

## 5.03 Sleeping Beauty: Waking from the Dream

### Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I offer my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

[theme music fade in]

### Angourie [host]

Hello and welcome to The Community Library: a fortnightly podcast for anyone interested in stories, and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice, and this week, I'm reviving an old series on the podcast and talking about everyone's favourite finger-pricking princess: Sleeping Beauty.

[theme music fade out]

## Intro

### Angourie [host]

Once upon a time, a year ago, to be exact, at the height of Melbourne's strict lockdown, I started a fairy tale series on the podcast in which I analysed and compared four Disney Princesses with their fairy tale counterparts. The lucky ladies were Snow White, Cinderella, The Little Mermaid, and The Snow Queen, also known as Elsa from *Frozen*. A year later, and Melbourne finds itself in yet another strict lockdown, and I find myself itching to revisit the things that make me feel cosy and safe. Enter: Disney princesses, fairy tales, and critical thinking.

If you haven't been here before, hello, I'm Angourie. I'm an actor, podcaster, and Disney-lover, and The Community Library is a space in which we talk about books and movies and pop culture. I really love comparing classic literature with current pop culture, so if that interests you, feel free to look around! You are so welcome to be here.

When I did this series last year, my choice of princesses was not arbitrary. With Snow White, Cinderella, Ariel and Elsa, I hoped to track Disney's relationship with the princess brand throughout history, from its inception to where it is now, all the while highlighting a few of my personal favourite princesses. But there are some princesses missing from the timeline, and what better lockdown activity than to fill in the blanks? If you haven't listened to the previous episodes in the Disney Fairy Tale series, I'd recommend listening to *Snow White* and *Cinderella* before this episode, but if you can't be bothered, don't worry, it'll still make sense to you if you haven't listened to the others.

[ominous orchestral music sound bite fades in and out to indicate a little break]

## History

If you haven't listened before, we always begin with the history of the fairy tale and highlight a few of the versions that contributed to the Disney adaptation. Like with many fairy tales, our drowsy damsel has lived through many centuries and countries. The widely accepted first version of *Sleeping Beauty* was recorded in the French 14<sup>th</sup>-Century epic story *Perceforest*, a fictional history of Great Britain which builds on Arthurian legend. In it is the tale of Zelladine, who is cursed by an offended fairy to prick her finger while spinning flax, then fall into a deep sleep.

But *Sleeping Beauty's* first solo story was written by Italian poet Giambattista Basile, whom you might remember from our episode on Cinderella. His collection of stories and fairy tales, published after his death in 1634, included *Cenerentola*, the first recorded European version of Cinderella. Also in this collection was *Sole, luna e Talia* – also known as Sun, Moon and Talia.

At this point I'd like to offer a content warning for r\*pe, to skip over it, please skip over the **red text**.

Basile tells the story of Princess Talia, who is doomed to 'incur great danger from a splinter of flax.' Or so say the astrologers and wise men whom the King and Queen consult upon their daughter's birth. Though the King banishes all spindles from the kingdom, Talia happens upon an old woman spinning. She asks to have a go, and gets a splinter under her nail and dies. She is laid to rest in the castle and abandoned, until a travelling King discovers her. He finds her so beautiful, and tries to wake her. When she doesn't respond, he rapes her and leaves. A little while later, Talia, still supposedly dead, gives birth to twins Sun and Moon. It's only when one of the children sucks on her finger that the splinter is dislodged and Talia awakens to find her newborn children. The King, meanwhile can't stop thinking about Talia, and so he returns to see her awake with her twins.

And you would think that this would be the point at which they all live happily ever after, right? Talia's not dead, she's got two kids, and a King who loves her. Right? *Right?* But wait! There's more! The second half of the tale isn't as well-remembered or often-told as the first half – possibly because it makes the story too long, or it doesn't fit with the first half, or perhaps because it's just basically a retelling of *Snow White*. But a very similar second act also appears in one of the most famous versions of *Sleeping Beauty* – the version that popularised the tale and actually named her Sleeping Beauty. And to meet her we must travel sixty-three years into the future to late 17<sup>th</sup>-Century France, where Charles Perrault wrote *La belle au bois dormant*, which literally translates to *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*, but is more commonly known as *Sleeping Beauty*. It goes like this ...

