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*When Beauty Goes to Sleep:
an analysis of the symbolism behind the Sleeping Beauty tale*

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1. Introduction

Approaching the world of the fairy tale as an adult, one soon realizes that things are not what they once seemed during story time in bed. Something that once appeared so innocent and simple can become rather complex when digging into its origin. A kiss, for example, can mean something else entirely.

I can clearly remember my sister, who is ten years older than I am, telling me that the fairy tales I was told had a mysterious hidden meaning I could not understand. I was probably 9 or 10 when she told me that the story of Sleeping Beauty, which I used to love so much in Disney's rendering, was nothing more than the story of an adolescent girl, with all the necessary steps needed to become a woman, the bleeding of menstruation and the sexual awakening - even though she did not really put it in these terms. This shocking news troubled me for a while, so much so that I haven't watched that movie since. But in reality it was not fear that my sister had implanted in me: it was curiosity, the feeling that I was missing something terribly important behind the words and images. But it was not until last year during my semester abroad in Germany, where I had the chance to take a very interesting English literature seminar, that I fully understood what I had been looking for all these years. Thanks to what I learned from the work of Bruno Bettelheim, Jack Zipes, Vladimir Propp, and many other authors that wrote extensively about the subject, I feel I finally have the right tools to really get to know this fairy tale. But what I also know now is that the message behind fairy tales is not to be searched for behind only one version: on the contrary, since they come from oral traditions and their form was slowly shaped by centuries of recountals and retellings, the more one digs, the more complete the understanding of the tale will be. As Zipes argues:

A tale will not be told again as a communication whether oral or written, in exactly the same way, but the person will tell it because he or she feels it is relevant in a certain sociocultural context. It will also not become part of a cultural tradition or canon unless it is vital to the survival of a community and the preservation of its values and beliefs [...] Members of a community "latch on" to a folk tale and conserve it so that it sticks, and they do so because it provides relative stability for the community and its culture. (Zipes, 2006:11)

I will therefore look for Sleeping Beauty's hidden meaning by looking for the reason why it did *stick* so consistently throughout time. To achieve this goal, I have organized my analysis in three chapters: in the first chapter, I will analyze the first known literary version of the tale, the French *Perceforest*, and then compare it with the following Italian version, Basile's *Sun, Moon, and Talia*; in the second chapter, I will focus on the most famous and by now classical literary versions of Sleeping Beauty, *La Belle Au Bois Dormant*, written by the Frenchman, Perrault, and the German *Dornröschen*, recorded by the Brothers Grimm's; finally, in the last chapter, I will analyze Almodovar's film *Talk to Her* as a modern rewriting of this tale, which after a closer look, appears closely related to the earliest version of the story, *Perceforest*.

2. Analysis

2.1 The literary origin of the tale: "Perceforest" and Basile's "Sun, Moon, and Talia"

Nowadays the most widely known versions of Sleeping Beauty are those of Perrault and the Brothers Grimm's, or probably a mixture of the two (thanks to the popular Disney's animated movie), but in order to understand their origin, and their differences, it is important to consider the earlier versions of the tale, even if tracing them back to their beginnings is never easy. Since they come from an oral tradition, we can only work effectively starting from when the literary tradition was established. For "The Sleeping Beauty" it begins with the *Anciennes Chroniques de Perceforest*. Book III of this anonymous prose romance, composed in French between 1330 and 1344, contains the "Tale of Troylus and Zellandine", which shares many common features with what became Sleeping Beauty. It is remarkable how the elements presented in this first written form of the tale are the basis on which all later versions are developed: the curse cast on a newborn, the pricking of the finger and the following sleep, the male savior. What changed in later versions is the relationship with the male savior character, where a rape is substituted with a kiss, where the fruits of their relationship are postponed until only after their marriage, and the revenge of another female antagonist.

The female character of *Perceforest's* tale is Zellandine, the daughter of king Zelland. The day of the princess's birth, the king's sister forgot to put a knife at the table for one of the three goddesses invited to the party. This goddess was Themis, goddess

of destinies, and thus she cursed the new born: <From the first spin of linen that she pulls from the distaff, a splinter will prick her finger and [...] she will immediately fall asleep> (Cox, 1990:135). Venus, the last goddess to enter, promises that she will see the splinter sucked out, and she will arrange everything. Before being struck by the curse, however, Zellandine meets and falls in love with the knight Troylus, which as a matter of fact is also the name of a legendary character of Homer's Iliad, which became in the Middle Ages a model of the faithful courtly lover and the virtuous pagan knight. It is when Troylus is away that Zellandine touches a distaff and, as predicted, falls asleep. The King, her father, is not able to wake her, but since he knows a goddess promised to save his daughter, he locks the princess in a high tower, thinking that only a god will be able to get there, and he leaves only his sister to attend to the princess. As soon as Troylus hears what has befallen to Zellandine, he sets out to search for her. With the help of Venus, he is told what to do: he will have to < [...] penetrate inside the tower [...] and [he could] through the opening find the fruit where lies a remedy> (Cox, 1990:123). Even if the knight does not understand Venus' words, he travels in search of this castle, and once he gets there, with the help of Venus, he is able to enter the high tower where the princess is kept. He finds her, <sleeping so peacefully as if she was sleeping naturally [...] white and tender> (Cox, 1990:130). More in love with her than ever, he is instructed to kiss her, but he restrains himself: Reason and Discretion interfere, telling the knight that he <must not touch her without previous permission and [...] while she is sleeping> (Cox, 1990:130). Nonetheless, overcome by desire, he kisses her <more than twenty times>, but still he is not able to wake her up, so Venus instructs him to <lie by her side>, but again Troylus is afraid to offend his lady. Angry at the knight, the goddess <set Troylus ablaze and it was as if the heat made him lose his mind> (Cox, 1990:131). He <undressed, and got under the covers with the maiden who was there, completely unclothed, white and tender. Immediately, Troylus was in a high state [of happiness]; he said to himself that a man has never been as happy as he was> (Cox, 1990:131). After having <found the fruit that will cure the beautiful maiden> (Cox, 1990:131), Troylus exchanges his ring with Zellandine's and is then sent away. Later, the King's sister, after becoming suspicious about a light in the princess' chamber, visits her and finds out that somebody else has visited her. She concludes that it must have been the god Mars who

climbed the tower to save her niece. While making the bed, she notices that the god <had far too much contact with her niece> (Cox, 1990:133), but in her honor, decides not to tell anyone. After 9 months, Zellandine gives birth to a baby, who sucks the splinter out of his mother's finger. The princess wakes up, and is told by her aunt all about the curse and how the gods saved her. At the end she is about to be forced to marry another man, but Troylus finds her first and takes her to Great Britain so they can be happily together.

