

6

When the Kiss Goes Wrong – A Subversion of Sleeping Beauty Myth from Brothers Grimm to Angela Carter

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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the hegemonic values of the classic fairy tales of Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty as can be seen in the German Grimm brothers' "Little Briar Rose" would reveal rather blatantly the idea of stereotypical femininity where the quintessential heroine is graceful, polite, supportive, often maligned by the other stronger females of the society, but has no agency of her own, incapable of changing her situations with her own will power, and waits in passivity for an outsider, usually a male in the image of a Prince Charming, who will eventually save the day ending in a 'heterosexual happiness'. Angela Carter through her short story collection called *The Bloody Chamber* tries not only to break such phallogocentric stereotypes worked under hegemonic discourse, rather created a complete new type of narrative like *écriture féminine* or feminine writing as popularised by the French feminists like Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. Unlike Grimms' "Little Briar Rose" that ends with a note of heterosexual marital happiness after the Prince saves the Sleeping Beauty with his life affirming kiss, Carter's "The Lady of the House of Love" deconstructs and defamiliarises the patriarchal notions of gender performativity by depicting an active, sexually rapacious female protagonist, and an apparently powerful but ignorant Officer whose fatal kiss fails to save the damsel in distress and seals her destiny to death.

Keywords: Sleeping Beauty Myth, Grimm Brothers' "The Briar Rose", Angela Carter's "Lady of the House of Love", Cinderella Syndrome, *Écriture Feminine*.

I am very cross because I am old
And my tales are told
And my flames jewel-cold[...].

(Sitwell 1.123-125)

Can a bird sing only the song it knows or can it learn a new song?
(Carter 155)

Once upon a time, when fairytales were still only an oral culture, the classic tales of Cinderella or the Sleeping Beauty used to escort the common folk to an enchanted fairy land of magic and wonder. The magic wand shifted its direction from oral to literary tradition with the invention of printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1440. With an increasing literacy growth a new tendency to collect, record, compile, print and manufacture the oral tales had already been initiated. Although the oral tradition of the tales does not evaporate altogether, the literary tales with their rising vogue add a new dimension to the literary-cultural (r)evolution and historical trajectory of folkloristic. Like a fairy-God-father Giovanni Francesco Straparola started the literary tradition of compiling the fairytales in Italy followed by *contours* (male fairytale writers) like Jean-Paul Bignon, Francois de la Mothe-Fénelon, Jean de Préchac and of course Charles Perrault and other *contenses* (female fairy tale writers) like Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, Catherine Bernard, Charlotte-Rose Caumont de La Force and many others in France. But it was in the hands of the two brothers named Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, who ushered in a new epoch in the folk and fairytale scholarship of Germany, Europe, and eventually the entire world. They not only saved the folk spirit of Germany through their collections but also set a landmark in an unswerving narrative tradition with their publication of *Kinder und Hausmärchen* ("Children's and Household Tales") in 1812 followed by several extended editions. The brothers did not only collect and compile the tales as they heard them mostly from female informants, they also stylised them and created 'an ideal type for the literary fairy tale' (Zipes, *The Complete* xxv) keeping in mind the 'dominant

patriarchal code' (xxviii) and thus establishing the predominating hegemonic values. Angela Carter's 1979 short story collection *The Bloody Chamber* is an attempt to deconstruct such age-old-fairytale-narratives under hegemonic discourse. The present paper will deal with the subversive narrative of the Sleeping Beauty myth in Carter's "The Lady of the House of Love" with reference to its classic variant, Grimms' "Little Briar Rose".

Someday my prince will come,
Someday we'll meet again,
And away to his castle we'll go,
To be happy forever I know [...], (Disney)¹

We hear Snow White singing the song of anticipation in the Disney version of the movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* where like any other fairy tale heroine the female protagonist dreams of a better world of heterosexual happiness resulting from the expected marriage of the heroine with her Prince Charming who will always rescue the damsel in distress. This one dimensional plot is known, in one word, as Cinderella Syndrome, named after the quintessential fairy tale heroine Cinderella as can be seen in the classical tales of Perrault or Grimm brothers. In her book, *Cinderella Complex: The Women's Hidden Fear of Independency*, Colette Dowling defines the condition she named as the "Cinderella Complex", yet to be recognised and classified in psychology as a state of mind that affirms a complicated system in which women in general, and female protagonists in particular, are always subordinate in comparison to their male counterparts. The idea of femininity is legitimised only in a male hegemonic discourse where the woman is beauty-incarnate, gracious, virtuous, polite, submissive and usually harmed by other stronger wise women or step mothers or step sisters or witches, and in order to change her distressful condition she needs an outside agency like a fairy God mother or the Prince Charming. The stronger women are often silenced and the real trouble-makers are also the women in most of such classic tales. The narrative of a passive female

protagonist had almost become a myth in the gender constructions and ideological framework of a patriarchal cultural discourse.