[twinkly fairy tale music fade in]

*Once upon a time there lived a King and Queen who wished more than anything for a child. One lucky day, they were blessed with a daughter. There was a very fine christening, and the King and Queen decided to invite all the fairies in the kingdom to each give the princess a gift. As a thank you, the King had organised for a golden*

*knife, fork and spoon for each of the fairies. But as they were all sitting down at the table they saw come into the hall a very old fairy, whom they had not invited, because she hadn't been seen in fifty years, and was believed to be either dead or enchanted.*

*The King ordered for the old fairy to have a place at the table, however her place was not set with gold like the other fairies, because they had only made seven sets for the seven fairies. The old fairy felt slighted and muttered some threats under her breath, but sat down at the table anyway.*

*After the banquet, the fairies bestowed upon the princess their gifts: beauty, wit, grace, flawless dancing and singing, and the ability to play all kinds of music to the utmost perfection. The old fairy, however, gave a nasty gift which ordained the princess should have her hand pierced with a spindle and die of the wound. The guests recoiled in horror, but the seventh young fairy, who had not yet given her gift, assured the King and Queen that the princess shall not die.*

*'It is true,' said the young fairy, 'I have no power to undo entirely what my elder has done. The princess shall indeed pierce her hand with a spindle; but, instead of dying, she shall only fall into a profound sleep, which shall last a hundred years, at the expiration of which a King's son shall come and wake her.'*

*Still, to avoid the misfortune foretold by the old fairy, the King proclaimed that everybody was forbidden, on pain of death, to spin with a distaff and spindle, or to have so much as any spindle in their houses.*

*Sixteen years passed without injury to the young princess, but one day when the King and Queen were away travelling, the princess was exploring the palace when she happened upon a little room in a tower, where an old woman was spinning with her spindle. The old woman had never heard the King's proclamation. The princess, very curious, asked the old woman if she could try spinning, but as soon as she took it, the spindle ran into her hand and she fell down in a swoon. The old woman cried out for help, and attendants came running from all corners of the palace. They tried in vain to wake her, but the princess was as good as dead.*

*The King and Queen returned, and laid their daughter on a bed embroidered with gold and silver. The young fairy who had amended the curse also returned to the kingdom, and enchanted everyone in the palace to fall asleep alongside the princess, and only wake when she, too, had been awoken. To prevent trespassers, the fairy also placed a magical thicket of brambles all around the palace.*

*A hundred years passed, and rumours about the mysterious palace were passed down through the generations. A young prince from a neighbouring kingdom decided to discover for himself what was hiding behind the thick wood and palace walls, and so he set out on an adventure. Scarcely had he advanced toward the wood when all the trees, bushes and brambles gave way to let him pass through with ease.*

*As he entered the palace, he discovered everyone fast asleep. He explored and found rooms full of gentlemen and ladies, some snoring, some merely breathing lightly. At last he came to a chamber all gilded with gold, where he saw upon a bed the finest sight he had ever beheld: a beautiful princess. He approached with trembling admiration, and fell down before her upon his knees. The enchantment was broken, and the princess awoke. The prince was utterly charmed, and exclaimed that he loved her better than he did himself. They did weep more than talk – little eloquence, a great deal of love.*

*Meanwhile, the whole palace awoke, and everyone went about their regular business, preparing for the wedding of the prince and princess. They were married in the chapel, and they lived happily ever – oh wait. There's more?*

*The prince returned home to his kingdom, telling his parents that he had lost his way while hunting. The King believed his son, but the Queen could not be persuaded it was true, and after the prince began taking frequent and long hunting trips, she began to suspect he was secretly married.*