It is interesting to note that, in contrast with the other Sleeping Beauty stories, this is the only tale where the princess already knows her savior, an element that was reintroduced only by Disney in the animated version of 1959. Moreover, none of them can be found guilty of what happens: Zellandine knows nothing about the curse and touches the distaff while working with other maidens; on the other hand, Troylus does not want to offend the honor of his princess, but he is excused for his behavior, since it was the goddess who told him that that was the only remedy. Even though as Shuli Barzilai argues <Women's consent is a repeated theme in *Perceforest*> (Barzilai, 2015:63) - with remarks, such as in Book I <the female should have the rule of her own body, and the male should not use force against her will> (Bryant, 2012:80), the author employs different means to leave the rape in the background: goddess and magic come in play, while recurrent flashbacks interrupt the story to inform us and the characters about past events. For example, Zellandine is told by her aunt only after her awakening about the curse, the rape, and childbirth, which all happened *in absentia* (we could argue that Zellandine, through her sleep, was hidden from these traumatic events, and that she is also free from guilt, since she was not technically present), and Troylus' action of sexual intercourse is presented, not as a rape, but the saving of the princess: when the two are finally reunited, Zellandine cries since <her friend, by his indiscretion, had taken her virginity> (Cox, 1990); nonetheless, Troylus is able to convince her that he only did what the goddess told him to, so that she is in the end reassured and grateful to him.

If the recorder of *Perceforest* employed different means to excuse his character for his behavior, Basile presents far less guiltless characters in his tale "Sun, Moon, and Talia". Even if *Perceforest* was printed and translated in Italian in 1531, it is not clear

whether Basile knew the text, or if he worked on oral material from Italian folklore when he wrote his collection of tales, *Pentamerone*. Interestingly enough, the title that Basile chose for his fairy tale, “Sun, Moon, and Talia” recalls an even more ancient myth, that of Zeus and Leto: unfaithful to his wife, Zeus got Leto pregnant with two twins, Apollo, the god of the sun, and Artemis; Hera, Zeus’ jealous wife, tries to prevent Leto’s childbirth, forcing her to deliver neither on land nor on the sea; in the end, Leto reaches the island of Delos, considered neither as mainland nor as sea, and is able to give birth to the twins. This story might have inspired Basile to add to his story of a sleeping princess this element of the wife’s jealousy, which we find comparing “Sun, Moon, and Talia” with the previous tale, an element that lingers on in Perrault’s version. Apart from Leto’s myth, there is also another element that Basile may have borrowed from the Greek classics: to be punished by being served one’s own children at a feast. When describing the king’s heartless wife, Basile mentions Medea, who, according to Euripides and Ovid, killed her own children to ensure that Jason, her treacherous husband, would have no offspring. Another classical tale that may have inspired Basile is “Tereus, Procne, and Philomela” from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: King Tereus rapes Philomela, his wife sister, and cuts out her tongue so that she cannot tell anyone about his evil deed. Philomela, however, is able to send her sister Procne, the King’s wife, a piece of cloth where she wrote what happened, and so the queen decides to avenge her sister: together, they kill Procne and Tereus’ son, Ithys, and cook him for the king; when Tereus asks to bring him his son, Procne answers: <intus habes, quem poscis> [you have him here, inside]. Desperate after finding out he has eaten his own child, he seeks revenge and tries to kill the two women. In the end, while fleeing, they get transformed into birds and fly away. Another example of this type of punishment is present in the tale of Atreus: King Atreus, after finding out that his wife committed adultery with his own brother, Thyestes, cooks his brother’s children, except for their hands and feet, and tricks Thyestes into eating their flesh. After Atreus proves what his brother has done by showing everyone the remaining severed limbs, Thyestes is exiled from the country for having eaten his own children’s flesh.

The tale of “Sun, Moon, and Talia” begins with a king who becomes the father of a beautiful daughter – and a mother is never mentioned. Upon her birth, it is predicted

by the wise men of the kingdom that her life will be threatened by a splinter of flax, so her father sees that no flax enters the castle. One day, <ormai grandicella> [already grown up]¹¹, she is sitting at a window and sees an old woman spinning, and she is so fascinated by that instrument that she lets the old woman inside. She takes the spindle in her hand, pricks her finger and <cadette morta 'n terra> [fell dead on the ground]. Unable to revive the daughter, the sad king leaves the beautiful princess sitting on the throne, and leaves the castle to forget about his sorrow, never to return. After a while, another king finds the castle while hunting. When he explores the empty rooms, he finds beautiful Talia: he tries calling and shaking the beautiful princess, but again she doesn't wake up. Set afire by her beauty <portatola de pesole a no lietto ne couze li frutte d'ammore> [he took her to a bed and gathers the fruits of love]. Afterwards, he leaves and forgets all about Talia. After 9 months, Talia gives birth to twins, who are cared for by fairies, who help sleeping Talia to breastfeed the babies. One day, while looking for a nipple, they suck the splinter out of the finger, and she wakes up <pe la quale cosa parze che se scetasse da no gran suonno> [as if she woke up from a long dream]. After dreaming about her, the hunter king remembers the princess and goes back to the castle where he finds Talia awake with his children. Overjoyed, he tells her all about what happened, but then he must return to his kingdom, but he promises he'll come back for them. Back in his kingdom, his wicked wife, <chillo core de Medea> [with the heart of Medea], starts getting suspicious, and finds out that her husband has a mistress and where she is hiding. She sends guards to tell the princess the king wants to see her and the children, and orders the children to be cooked and served to her husband, and Talia to be thrown into the fire. At the dinner table, after the king has remarked how tasteful the meal is, the queen reveals to him what she has done with the words «Magna, ca de lo tuo mange!» [Eat up, you are eating of your own]. Horrified, the king seizes her, sends guards to save Talia, and the wicked queen is thrown into the flames she had prepared for Talia. After her, the king orders the cook who had served him his children to be executed, but the cook tells him that he had hidden the children, and cooked two lambs instead, and so the king is reunited with Talia, Sun, and Moon. The tale ends with the verses:

¹¹ If not otherwise stated, all quotations of Basile are translated by me.