Grimms' fairy tale version of the Sleeping Beauty myth, titled as "Little Briar Rose", a part of their volume *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* ("Children's and Household Tales") follows this archetypal pattern of Cinderella Syndrome, reminding of a traditional historical past, in which a young girl, named as Briar Rose, was cursed by one of the wise women of the unnamed kingdom for not being invited at the time of christening the girl who, as a consequence of the curse, would prick her finger on a spindle on her fifteenth birthday, and 'fall down dead' (Grimms 237). However, just like a helpful agency, the last of the wise women, "[...] whose good wish still remained unspoken, came forward, and as she could not undo the evil sentence, but only soften it, she said: 'It shall not be death, but a deep sleep of a hundred years, into which the princess shall fall'" (237-38). On her fifteenth birthday the inquisitive princess pricked her finger on a spindle and fell asleep for a long hundred years only to be awakened by a Prince charming, who being enthralled by the graceful sleeping beauty, "[...] stooped down and gave her a kiss [...]. Briar Rose opened her eyes and awoke [...]. And then the marriage of the King's son with Briar-Rose was celebrated with all splendour, and they lived contented to the end of their days" (241).

Such mythic representation of gender discourses often naturalises the gender roles in human culture. In the article "Myth and the Production of History" Richard Slotkin observes how fairy tales are often equated with myths, which according to her, "[...] are stories drawn from history" (70). Certain myths and metaphors create a sense of connectivity with a cultural past and since primordial time a patriarchal power structure operates by projecting an ideological representation of men as superior and women the 'ideological opposite' (72). The mythic representation

of women trapped in the binary hierarchy of gender stereotypes is often validated as a natural construct. Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* is an attempt to criticise the naturalised depiction of gender-roles in patriarchy as can be seen in the traditional fairy tales which are nothing but 'sugar-coated lie[s]' (Roemer & Bacchilega 68). However, Carter was very vocal about her selection of short stories which are 'not retellings' but 'new stories', as quoted by Helen Simpson in the "Introduction" to the book –

My intention was not to do "versions" or, as the American edition of the book said, horribly, "adult" fairy tales, but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories and to use it as the beginnings of new stories (Carter x).

By staying outside the patriarchal logos, Carter, undoubtedly works more than as one who challenges and deconstructs the hegemonic discourse; moreover her short story collection establishes a testimony to the class of writing known as *écriture féminine* or feminine writing, popularised by the 'new' French feminists like Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. In a man-privileged society, women's position is necessitated as an 'Other', and language is one of the many determiners to muffle the voice of women in it. Cixous writes –

If woman has always functioned 'within' man's discourse [...] now it is time for her to displace this 'within', explode it, overturn it, grab it, make it hers, take it in, take it into her women's mouth, bite its tongue with her women's teeth, make up her own tongue to get inside of it (*The Newly* 95-96).

In her advocacy for the feminine language, Cixous was primarily inspired by the post-structuralist ideas and deconstructive thoughts of Jacques Derrida and the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan. Derrida offers a critique of Western metaphysics which is grounded on the 'binary oppositions' of good/evil, light/darkness, life/death, soul/body, speech/writing and so on. In her "Sorties", Cixous extends Derrida's argument by concentrating on gender of man/woman,

activity/passivity – “In philosophy [or literary history], woman is always on the side of passivity [...] She does not exist, [...]” (283). The man is always associated with ‘being’, the present, whereas the woman is ‘absent’ and associated with ‘death’. Cixous proposes an alternative to counter the hegemonic discourse, a new feminine writing that not only breaks away the patriarchal style of writing, but also asserts a *difference* that revalidates the feminine identity and experience. This feminine writing is undoubtedly a political act to question the phallogocentrism which always privileges the masculine through the image of the ‘transcendental signifier’ called phallus, the emblem of power in culture. Carter’s book likewise challenges the classic projections of stereotypical heroines like Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty whose mythic narratives are “[...] the parables of feminine socialisation” (Kolbensschlag 3).