*The prince lied to his family and visited his wife in secret for two years, in which time the princess had two children; a daughter named Morning and a son named Day. The Queen tried to get her son to tell her the truth, but he never dared trust her with his secret. Though he loved her, he also feared her, for she was an ogre, and the King would never have married her had it not been for her vast riches.*

*After two more years, the King died, and so the prince became King, and decided to reveal his wife to all the world, now as his Queen. The King's ogre mother was not happy about this, and one day, while her son was away, she said to the palace chef: 'I would like to eat little Morning for my dinner tomorrow.'*

*The chef did not like to disobey the ogre, but when confronted with the beautiful face of four-year-old Morning, he couldn't bring himself to kill the child. He hid Morning with his wife and instead served lamb. Eight days later, the wicked ogre said to the chef: 'I will sup on little Day.' The chef said not a word, but tricked her as he had done before, hiding Day with his wife in their house at the bottom of the garden. But one evening the ogre said to the chef: 'I will eat the Queen.'*

*The chef did not know how he would deceive the ogre a third time, and so he resolved to kill the Queen, if only to save his own life. He approached the Queen in her chamber, and decided to not surprise her, but rather tell her, with respect, of the orders he had received.*

*'Do it, do it,' said she, stretching out her neck. 'Execute your orders, and then I shall see my children,' for she thought them dead ever since they had been taken away without her knowledge. The chef was brought to tears, and brought her in secret to his house, where he reunited the Queen with her children, and instead served the ogre a hind.*

*All, it seemed, was well. But one evening, as the ogre was walking around the palace garden, she heard a cry of a child, and then the voice of the young Queen. Furious that she had been tricked, the ogre commanded that the Queen, the children, the chef and his wife, should be thrown into a large tub of toads, vipers, snakes and all sorts of serpents.*

*And so the executioners organised the tub of animals, took the victims, and were about to throw them in when the King unexpectedly returned from his travels. His ogre mother was so enraged that she threw herself head first into the tub and was instantly devoured by the ugly creatures. The King couldn't help feel sorry, for she was his mother; but he soon comforted himself with his beautiful wife and his pretty children.*

*The End.*

[orchestral fairy tale music fade out]

Charles Perrault – whom you might remember for popularising *Cinderella* after Basile's earlier *Cenerentola* – added in 1660 – nope, not 1667, in 1697 [laughs] many features of the tale that we recognise today. Gift-giving fairies (good and bad), an enchanted hundred years, and a valiant and available prince to save the girl. But no one remembers the ending with the wicked ogre mother, right?

We have, in part, Disney to thank for that. The 1959 animated film adaptation is, as it states in the opening titles, 'from the Charles Perrault version of Sleeping Beauty', but it cuts the second half and instead ends when the Prince wakes the Princess, and they live happily ever after. But another influence on this shortening of the tale comes from our buddies Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, also known as the Brothers Grimm. Their 1812 collection of German fairy tales called *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, or *Children's and Household Tales*, included *Dornröschen*, or *Briar Rose*. *Briar Rose* ends with a happily ever after right when the princess wakes up – no ogre shenanigans thank you. But apart from that, the tale is so similar to Perrault's version, it's not even worth recounting for you here. The key difference in Grimm's ending, is a kiss to awaken the sleeping princess. This is a feature that Disney actually borrowed for their film adaptation of *Snow White*. The Brothers Grimm write in *Briar Rose*: 'The prince was so amazed at her beauty that he bent over and kissed her. At that moment she awoke.'

Yet another retelling of the fairy tale we must consider is Tchaikovsky's 1890 ballet, also titled *Sleeping Beauty*. Perrault's tale named the princess's daughter *Aurore* (translated to Morning) but Tchaikovsky's ballet named the princess herself 'Aurora' – a name which Disney took on. Tchaikovsky's music also lent itself to the Disney soundtrack. The story of the ballet differs from Basile's version, Perrault's version, and Grimm's version, but it appears that Disney took nothing from the ballet but the name and the music.