<canoscenno a tutte botteca chi ventura tene,
quanno dorme perzì chiove lo bene>

[Lucky people, so 'tis said/are blessed by Fortune whilst in bed]².

If the characters of *Perceforest* could be considered innocent for their doings, the same cannot be said of Talia and her king: firstly, she deliberately goes out of the castle, instead of remaining safely indoors, and, as Eve in the Garden of Eden, or as Bluebeard's wives, <le venne tanta curiositate che la fece saglire 'ncoppa> [she became so curious that she had the old woman come up to her room] she takes the distaff in her hands, and is therefore punished with a deathlike sleep; as Barzilai puts it, <She invites the outside inside, and all her father's precautions are overturned by her incaution> (Barzilai, 2015:69); secondly, when the king finds her asleep, it's her beauty that sets him afire, so a death by fire should be her right punishment. As for the king, he is not only already married, but, after making love with her, he forgets all about her for more than nine months. Bruno Bettelheim underlines how in this story a king substitutes another king in Talia's life, the former being the father, who out of love for his daughter leaves the castle and does not return even after her awakening, and the latter lover, who cannot resist Talia's beauty even if she sleeps - which in later versions becomes a prince to distance the savior character from the father figure. Bettelheim argues that these two king character may be a replacement for each other in different periods of a girl's life, and we have the element of <"innocence" of the oedipal child, who feels no responsibility for what she arouses or wishes to arouse in the parent> (Bettelheim, 1976:228).

But no matter how the characters are presented and structured, sex is in both tales the cure for the maiden's lethargy, and childbirth becomes the ripe time for the maiden to become a woman and therefore wake up and live peacefully with the other sex. Interestingly enough, what did not stick was the true love of Troylus and Zellandine: instead of a knight who had to violate his own moral values to save his love, Basile presents a forgetful king with no self-restraint who ravishes a sleeping girl, besides cheating on his wife. Probably inspired more by Zeus than Troylus in shaping his hero,

² Translation into English from: Basile, *The Pentamerone*. London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1932.

Basile was also not writing children's literature - which was actually born much later, in the mid-eighteenth century - but to an adult audience. His stories were therefore usually vulgar, and the rape of a girl, not only beautiful and asleep, but also a stranger, was much more titillating.

We shall see in the next chapters how the tale evolved to become a children's tale, and how the rape element, after being obscured for three centuries, reappeared in the present day.



Figure 1 - Warwick Goble's illustration, *The Fairy Book* - 1913

2.2 Popularization of the tale: Perrault's "*La Belle Au Bois Dormant*" and Grimm's "*Dornröschen*"

After digging into the literary origin of the tale, it is time to focus on what has become the canonical version of Sleeping Beauty, the Brothers Grimm's *Dornröschen*, without considering the great influence that Disney had in more recent times; but first it

is important to also mention Perrault's *Belle Au Bois Dormant*, written in 1697, since it was his version that the Brothers Grimm heard and recorded (a century later) in Germany. Even though the two tales are very similar, they present some different elements, and also a different ending.

In his chapter dedicated to Sleeping Beauty, Bettelheim states that Perrault used already existent folk tales and adapted them for the court, as he did for most of the other fairy tales he wrote. Having in mind the courtiers as his readers, Perrault modified Basile's tale, obscuring those elements he found not suitable for court, like the ravishment and impregnation of a sleeping princess, and changed the male character from an unfaithful and forgetful king into an age-appropriate prince. He also reintroduced the theme of the offended fairy to explain why the newborn princess is cursed, which was omitted in Basile's version.

Perrault's tale begins with a King and Queen, who cannot have children <everything was tried, but nothing came of it> (Perrault, 1980:85)³. At last, however, the Queen was with child>, and a fine christening is organized, to which the seven fairies of the kingdom are invited, but at the party an eighth fairy shows up, who was not invited, since the King and Queen thought she was <either dead or enchanted> (Perrault, 1980:85). The fairies donate beautiful gifts to the newborn, but one hides, fearing the old fairy who was not invited might be planning to donate some evil gift, which is what eventually happens: offended since she did not receive a golden dish and cutlery as the others, the ancient fairy curses the child, who <should have her hand pierced with a spindle and die of the wound> (Perrault, 1980:85). The seventh fairy comes out of her hiding place and changes the curse into a hundred-year sleep, at the end of which a prince shall come and awake the princess. The king, to prevent the curse from happening, bans all distaffs and spindles from the kingdom, but, after fifteen years, while the King and Queen are away, the princess finds an old woman spinning, and having never seen anything like it, she tries to spin and, <whether being very hasty at it, [...], or that the decree of the Fairy had so ordained it> (Perrault, 1980:86), she pierces her hand and falls asleep. The parents return, but no matter how hard they try, they cannot wake her up, so the king has her laid down onto a beautiful bed, and commands that

³ All quotations of Perrault are Opie's translation.

nobody should disturb her. The seventh fairy, after hearing what has happened, enchants the entire castle (except for the king and the queen), so that everybody will sleep until Beauty awakes. As soon as the parents leave the castle, a wall of bushes and trees grows to protect the princess <from the Curious> (Perrault, 1980:87). After a hundred years have passed, a young prince hears the story of the beautiful princess, and decides to look for her. Arrived at the castle, the wall of trees opens to let him pass, and he is able to reach the sleeping princess. Already in love with her, he kneels down to observe the beauty of the princess and, at that moment, she wakes up, grateful to her prince. Together with her, the entire castle is awakened, and <without losing any time, Lord Almoner [the castle's priest] married them> (Perrault, 1980:89). Now that their union is sealed, they spend the night with her, but the prince has to leave Sleeping Beauty's castle to return to his kingdom, where he does not tell his parents about his marriage. We are then told that his father is <a good man> (Perrault, 1980:89), but his mother <was of the race of the Ogres> (Perrault, 1980:90), who loves eating the flesh of children. Two years pass and Sleeping Beauty and the prince have two children, Morning and Day, but the prince does not bring them home until his father dies and he becomes king. One day, he has to go to war and leaves his mother in charge of the kingdom <and earnestly recommended to her care his wife and children> (Perrault, 1980:90). She orders to bring them to a cabin in the woods, and orders her butler to cook first Morning, and then Day, but he spares the two innocent children and cooks two lambs instead, and when he is asked to cook the young queen, he cooks a hind in her place. Even though the butler succeeds in fooling the queen mother a third time, the ogress hears the voices of the children and finds out where they are hiding. She has a tub full of toads, vipers, and snakes prepared, where to throw in Beauty, but the king returns in time, and the evil mother jumps into the tub and is <devoured in an instant by the ugly creatures> (Perrault, 1980:92).