Set in the early twentieth century Europe during the Great War, “The Lady of the House of Love” begins with an awry description of a deserted village in Romania. The Countess resides in a castle that ‘does not reflect a presence’; in the abandoned ‘village below the château’ the ‘beautiful somnambulist helplessly perpetuates her ancestral crimes’ (Carter 154). The very beginning of the story reminds us of the sleeping kingdom of “Little Briar Rose” where “[...] round about the castle there began to grow a hedge of thorns, which every year became higher, and at last grew close up round the castle and over it [...] and the youths were caught in them, could not get loose again, and died a miserable death” (Grimms 240). Carter’s Countess “[...] never sees the sun, that all day she stays in her coffin [...]” (159) wearing a ‘négligé of blood-stained lace’ (159); “[w]earing an antique bridal gown, the beautiful queen of the vampires sits all alone in her dark, high house under the eyes of the portraits of her demented and atrocious ancestors, each of whom, through her, projects a baleful posthumous existence [...]” (155). She plays ‘the game of patience’ with her Tarot cards relentlessly to know her own fortune until ‘she grows hungry,

until she becomes ravenous' (156). She is accompanied only by an old crone in black dress and white apron, who usually invites the men 'with smiles and gestures' because the 'Countess wants fresh meat' (159). Throughout the story, the Countess is described in light of her male ancestors –

[...] her claws and teeth have been sharpened on centuries of corpses, she is the last bud of the poison tree that sprang from the loins of Vlad the Impaler who picnicked on corpses in the forests of Transylvania [...] Now she possesses all the haunted forests and mysterious habitations of his [father, Nosferatu's] vast domain; [...] (157).

Her mother is only mentioned with the reference to her bridal dress, indicating women's restricted roles in marriage and domesticity.

The story not only parodies the patriarchal plot but also defamiliarises the ending by a conscious shift from the mythic narrative of Sleeping Beauty plot. One night the Countess sees the prophecy of the Tarot cards that she is about to truly fall in love with a man and that is going to bring her death. In course of time a young officer of British army comes in the dark castle. Being unaccustomed to the darkness he needs a light to see the beauty fully which causes the queen of vampire to wear sunglasses, the breaking of what subsequently cuts her finger just like the Briar Rose cuts her finger being pricked with the spindle. Seeing the gushing out of the blood from the Countess' finger, the Officer, the 'saviour' "[...] will kiss it better for her [the true love's kiss]" (177), thus sealing her fate to death.

Carter deconstructs the 'beauty myth' by describing the Countess with having claw like finger nails and fangs – "The eyes of this nocturnal creature enlarge and glow. All claws and teeth, she strikes, she gorges; but nothing can console her for the ghastliness of her condition, nothing" (158). The Countess is described as an animal, which 'pursues with fleet, four-footed speed [...] with blood smeared on her cheeks' (158.). She is not a human, but someone who dreams of 'to be human' (158). In

patriarchal discourse women are never considered to be a human, but only the weaker counterpart of man. Carter also parodies the phallogocentric symbols and languages by stereotypically describing her who inherits the powers of her father, Nosferatu – she is the ‘commandant of the army of shadows who [...] penetrate the woods’ and who ‘torment pubescent girls’ with ‘disorders of the blood, diseases of the imagination’ (157). She is like a ‘reverberations in a cave: [...] she is herself a cave full of echoes, she is a system of repetitions, she is a closed circuit’ (155). Thus Carter mocks the male ancestry that depicts women as passive, like an empty vessel. Satirically she depicts her protagonist performing her gender role attributed to her by the male androcentric discourse.