So here we have four popular versions of *Sleeping Beauty* to contend with: Basile, Perrault, Grimm, and Tchaikovsky. Each from a different country, as well: Italy, France, Germany and Russia. Each of these versions preceded Disney's film and must have influenced it, either

directly or indirectly. But today we're going to focus on the first half of Perrault's 19– not 19! Why do I keep saying 1967? On the first half of Perrault's 1697 version, because Disney claimed it as its main source. And if you've listened to the podcast before, you know that I love textual evidence.

[ominous orchestral music sound bite fades in and out to indicate a little break]

## Everyone is boring

In previous episodes about fairy tales I have of course begun by talking about our princess protagonist, and it seems only fair to continue the tradition and begin with Sleeping Beauty herself. But I mean ... what is there to say? She gets cursed, she falls asleep, and then she wakes up and gets married. *Sleeping Beauty* is historically not a favoured fairy tale, and is often considered one of the most 'un-feminist' ones, since she gives her name to the title, and yet spends most of the story out of the action; fast asleep and looking pretty. But, as I've mentioned in previous episodes in this series, fairy tales aren't about the individual. Most characters aren't given unique names, they're simply named by their title, such as King, Queen, Princess – or a visual descriptor, such as Snow White or Sleeping Beauty. And this is very deliberate: these characters are merely vehicles for the morals the story is trying to teach. The characters, time period and magic system is all purposefully non-descript so's not to distract from the bigger ideas of love, beauty, and prevailing goodness.

But that doesn't make Sleeping Beauty as a character any less uninteresting. And, when we compare her with her contemporaries such as Cinderella (who also got a Perrault and Grimm treatment), she's decidedly dull. In fact, all the characters in this story are dull. Even the villain – who usually provides some opportunity for analysis – seems to have no motivation other than the fact that she wasn't invited to the party. So to analyse the story, I believe we must look past the characters, and rather to the overall morals. Like with *Cinderella*, Perrault is kind enough to tell us the moral of the story in the form of a poem at the end. Thanks, Perrault. It reads:

*Many a girl has waited long  
For a husband brave and strong;  
But I'm sure I never met  
Any sort of woman yet  
Who could wait a hundred years,  
Free from fretting, free from fears. Jeez, that's hard to say!*

*Now, our story seems to show  
That a century or so,  
Late or early, matters not;  
True love comes by fairy-lot.  
Some old folk will even say  
It grows better by delay.*

*Yet this good advice, I fear,  
Helps us neither there nor here.*

Though philosophers may prate  
How much wiser 'tis to wait,  
Maids will be a sighing still –  
Young blood must when young blood will!

Okay, so to break it down, the first two stanzas say that it doesn't matter how long a young girl must wait for true love, she must wait nonetheless. Perrault says that some old folk might even say that love will be all the more sweet if you wait. But, he acknowledges in the last stanza that his advice to wait patiently for true love and keep your virtue may not be of any help, for 'young blood must when young blood will!' I tried to find a definition for this phrase, but it doesn't appear to be a widely-used idiom. My interpretation is that it means young horny people will be young and horny, there's nothing you can do, fairy tale moral or no fairy tale moral.

So ... our moral is that women should wait until marriage to have sex, even if that means waiting in a deep sleep for a hundred years. But, as we all know, I love textual evidence; and I don't think *Sleeping Beauty* gives us the textual evidence for this moral. And beyond that, I think Perrault misses a much more interesting theme of the tale; a theme that has persisted through every single version of *Sleeping Beauty* – and a theme I'd like to argue for here in this episode.

## Wheel of fortune (no not that one)

All good stories have a conflict. This is when the main character's desire is met with an obstacle, either internal, or external. And in the central conflict is usually where you find the main theme or idea of a story. Perrault's poetic moral of *Sleeping Beauty* would have us believe that the story is about a princess (main character) who wants to have sex (desire), but she is cursed to fall into a deep sleep (obstacle). But that's not what's in the text.