Bettelheim argues that Perrault did not take seriously the genre of fairy tales and <made fun of the stories he told> (Bettelheim, 1976:230). We can easily deduce this by elements that are not usually present in this genre, such as real world or time references. For example, Perrault specifies that, to revive the princess after the curse has struck her, the servants try to <rub her temples with Hungary-water> (Perrault,

1980:86), or later on, when the queen mother asks the clerk to cook the children, she wants them served <with Sauce Robert> (Perrault, 1980:90). Again, when Beauty wakes up, the prince notices <that she was drest like [his] great grandmother, and had a point band peeping over a high collar; she looked not a bit the less beautiful and charming for all that> (Perrault, 1980:89), as if, to put it in Bettelheim's words, <fairy tales heroes would not live in a world where fashions do not change> (Bettelheim, 1976:230). Bettelheim goes on by saying that these details <destroy that mythical, allegorical, and psychological time [...] by making it a specific chronological time>, thus nullifying that feeling of timelessness that is important to make the tale effective on the child's mind. Furthermore, even though Perrault tried to distance his characters from Basile's, perhaps to censor the father's love for his daughter and her substituting a king for another king that might have been considered morbid, he was not able to leave out some oedipal connotations from his story: here we have a mother, who wishes to eat her grandchildren out of gluttony (or maybe jealousy?), while Prince Charming keeps his marriage secret to his father, maybe because <he fears the king's oedipal jealousy if the son also becomes a father> (Bettelheim, 1976:229) and brings Beauty to the castle only when he is dead, and basically leaves her in the clutches of his ogress mother, knowing very well her attitude towards children. But if the queen in Basile's tale was convincing in her jealousy, Perrault ogress is not, and his story <falls into two incongruous parts> (Bettelheim, 1976:229).

With two such divergent parts, it is understandable why in oral telling the story may have ended with the happy marriage of the two, and thus why the Brothers Grimm's tale is far shorter, even though much denser with symbols and a bit more fairy-tale-like. *Dornröschen* ends with the awakening of the princess, while the second part of the tale was included by the brothers with the title *The Evil Stepmother* at the end of the first edition of the collection *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, together with other fragments that the Grimms recorded but chose not to develop. Maria Tatar argues that they probably found the subject of a jealous mother who wants to eat her grandchildren not suitable for a children's book, but mostly <the fact that the tale existed in a fuller version in French and Italian stories did not add to the appeal> (Tatar, 2010:275), since <the Grimms were recovering a German mythology and a German attitude to life. They saw themselves as

asserting what was German against the French occupying forces of the Napoleonic Empire> (Tatar, 2010:XV). But even though the Brothers Grimm were more attentive than Perrault in respecting fairy tales conventions, their tale is nonetheless deficient: while in Basile's and Perrault's tale the evil principle is done away with by killing the evil queen, who could be seen as part of the split mother figure who uttered the curse in the beginning, in the Grimms' version, there is a happy ending, but no retribution.

But no matter how reluctant they were to admit it, the Brothers Grimm's version of the tale is mainly derived from Perrault, even though they added it to their collection of German tales, as Iona and Peter Opie argue, only because of the parallel with the story of Brynhild in the Icelandic *Volsunga Saga*, which dates back to XIII century, and which later inspired the German *Nibelungenlied*.

In this ancient story, the strong female warrior Brynhild is banished to Earth, and she is forced to marry like any other woman, and her uppermost fear is that she will marry a coward. To prevent this from happening, Odin places her alone in a castle surrounded by flames, and stabs Brynhild with a sleeping thorn, so that her beauty will be preserved until a suitable mate will come. When Sigurd finds her, he removes her armor, causing her awakening, and falls in love with her; Brynhild wakes up asking <What broke the chainmail? ... Who has freed me from my imprisoning armor?> (Crawford, 252), and seeing that man, brave and strong enough to save her, Brynhild falls for him, too. Even though we could say that the two female characters are direct opposites, since one is a beautiful and passive princess and the other a fierce warrior, their sleep could be all the same explained by the same reason: they are both not ready to mate - or maybe they are, but they do not want to - and their sleep will protect them until a suitable partner will come.

This is also the idea behind the psychological analyses of the tale made by Bornstein and Bettelheim, that Sleeping Beauty is a tale about the traumas of adolescence and the eventual reaching of adulthood when one is ripe for it, and the message behind it is that <a traumatic event - such as the girl's bleeding at the beginning of puberty, and later, in first intercourse - does have the happiest consequences> (Bettelheim, 1976:235).