Another important aspect of the story we must not overlook is the idea of ‘desire’ as a determiner to counter hegemonic discourse. In patriarchal social structure desire is mostly controlled and policed by different socio-cultural practices related to age, gender, and sexuality. In classic fairy tales the female protagonists are always the object of male desire and gaze. In “Little Briar Rose” the prince falls in love with the unparalleled and enchanting Beauty in her sleep. He desires her and kisses her the moment he sees her culminating in a heterosexual marital happiness. But in Carter’s tale it is the lady who desires; she is the sexual aggressor, who feeds off men by luring them to her castle and plunders them sexually before destroying them ‘at the place of annihilation’ (174). Thus the male in the story is the victim and passive in comparison to their female counterpart.

Carter also uses the several sexual imageries like ‘rose’, a classic symbol of female genitalia, to criticise the hegemonised discourse. In “Little Briar Rose” the protagonist is called a rose that is wild, symbolising her untamed sexual appeal. In Carter’s story, we find the Countess’ castle is surrounded by rose bushes – “A great, intoxicated surge of the heavy scent of red roses blew

into his face [...] inducing a sensuous vertigo; [...]” (163). At the end of the story when the Officer leaves the castle he takes with him a ‘fanged rose’ as a ‘souvenir’, ‘plucked from between [the dead Countess’s] thighs like a flower laid on a grave’ (179). By using the symbol of rose from a man’s point of view, Carter basically offers a ‘gynocriticism’ (Showalter), a type of ‘women’s poetics’ to make a critique of androcentric logos that always tries to objectify and sexualise female body. ‘Blood’ is another such powerful symbol that is often equated with the act of sexual consummation. In Grimms’ tale we see Briar Rose falls asleep after she pricks her finger with a spindle and the blood is used to deflower her in distant future – the “[...] pricked fingers as well as the thorns [or spindle] represent feminine bleeding in connection with potential fertility” (Silva 245). In Carter’s tale, on the other hand, the broken sunglasses cause her blood to gush out of the wound that finally causes her death, unlike the hundred years’ sleep of Briar Rose. The imagery of blood runs like a leit-motif in the story. After the Countess dies the Officer observes her ‘lace negligé lightly soiled with blood, as it might be from a woman’s menses [...]’ (178). Lucie Armitt observes that the blood here also symbolises the “[...] menstrual flow, which continues to threaten to breach the limits of restrictively enclosing patriarchal representations [...]” (Bristow & Broughton 93). It is beyond patriarchy’s power to control the menstruation of a female body, thus posing a threat to phallogocentric discourse. It is also a threat because it denies sexual penetration at a certain point.

Interestingly, Carter has also depicted her male hero to be ignorant of the things going around the place. In her description of the Officer Carter wittily satirises patriarchy, man-made science and their proclamation of being the emissary of enlightenment, logic and reason. Despite being himself “[...] a young officer in the British army, blond, blue-eyed, heavy-muscled, visiting friends in Vienna, [...] [having] the special quality of virginity”, all the romantic characteristics a hero can

possess, the male protagonist is 'ambiguous' in nature; he is both the "[...] ignorance, [and] power in potential" (160-61). The Prince in "Little Briar Rose" was courageous enough to enter the sleeping castle and break the spell. In "The Lady of the House of Love" the officer 'is more than he knows' (161). Although hesitant initially in the gloomy and uncanny atmosphere of the castle, he is basically ignorant of his own power, limitations and vulnerability. His ignorant mind is busy with plans – "We shall take her to Zurich, to a clinic; She will be treated for nervous hysteria. Then to an eye specialist, for her photophobia, and to a dentist to put her teeth into better shape. Any competent manicurist will deal with her claws. We shall turn her into the lovely girl she is; I shall cure her of all these nightmares" (179). Carter here mocks the saviour of the girl as it is because of his life squeezing kiss that she finally meets her fatal destiny. In Western patriarchal culture light is connected with knowledge and enlightenment. But here in the story his lack of knowledge brings the unexpected turn of event; his kiss meant to better the vampire's wound inadvertently leads to her death.

Thus "The Lady of the House of Love" offers a performative and politically powerful text that not only deconstructs the phallogocentric logos but also ushers the tradition of writing new feminine texts, unlike their classic predecessors dominated by patriarchal hegemonic values. Carter's intention is clear and fulfilled as she consciously weaves a new fiction, that is, as Carter writes to Robert Coover, "[...] absolutely self-conscious of itself as a different form of human experience than reality can help to transform reality itself" (xii).

NOTE

1. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Dir. Walt Disney), USA, 1937. 58:01-59:03.

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