In *Sleeping Beauty*, the obstacle is external: the bad fairy and her curse. The bad fairy decrees that 'the princess should have her hand pierced with a spindle and die of the wound.' Though the good fairy amends the curse, the King and Queen's main objective is to prevent the injury from happening in the first place. The King forbids everybody 'on pain of death, to spin with a distaff and spindle.' That is the main conflict of the story: the King and Queen trying to resist the fate of a curse. And yet, despite their best efforts, it still comes to pass. Perrault writes:

'[The princess] had no sooner taken [the spindle] into her hand than, whether being very hasty at it, somewhat unhandy, or that the decree of the fairy had so ordained it, it ran into her hand, and she fell down in a swoon.'

I find this part of the sentence so interesting: 'the decree of the fairy had so ordained it.' It points to a bigger force at play. It suggests that the princess is not in control of her actions, but rather acting in a way that has been predetermined by fate.

The spindle is not an inconsequential prop in this story; it is integral to our reading of the fairy tale as a representation of fate in action. In Greek Mythology, there are the three

‘Fates’, also known as the Moirai. They are three weaving goddesses who determine the fate of mortals through weaving a thread that represents a mortal’s life. Clotho spins the thread, Lachesis measures the length of the thread, and Atropos cuts it. Clotho used a spindle and distaff to spin the thread of life, and these objects have been represented in poetry, art and sculpture as agents of fate. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that in *Sleeping Beauty*, the object that fulfills an unavoidable, terrible fate, is a symbol of fate itself.

This is where I think the real theme of the fairy tale comes in – the theme that Perrault completely disregarded with his stupid moral about chastity. Yes, I’m very bitter about it [laughs]. *Sleeping Beauty* is about the inability to change or avoid your fate. Whether it’s fairies (in the world of the fairy tale) or God (in the culture Perrault was living and writing in), the higher power that determines the fate of mortals cannot be overruled. This reading also speaks to the format of a fairy tale itself. The only mortal characters who perform concrete actions, seemingly separate of fate, are the King and Queen. But their single action is pointless, because the princess still finds a spindle. And this is a pattern in fairy tales: mortal characters rarely perform actions that drive the story. On the occasion that they do, they’re usually only successful if helped along by fairy folk. The mortal characters in fairy tales are merely pawns to convey a bigger message, but they are also pawns within their own world, at the mercy of fate and the fairies. Perhaps that’s why it’s called a fairy tale. It’s the fairy’s story.

So what’s the moral? That the actions of mortals are pointless because fate is unavoidable? That’s pretty dire considering that poor Sleeping Beauty’s fate is a wooden spike through the hand and one hundred years of unconsciousness. But if we dig a little deeper, I do think the fairy tale offers a more balanced outlook on fate. Though the bad fairy curses the princess to injure herself and die, the good fairy then offers a counter curse. And without the bad prophecy being fulfilled first, we wouldn’t get to see the good one. The prince and princess wouldn’t find each other and fall in love. The fairy tale shows us that with every bad curse, there is counter curse to make it right. It asks the readers to trust in a higher power – whether it’s fairies, the magic of the universe, God or Gods – to maintain balance and order. Even if our actions to combat ordained evil are futile, then so are the actions of those who seek to combat ordained good.

This, I think, is one of the most interesting themes I’ve extracted from any of the fairy tales we’ve covered so far. If I do say so myself! It’s the push and the pull of fate and mortals – with a beautiful, silent girl at the centre of it, sure – but she’s no less a placeholder than the Prince, or the King and Queen. And yet, somewhere along the way, *Sleeping Beauty* became a crooning day-dreamer with eighteen minutes of screen time and the title of ‘least feminist Disney Princess’ to her name. What happened?

[fade in and out: ‘50s jazz music with drums, trumpet and piano]

## **Disney: 1950 – 1959**

In November of 1950, nine months after the successful release of *Cinderella*, Walt Disney announced to the LA Times that he was developing *Sleeping Beauty* as an animated feature film. Writing treatments began as early as 1951, with a completed storyboard presentation



in June of 1952 and the promise of a 1955 release date, but Walt was dissatisfied. In fact, he was frequently dissatisfied with the progress of *Sleeping Beauty*. Animation historian Michael J. Barrier wrote: 'he could never get comfortable with the story, even as it went into production.' And on top of all this, Walt Disney was preoccupied with other projects, namely, creating the happiest place on earth.