Our Sleeping Beauty is named *Dornröschen*, translated in English with Little Briar-Rose, which underlines the two most important features of the princess: she is beautiful, like a little blossoming rose, but she does have thorns, too. Her tale begins with a king and a queen, who everyday wish for a child, which never comes. One night, while bathing, the queen is visited by a toad, who predicts that within a year she will give birth to a girl. As in other fairy tales, such as “The Frog King”, the toad symbolizes sexual fulfillment, and Bettelheim suggests that the parents’ long wait <conveys that there is no need to hurry towards sex>, since <it loses none of its rewards if one has to wait a long time for it> (Bettelheim, 1976:231), as demonstrated by the birth of the beautiful princess; on the other hand, Bornstein argues that, seen from the child’s prospective, the parents <bekommen kein Kind [...] [sie] haben keinen Geschlechtsverkehr> [do not have a child [...] since they do not have sexual intercourse] and only <der unvermeidliche Penis des Vaters> [the inevitable penis of the father] and not the king, visits the queen, since <[der] Vater liebt [die] Mutter nicht> [the father does not love the mother] (Bornstein, 1933:507)⁴. In any case, after nine months a child is born, and, out of the thirteen fairies of the realm, only twelve are invited at the christening, since the King has only twelve golden plates for the feast; but, after eleven of the fairies have bestowed their gifts to the children, the angry uninvited fairy comes to utter the by now well-known curse <“The King’s daughter shall in her fifteenth year prick herself with a spindle, and fall down dead.”> (Grimm, 2012:117)⁵. To make up for the curse, the remaining fairy changes death into a one-hundred-year sleep, after which a prince will come to wake her. Bettelheim remarks that <the thirteen fairies [...] are reminiscent of the thirteen lunar months into which the year was once divided>, and since menstruation occurs every twenty-eight day, <the number of twelve good fairies plus a thirteenth evil one indicates symbolically that the fatal “curse” refers to menstruation> (Bettelheim, 1976:232). On the other hand, while he agrees that the curse represents menstruation, Bornstein claims that the good fairies and the evil one also represent the split figure of the mother that we so often find in fairy tales: the good fairies gift the child with the most <splendid thing[s] that one could possibly wish for>

⁴ All quotations of Bornstein are translated by me.

⁵ All quotations of Grimms are Hunt’s translation.

(Grimm, 2012:117), as a mother does by giving life to her kids, while the evil fairy represents the jealous mother, since the father <konzentriert seine Liebe nur auf sein Kind [...] gibt sie nichts zu essen, hat fuer [die Mutter] den Teller nicht und kein Geld fuer sie> [concentrates his love only on the child [...] he gives the mother nothing to eat, he has no plate and no money for her] (Bornstein, 1933:507). Still hoping to save his daughter, the king bans all distaffs from the kingdom, but on the princess' fifteenth birthday the king and queen are not home, and she is left alone in the palace. The king, the male, does not understand the curse, i.e. menstruation, and so when he tries to prevent it, he is not able to do so, as shown by his absence on the cursed day, while, in all versions of the tale, the mother seems unconcerned, since <she knows better than to try to prevent it>, and also because <whatever precautions a parent takes, when the daughter is ripe for it, puberty will set in> (Bettelheim, 1976:232).

As Bettelheim points out, the next part of the story <abounds with Freudian symbolism> (Bettelheim, 1976:232), while Bornstein specifies that the tale speaks <in der Sprache des Träumes der Onaniewunsch des Mädchens> [the language of dreams of onanistic desire of the girl] (Bornstein, 1933:508): she uses this time alone to explore all the chambers in the castle, a symbol for exploring her changing adolescent body, up until she reaches a circular staircase, which <in dreams [...] typically stand for sexual experiences> (Bettelheim, 1976:233). She reaches a door locked with a rusty key, which opens on a small room: while the small room symbolizes the female genitalia, the turning key in a lock often symbolizes intercourse. There, she finds an old woman spinning and she asks her <What sort of thing is that, that rattles round so merrily?> (Grimm, 2012:118), and when she tries to take it in her hands, pricks her finger and falls asleep. It is not difficult to see the distaff as a phallic symbol: the girl desires to penetrate her own vagina, and therefore to have a penis, and is then punished. And even though the bleeding could be seen as a symbol for both menstruation and defloration, it is no wonder that there is an old woman, and not a man, in the room. While Bettelheim argues that, as written in the Bible, <the curse [of menstruation] is inherited by woman from woman> (Bettelheim, 1976:233), Bornstein reminds us that <unsere Volksmärchen [...] ein uraltes Kulturgut darstellen. [...] was das Märchen wie eine sonderbare Phantasie aufzeichnet, war einmal [...] ein Stück Realität> [our folktales represent an

ancient cultural asset. What is represented in fairy tales as an odd fantasy was once part of reality] (Bornstein, 1933:509). Citing the work of the anthropologist Alfred Winterstein⁶, Bornstein lists different tribal rituals, where an old woman would cause the defloration in the pubescent girl, <meistens mit dem Finger, einem Stein [...] oder einem Messer> [usually with a finger, a rock, or a knife] (Bornstein, 1933:510), as Freud argues in his work *The Taboo of Virginity* (1917), to avoid a hostile reaction of the girl at her first sexual encounter.

As soon as Briar-Rose has fallen asleep, the parents return, and the entire castle goes to sleep with her, <even the fire that was flaming on the hearth became quiet and slept> (Grimm, 2012:118) Briar-Rose's sleep is almost a pleasant exile: Bornstein explains this by saying that it is common in various cultures that the menstruating girl should not move, scratch herself, or touch her body, to prevent her from masturbating; in the tale, not only is she peacefully asleep with nobody telling her what to do, but also the fire, i.e. her desire, is quiescent like her. But her sleep is also narcissistic: in her self-absorption, there is no knowledge or experience to be gained, and during her death-like sleep, everything around her is still as if it was dead. As hair grows on the body of the pubescent girl, so does the wall of thorns outside the castle, which has two functions: keep the girl safe <from all suitors, i.e. premature sexual encounters> (Bettelheim, 1976:233), but it also enacts her revenge towards the male sex. Angry at her father, who was supposed to protect her in her time of need, but preferred the company of the mother, she takes her revenge on the male suitors, she <bildet die Phantasie der *vagina dentata*, die den Penis des Mannes vernichtet> [sets up the fantasy of the vagina dentate, which destroys the male penis] (Bornstein, 1933:512) and lures them with her beauty. Thorns are an important symbol in puberty rites: among a Brazilian tribe, for example, girls reaching puberty are beautifully dressed and tattooed with thorns, to scare and keep away possible male partners. In the end, however, Briar-Rose is able to overcome her fear for the opposite sex: when a brave prince arrives at the castle notwithstanding the warning of an old man, the thorns have become beautiful flowers that open for him, and <Dornröschen vaginale Potenz ist erreicht> [Briar Rose's vaginal potential is reached] (Bornstein, 1933:514). He finds her, and after having kissed her,

⁶ Imago XIV, Heft 2/3, Alfred Winterstein: Pubertätsriten der Mädchen.

she <opened her eyes and awoke, and looked at him quite sweetly> (Grimm, 2012:118): now that <die genitale Angst überwunden ist, darf auch die prägenitale Lust triumphieren> [the genital fear is overcome, the pregenital desires may triumph] (Bornstein, 1933:514). Everybody wakes up with the princess, the fire flickers again, everything is ready to celebrate their marriage.

