are more logical than women. In doing so, she draws the reader's attention to the sexism of the Grimms' and Disney versions, where the males take charge; the King arranges the Christening, and the Prince takes it upon himself to rescue the Princess on his own. Therefore, Carter's version, like Sexton's effectively highlights the problems of patriarchy and the need for social change. Just as Sexton's version focused on the theme of patriarchal marriage as entrapment, Carter exposes this theme through symbolism. We are told that the Countess wears an antique wedding dress as she sleepwalks at night. This alone is symbolic of the passivity and entrapment of women in the state of a patriarchal marital confinement; she is confined to the trance-like state that Sexton described in



her poem. Carter mocks the patriarchal binaries within marriage; The Countess, who, albeit displays the assertiveness and dominance of a stereotypical male, still leads a domestic life, in a castle for her bridegroom to come to the bedroom ' which has been prepared for him' (Carter, p. 119.) Like the original Sleeping Beauty, ' she plays the game of patience' (Carter, p. 108). She waits for fulfilment from the male, but it is she, the female, who intends to dominate him. Furthermore, we are also told that the bridal gown is blood-stained. This, it can be argued, is a symbol of her female sexuality. The blood-stained Wedding dress symbolises that the Countess is not a virgin. Contrary to all expectations of ' the ideal femininity', she is by no means a Madonna. It may also be considered as a symbol of menstruation, as Bettelheim interpreted in the Grimm's text.[58]Carter addresses the taboo of female menstruation, and the male fear of menstruation, at the same time as she addresses the taboo of an unmarried female who is not a virgin. The Lady of The House of Love exposes the theme of female sexuality through distinct gender inversions. The ' new' woman she invents could not be more different from the Sleeping Beauty traditional versions portray. It can therefore be summarised that both Sexton and Carter's versions successfully present the tale of Sleeping Beauty in a completely different light, consequently forcing the reader into realising the sexism of traditional versions. However, interestingly, neither version completely eliminates the theme of patriarchy altogether. In fact, as I have illustrated, it is intentionally emphasised to point up the sexism of traditional versions. In the transition from one version of the story to another, the elements of sexism, whether they are continued, as in the work of Walt Disney, or contested, as in the

work of Sexton and Carter, are still present in the story. ' Carter has indicated that, in patriarchal cultural myths, women do not grow up. They simply change masters.' [59] Here, it can be argued that, in the transition from one text to another, the themes are always present. The text simply changes authors. These authors merely present the themes of the original text in a different light. Anne Sexton's poem describes the girl: ' She is stuck in the time machine,' (Sexton, line 7). This dissertation maintains that the story itself is stuck in a time machine. It cannot be reproduced without acknowledging and addressing the culture in which it was written. One particular line in Carter's text reads ' Can a bird sing only the song it knows, or can it sing a new song?' (Carter, p. 108). Carter, in this line, is primarily expressing her uncertainty as to whether or not a change from patriarchy is possible, but this could also be interpreted as a reference to the story itself. A text is only an adaptation if it preserves elements of its predecessor text; therefore, it can only ' sing the song' it already knows. As stated in Chapter One, Rowland Barthes argued that ' writing is an act of historical solidarity'. When a book is written, it becomes a monument, a testament to its own time and culture. Here, it will be stated that, consequently, reproductions of the tale must therefore acknowledge that culture. Carter wrote: Ours is a highly individualised culture, with a great faith in the work of art as a unique one-off, and the artist as an original, a godlike and inspired creator of unique one-offs. But fairy tales are not like that, nor are their makers. Who first invented meatballs? In what country? Is there a definitive recipe for potato soup? Think in terms of the domestic arts. This is how I make potato soup. [60] Carter acknowledges that, as fairy tales have no clear original, the

originality lies within each individual author's take on the themes. In order to do this, however, as Linda Hutcheon states: They use the same tools that storytellers have always used: they actualize or concretize ideals; they make simplifying selections, but also amplify and extrapolate; they make analogies; they critique or show their respect or so on. But the stories they relate are taken from elsewhere, they are not anew... Adaptations have an overt and defining relationship to prior texts, usually revealingly called "sources". [61] Therefore, as long as any re-telling of the story defines itself as an adaptation, whether it be a new version, a parody, or as Carter defined her own work, a 'new story created from the latent content', the themes and content from the 'source' must be preserved, or else it would not be a response, but a new story entirely. As Barthes acknowledged, writing, consciously or subconsciously, preserves both culture and history. An adaptation therefore, consciously or subconsciously, will inevitably acknowledge this culture and history. Therefore, the story of Sleeping Beauty is a tale cemented in history, ever confined to its patriarchal past. It forever exists, and will forever be told 'Once Upon a Time.'

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, as Jack Zipes summarised, 'fairy tales reflect the concerns of their author and the contradictions of their age, and versions today inevitably inherit these concerns and contradictions.' [62] Sleeping Beauty is no exception. Versions of the tale, whether they continue or contest these themes, still keep the elements of the 'source' text alive in the act of preserving them alone. Therefore, as this dissertation has illustrated, if Charles Perrault's work is considered the 'source' text, both the Grimms' and Disney version preserve patriarchal values to promote them, whereas

Sexton and Carter preserve these elements to draw attention to a need for change. Patriarchy is the common theme, but each version deals with it in a different way. As Marina Warner wrote, 'The happy endings of fairy tales are only the beginnings of the larger story.'<sup>[63]</sup>Fairy tales, like all literature, are completely subjective and the ultimate meaning will always vary from reader to reader. It seems only natural, then, that versions of the story will always vary from writer to writer. But the story of storytelling is a tale that will never be done.<sup>[64]</sup>Warner states that: 'This is my story, I've told it, and in your hands I leave it.' The story of Sleeping Beauty has been told. It has been changed. Bits have been added and sections taken away. Ultimate responsibility for meaning, however, always lies with the reader. We can interpret it. We can re-tell it. We can agree with it, or we can change it altogether. Fairy tales are works of art. The story of Sleeping Beauty is forever in evolution. It exists for us to make of it what we will.