The idea had been in his head for a while, but after many design phases and purchasing a large block of land in Burbank, California, construction on the Disneyland Park began in July of 1954 – ambitiously, merely a year before it was scheduled to open. But open it did, in 1955, pushing *Sleeping Beauty's* release back to 1957. But the production took still longer than expected; it was a combination of the highly detailed art style, the ever-changing animation team, and the fact that Walt was a very busy man. After eight long years, *Sleeping Beauty* was finally released on the 29<sup>th</sup> of January, 1959. In a promotional video about the making of *Sleeping Beauty*, Walt Disney said:

[the following quote is spoken by Walt Disney himself in the promotional video]  
'That's why it took us 6 years and 6 million dollars to make *Sleeping Beauty*, but to us it was worth it.'

Except, it wasn't worth it. [laughs] It was the most expensive animated feature Disney had made up until that point, but in its initial theatrical run in 1959, the film grossed \$5.3 million, not enough to make a profit. Barrier writes:

'*Sleeping Beauty's* expensive box-office failure brought the sharp upward trend in revenues and profits to a jarring halt. Profits fell in [...] 1959, and revenue fell the next year, when the company suffered its first loss since the forties.'

So it wasn't a commercial success, and to add insult to injury, the critics didn't like it either. The New York Times review commented:

'*Sleeping Beauty* compare[s] less favorably with *Snow White*. The musical score is sorely lacking notable melodies [and] the humor is also rather scanty.' – Crowther, Bosley. 'Screen: *Sleeping Beauty*'. *The New York Times*, 18 Feb 1959.

Savage. This dislike of *Sleeping Beauty* has persisted through time – though the animosity now seems to be attached more to Aurora herself than the film as a whole. In my research for this episode, I consulted fifteen websites that had ranked the Disney Princesses: including but not limited to Bustle, BuzzFeed, Screenrant and Seventeen. And whether the ranking was 'most to least feminist' or, 'most powerful to most worthless', or simply 'best to worst', our poor Aurora was consistently ranked second last or last. And so when I sat down to watch all 75 minutes of *Sleeping Beauty* – the same length as only three and half episodes of *Friends* – my expectations were rock bottom.

[ominous orchestral music sound bite fades in and out to indicate a little break]

## The best Classic Disney film?

True to its source material, Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* is simple in plot. Three good fairies, two good gifts, one bad curse. There are two key differences I'd like to point out. The first is that the three good fairies decide to raise Aurora in a cottage in the woods until she turns sixteen, in order to hide her from Maleficent and hopefully prevent the curse. The other difference is the dramatic third act, in which Maleficent – in the form of a dragon – battles Prince Phillip to stop him from saving Aurora. It's simple, it's classic, and exceeded my expectations astronomically. Yes, my friends, it could have been my social-interaction-deprived-lockdown-brain not making any sense at all, but I had a fucking great time watching *Sleeping Beauty*, and I'm here to tell you why it's the best Disney Princess film made during Walt Disney's lifetime.

## Aurora and Prince Phillip

Now, any time anyone talks about *Sleeping Beauty*, it is mentioned that Aurora only gets 18 minutes of screen time of the 75-minute film – that's 24%. Her wordcount is also dismal, with twenty-four lines of dialogue, the last line being delivered at the 39-minute mark. [echo voice effect] SHE IS THE LEAST FEMINIST DISNEY PRINCESS. But let's look at Prince Phillip's stats (which I had to compile myself, since it's much less commonly spouted on the internet). He only has twenty-five lines of dialogue himself – just one more than Aurora. His last line is delivered at the 45-minute mark, only six minutes after Aurora's. And, his screen time is only 12 minutes, more than half of which he shares with Aurora. So if Aurora and Phillip only speak a handful of times and are only on screen for about 23 minutes, who's doing the rest of the talking, and who's on screen for the other – I don't maths, the rest of the time? Well, the main characters, of course. *WHAT?!* You exclaim! *Aurora isn't the main character?!* No, of course not. Much like the original fairy tale, Disney's film isn't about *Sleeping Beauty*. No. No, no, no, no, no, no. It's about three rather forgotten good fairies: Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather, and their arch nemesis: Maleficent. Yes, my friends. This film is about four powerful, magical women, and the triumph of good over evil.