But why does Briar Rose wake up after one hundred years? If we look at the parallel story of Brynhild, she is awakened only when a man brave enough for her comes, as the prince does, setting out to search for the princess, even though others have died trying. If we understand this time span as a child would do, <die hundert ein Synonym für "sehr viel" ist> [a hundred is a synonym for a "very long" time] (Bornstein, 1933: 514), so that it conveys the message that <one may have to wait a long time to find sexual fulfillment> (Bettelheim, 1976:231). Whereas if we look back at the ancient puberty rites described by Frazer, the duration of isolation of the pubescent girls could vary from just a few days up to seven years: for instance, in Cambodia, girls at puberty are put to bed under a mosquito curtain, where they should stay a hundred days.

Bettelheim suggests that the story appeals differently to children depending on their age: the younger child will read it as a metaphor for self-awakening, <the achievement of concordance between what had been his inner chaotic tendencies> (Bettelheim, 1976:234), while after reaching puberty it is usually perceived as finding the harmony with the other. But looking at the past of this story, it can tell us much more: female self-fulfillment does not come with menstruation, or when falling in love, and not even intercourse and childbirth are enough to wake the sleeping princess. It comes with the nurturing of a new life, the same life children receive when coming into the world, they give back to their mother by sucking out the splinter in her finger, putting an end to her self-absorbed sleep. And even if these elements were removed in Perrault's and the Grimms' versions, even in their tale the world comes back to life together with the princess, and humanity can continue to exist. Even in shortened versions that end with the kiss of the prince, we feel - even though it is not spelled out as in the more ancient versions - that Sleeping Beauty is <the incarnation of perfect femininity> (Bettelheim, 1976:236).

2.3 A modern rewriting of the tale: Almodovar's "Hable con Ella"

The correspondence between the tale of Sleeping Beauty and Almodovar's film *Talk to Her* (2001) has already been pointed out by various critics, and Almodovar himself made it more obvious in his comment aimed to praise Leonor Watling's immobility: <She's wonderful playing the sleeping beauty in the "El Bosque" [The Forest] Clinic. Her motionless body is so expressive and so moving!>⁷. The name of the clinic in which the movie takes place also brings to mind the castle in which Beauty sleeps, surrounded by <trees, great and small, bushes and brambles twining one within another> (Perrault, 1980:87). But even more remarkable is how the plot parallels the most ancient version of the tale: it is not good timing, as in Perrault's, or a kiss, as the Grimms', that wakes the dormant princess, but rape and the following childbirth, thereby once again reestablishing as a remedy the most ancient version of the tale.

The film begins with an amaranth curtain that rises to reveal Pina Bausch's piece *Café Müller*: two women, dressed with loose white dresses, wander with eyes closed on a stage full of wooden chairs to the music of Henry Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*; while they run from one side of the stage to the other, a man precedes them to clear the way from the obstacles. Then, the camera turns to the audience, where two men, at this point still strangers, are sitting next to each other by chance: one is sadly moved by the performance, the other looks at the stranger's tears with curiosity. They are the two male protagonists Benigno (Javier Camara), and Marco (Dario Grandinetti). We then meet Benigno, who is a nurse, and, as we learn from later flashbacks, spent the last 20 years at his mother's bedside, taking care of her as she was <neither sick nor crazy, just a bit lazy>. After her death, he spies from his apartment's window the dance academy on the opposite side of the road, but especially on one of the students, Alicia (Leonor Watling). Obsessed by her, he tries to make contact with her, but they



⁷ Almodovar, Pedro, interview with Emanuel Levy, available at <http://emanuellevy.com/comment/talk-to-her-interview-with-almodovar-part-2>.

exchange just few words. Afterwards, Alicia has a car accident, and is taken to the El Bosque Clinic, where Benigno works. Assigned exclusively to Alicia, Benigno exceeds his duties as a nurse, doing anything to preserve her beauty and doing things she liked to do, like going to see a ballet or to the movies.



Meanwhile, Marco, a journalist, the man who cried in the theater sees the bullfighter Lydia (Rosario Flores) for the first time, watching her on

tv in an interview, where she is forced to answer the questions of a nosy journalist about her (presumably) ended relationship with the torero El Nino De Valencia. He is so intrigued by her that he tries to get an interview with her: after a refusal at first, Lydia is so grateful to Marco for having killed a snake which scared her in her apartment that she agrees to the interview. Even on that occasion, after throwing away the dead snake, Marco cries. Several months afterwards, we see Marco and Lydia in a car, and, behind dark glasses, she tells him they need to talk after the corrida. But they never will: Lydia is gored by the bull, and she too is then taken to El Bosque. While walking through the corridor, Marco peeks into Alicia's room, and sees her for the first time, lying naked while Benigno is washing her. He looks away when her eyes open, but that is just an automatic reflex. He finds the doctor, who informs him about Lydia's conditions: she is in a persistent vegetative state, therefore it could be that Lydia never wakes up, but, contradicting what he had just said, the doctor tells Marco about an American woman, who was a PVS and went into a coma during childbirth, who then woke up after 15 years. Shaken by the news, he walks back to Lydia's room, but stops again at Alicia's door, and this time he's noticed by Benigno, who invites him to join them inside. With time, Benigno and Marco become good friends and spend time together in the clinic: Marco tells his new friend that he can't do anything to help Lydia, not even touching her body, or help the nurses move her. Benigno simply tells Marco <hable con ella!>, so "talk *with* Lydia" (and not just *to* her as the English translation suggests), since <the

woman's mind is a mystery, especially in this state>, and they need to be talked to, to be reminded they exist. One night, we see Benigno, massaging the beautiful Alicia and recounting a silent movie, *The Shrinking Lover*. Then through flashbacks we get to know Marco's



story: he was married to a young girl with drug problems, and they had to travel constantly to escape the drug temptations in Madrid, but her family thought Marco was part of the problem, and the couple was forced to split up. He admits to Lydia that he cried because he couldn't share with his ex-wife what he liked (a ballet, a song), but Lydia's love helps him forget all about her. One day, Marco enters Lydia's room, and finds El Nino de Valencia, who admits that Lydia and he had been back together since a month before the accident, and that is what Lydia wanted to tell Marco on the day of the corrida. He decides to leave and travel to forget Lydia, and so says goodbye to Benigno, who, on that occasion, reveals he would like to marry Alicia, since they get along better than most couples he knows. Worried for his friend, Marco tells him not to repeat something like that ever again. But soon after he leaves, the nurses at the clinic notice that Alicia does not have her period anymore, and find out she is pregnant. An eavesdropper nurse tells the clinic's board about the conversation he overheard between Marco and Benigno, and, after being found guilty of rape against Alicia, Benigno ends up in prison. In the meantime, Lydia dies, and when Marco hears of her death, he goes back to Spain, and goes to see Benigno, who begs him to find out what has happened to Alicia, and leaves him his apartment to pay up for a new lawyer. The lawyer finds out that Alicia is awake, but the baby was stillborn, and he advises Marco not to tell Benigno, since he may try something stupid, so they tell him Alicia is still in coma. Convinced that he too could go into a coma and therefore reunite with Alicia, Benigno takes several pills which kill himself rather than induce a coma. At the graveyard, Marco is able to finally able to tell him the truth: Alicia is alive and he could see her from the same window by which Benigno fell in love with her. The movie ends in

the same theater it began, but this time it is Alicia that Marco meets by chance. She asks him if everything is all right, and he answers that now it is better. During the show, we see Marco gazing at Alicia over an empty chair and a title that reads with their names let us imagine that it was just the beginning of their love story.



In writing the screenplay for *Talk to Her*, Almodovar was influenced by various events, among which three regarded comatose women: first, a woman in the United States woke up from coma after seven years of irreversible vegetative state, which contradicts everything that science states on the subject; second, in Rumania, a morgue keeper felt attracted by the corpse of a woman, and, feeling too lonely, decided to take advantage of the beautiful dead girl. As a reaction, the dead girl woke up: she was only apparently dead, and was suffering from some kind of catalepsy. In front of the law, the man was considered a rapist, while the family of the victim was grateful, and helped him find a lawyer or brought him food while he was in jail. Third, a comatose girl from New York was found to be pregnant (with no knowledge of whether she woke up or not) and it was later found that it was the hospital doorman who impregnated her: Almodovar also asks himself, how can a clinically dead body generate life? Throughout the movie it is possible to see all these elements reworked in the story, intertwined with the dilemma it shares with *Perceforest*: how to make rape appear as the remedy, without censoring it, as in Perrault or the Grimms, or blaming the victim, as in Basile?

Communication is the key in this movie, and the first devices that Almodovar employs are a reticent disclosure of what is going on, and, as in *Perceforest*, a deviant linearity of the plot, with recurrent flashbacks and foreshadowing. As Despina Kakoudaki

remarks <While ostensibly focusing on communication and disclosure in the very title of *Talk to Her*, Almodovar deploys an extensive vocabulary of secrecy and concealment in the film's narration> (Kakoudaki, 2008:28). The characters are not able to communicate sincerely with each other: Lydia does not tell Marco about her affair with the torero, and she is gored the same day by the bull; Marco lies to Benigno about Alicia, which leads him to commit suicide, since he can't live without her. At the same time, the director is failing to tell the viewers what is really going on, so that the viewers' perception of the characters turns out to be falsified. This happens especially during the three symbolic pieces of artwork Almodovar inserted in his movie, two borrowed from Pina Bausch's repertory, *Cafè Müller*, and *Masurca Fogo*, and the fictional silent movie *Amante Menguante (The Shrinking Lover)*, whose meaning becomes clear only in retrospective.

Another device that Almodovar employs is doubling the plot and developing the motif of male bonding present in *Perceforest*, but ignored in the other variants here examined: the movie revolves around two male characters, the nurse Benigno and the journalist Marco, who both love two comatose women, Alicia the ballet dancer and Lydia the bullfighter. The friendship between Marco and Benigno encourages us to sympathize with Benigno in the end, even when we know he is guilty, and we are also invited to conclude that Benigno was not after all a rapist, but rather a scapegoat or a sacrificial victim needed to bring Marco and Alicia together: when the two men are talking in prison, the glass partition between them suddenly causes their reflections to overlap, anticipating their merging into one character; it makes sense then, that after

Benigno's suicide Marco inherits his apartment, and his object of desire, Alicia, who he watches by the very same windows as Benigno used to do. Even though Benigno's death does away with the



evil principle of this movie, like in fairy tales where evil has to be punished, Almodovar makes Benigno's deed a necessary evil to achieve the happy ending.

These characters also overturn the usual gender-induced stereotypes: Benigno is a nurse, who studied hair dressing and maquillage first to take care of his bedridden mother and then Alicia, and Marco, a man who is not afraid to cry in public, which is how he gets noticed first by Benigno, and, at the end, by Alicia. On the other hand, to follow her father's dream, Lydia has become a torero and, while being very feminine when casually dressed, her lean body appears very masculine in her corrida costume. The only character who falls completely into gender-induced stereotypes is Alicia, the pale adolescent dancer, and the least developed character. As Almodovar himself admits <l know very little about Alicia. Only what is seen in the film [...] Alicia's real film begins at the end, in the theater, when she meets Marco who has been so moved by the sighs in *Masurca Fogo*>. Contrary to Alicia, who is often shown beautiful and naked, with the camera lingering repeatedly over her bare full breasts, Lydia, the dark phallic woman, is always shown completely covered like she has lost all her femininity: we are also told that her menstrual cycle has stopped, and Marco, who was not able to communicate with her neither before nor after the accident, can do anything to apply the remedy that wakes Alicia, and therefore Lydia dies.

Like in the tale of Sleeping Beauty, where the curse is announced at the very beginning, or in *Perceforest*, where Zellandine is informed about the curse and the rape only retrospectively, foreshadowing and flashbacks play an important role also in *Talk to Her*, especially concerning the story of Benigno and the raping of Alicia: it is through flashbacks that we get to know about the lonely life of Benigno, his dedication to his mother and the void left after her death, and how he was filled with his secret love of the inaccessible Alicia. During his recountal of the silent movie we sense some unease as Benigno begins to form the intention to consummate his love of Alicia, and even if it is not clear when the rape occurs, we can see this scene as a foreshadowing of the future rape. The movie Benigno is recounting is *The Shrinking Lover*: Amparo is a female scientist, who is working on a potion that will help her lover Alfredo to lose weight. But when Alfredo drinks it, he starts shrinking, getting everyday more and more little. Amparo must then find a cure, and seeing Amparo becoming desperate to find it, Alfredo goes back to his mother's house to not see Amparo suffering. But after 9 years, she finds the address of the mother's house, and takes Alfredo away, sneaking him out

inside her purse. In a hotel that night, she tries not to fall asleep because she is afraid that she will crush Alfredo, but he reassures her that nothing will hurt him. As soon as she is asleep, Alfredo takes the cover off of her, and starts to explore her body, until he reaches her cavernous vagina: once there, he tries to enter it with his entire body, and, to sleeping Amparo's delight, succeeds, and, as Benigno ends his narration, he <stays inside her forever>.

By analyzing this 7 minutes, it is clear that what the viewer is seeing is not just a movie-inside-a-movie: Benigno is confessing to Alicia - and to the audience - his most inner desires, and Almodovar cleverly constructed a crypted representation of them to act as a comical distraction to divert the



audience's attention and "protect" Benigno's character. Considering Benigno's recounting not of a movie, but of a dream - just the scene where Briar-Rose pricks her finger - it is easy to interpret Alfredo's story as a metaphor for Benigno's delusion. Just when he begins recounting, he describes Alfredo as <a bit chubby, like me, but good>, so not only do they share physical appearance, but Benigno is also presented as a good character from the beginning, starting with his name: *benigno*, the good one. And Amparo, which means *shelter*, stands for Benigno's delusional idea of Alicia, since she was his shelter after his mother's death (Almodovar said that, in a cut scene, before her death Benigno's mother <asked her son (Benigno was now a man of twenty five who had known neither female nor male) "What are you going to do when I die, Benigno?" "Kill myself, I guess," he replied quite naturally>). Therefore Amparo, for Benigno, represents Alicia, a woman who returns Alfredo/Benigno's love, and looks for him, takes pleasure at what he is doing to her, while in reality, after smiling at him politely only once, during Alicia's next encounter with Benigno (when she was not yet in a coma) she was scared of finding him in her house. Benigno's need for a mother-figure is also

remarked by the 9 years it takes Alfredo to shrink to the right size to slip into Amparo, which reminds us of the 9 months it takes a baby to grow and do the exact opposite. So it makes sense that Alfredo runs to his mother at first, but Amparo finds him, and the mother is not able to stop her (shall we assume because she is now dead and cannot have control of Alfredo/Benigno): therefore Alfredo's shrinking represents both Benigno's desire to go back to his mother's womb and to penetrate Alicia in a neverending union which is also equivalent with death. As Barzilai remarks <The faux film (fore)tells the truth about Benigno's deed, even as it prefigures his death in delusory union with Alicia> (Barzilai, 2015, 72). When asked about *The Shrinking Lover*, Almodovar admitted:

With this silent film, I wanted to hide what was going on in the clinic. I wanted to cover it up in the best cinematic way and in an entertaining manner. Benigno had become like a friend of mine, although I wrote the character. Sometimes, you don't want to see things that your friends do. I didn't want to show Benigno doing what he did in the clinic. I also did not want to show the audience that image. So I put the silent movie in there to hide what was happening.⁸

Also the two pieces borrowed from Pina Bausch at the beginning and end of the movie foreshadow what is going to happen next: in the initial *Café Müller*, the two woman with eyes closed stand for our two Sleeping Beauties, and in the male figure we see the coalescence of the two male characters, trying to help the two women, which already foreshadows their merging into one character; at the end, *Masurca Fogo* begins with sighs, which stand for the sadness left from Benigno's and Lydia's death, which then transforms into a happy dance between couples, which foreshadows the new-found love of the two remaining characters. In thanking Bausch, Almodovar had this to say: <If I had asked for it specifically I couldn't have got anything better. Pina Bausch had unknowingly created the best doors through which to enter and leave *Talk to Her*>.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, these five versions here examined share a remarkable consistency in the elements they present. Presented by male authors, the woman's fulfillment is made possible - with the help of men - only with childbirth, and later on, with marriage. The

⁸ Pedro Almodovar, interview at the NFT (National Film Theatre), *The Guardian*, available at www.theguardian.com/film/2002/jul/31/features.pedroalmodovar.

beauty of a recumbent female character raises tender love and admiration for her beauty, while sexual fulfillment with the insensate virginal princess is granted to the adventurous male character. Using more and less diversionary techniques employed by the different authors, the actions of Prince Charming are excused even if ill-advised, since they eventually save the sleeping princess. What has radically shifted over time is the reason for her awakening: while the rape is disguised with a kiss, pregnancy and childbirth have receded from view. But the tale did stick anyway, and it does tell us much about human desires, even if from two different points of view: if it were men who imagined it, we could argue that their object of desire would be something rather uncanny; to use Freud's words <appearing to be dead is the most uncanny thing of all>, so do men desire to possess a motionless and powerless woman, who does not speak or cannot express her will? Or was this in the beginning a tale imagined by women for women, where one can sleep through the traumatic events of adolescence, and, most of all, be the object of other's desires, without any effort? Even looking at book illustrations of this tale, like Warwick Goble's illustration for Dinah Maria Murlock Craik's *The Fairy Book*, 1913, we can easily imagine the prince's amazement before the princess' beauty. Whoever the author was and regardless of his or her purpose behind the creation of this tale, it evolved in time to appeal both to men and women.

But, just as our princess, some elements may not remain dormant forever. As Barzilai argues <That Almodovar has made a commercially and critically successful film in the twenty-first century so close in content and design to a fourteenth-century narrative suggests that this knot or nexus of tales remains difficult, if not impossible, to eradicate.> (Barzilai, 2015:75). No matter how an author may try to change a fairy tale to fit his own rhetoric, when fairy tales stick they will naturally represent themselves, probably in a more modern attire, but still with the same beating heart that made them survive to the present day.

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