[ominous orchestral music sound bite fades in and out to indicate a little break]

## Flora, Fauna and Merryweather

Do you remember Flora, Fauna and Merryweather? No, neither did I until I sat down to re-watch *Sleeping Beauty*. If you need a quick reminder, they are three plump fairies each dressed in a different colour: Flora in red, Fauna in green and Merryweather in blue. Flora is the smart leader, Fauna is the kind-hearted equaliser, and Merryweather is the feisty hot-head. Their age is hard to determine, but they appear to be younger than the white-haired fairy godmother in *Cinderella* – though their shape and design is quite similar.

Flora, Fauna and Merryweather – who will henceforth be referred to as 'the Good Fairies' to save everyone's time – are often forgotten when it comes to discussing *Sleeping Beauty*, but they are no doubt the protagonists of the film. We can deduce this from the story conventions that *Sleeping Beauty* employs. Story conventions refer to the common way a story is told. They're not rules, but rather patterns that have formed over time and inform the way we understand character, timeline and plot. Story conventions differ across cultures, countries and languages, but here I'm going to be talking about the conventions

that are most commonly used in Western media, as *Sleeping Beauty* is an American film, and the original fairy tale was a contributor to Western story conventions in the first place.

The first convention I want to talk about is beginning the story with the main character. This seems like an obvious one: *Back to the Future* of course starts with Marty McFly and *Grease* starts with Danny and Sandy. But when it comes to films in which it's less clear who the protagonist is, looking at who's first introduced is a clue. The Good Fairies aren't the first characters to be introduced to us by the narrator, but they are the first named characters who speak. The only character who speaks before them is the court announcer who announces their arrival at Aurora's christening. So of our whole cast of characters, the Good Fairies are the first to give us a glimpse into the world of the story and who we will meet there. They set the scene, which points to their importance in the narrative.

Another convention of storytelling dictates that the protagonist is the one who drives the plot forward. Their decisions directly affect the outcome of the story. Similarly to the original *Sleeping Beauty* fairy tale, the mortal characters in this film make very few decisions – and when they do, they tend to have little to no bearing on the plot. The King's proclamation to burn all the spindles is, once again, futile, and Aurora's betrothal to Prince Phillip (which was also decided by the King) ends up having no effect, because they meet anyway. Aurora and Phillip actually don't make any active decisions that have a bearing on the plot. Their meeting happens by chance – they happen to be in the same woods at the same time, and we get a very insta-love dance sequence montage that is beautiful and pretty forgettable.

But you know who do make the decisions that drive the plot? The fairies, duh! Surely you saw that coming. They set the plot in motion by hiding Aurora in a cottage in the woods, they send the whole kingdom to sleep, and they rescue Prince Phillip so he can kiss Aurora back to life. Prince Phillip in the third act is merely a puppet through which the Good Fairies defeat Maleficent. When helping him escaping Maleficent's fortress, they turn rocks into bubbles, arrows into flowers, and steaming acid sludge into a rainbow. Not to mention they arm him with a magical sword and shield, and ensure the sword hits its target, right in Maleficent's dragon belly. Prince Phillip does fuck all. In every single instance, Flora, Fauna and Merryweather instigate action and plot. The only time they don't, is when they're met by their opposing force: Maleficent.

## Maleficent

As we spoke about before, the conflict in a story arises when the protagonist's desire is met with an obstacle that opposes their desire and actions. If we take the protagonists as the Good Fairies, their desire is to keep Aurora safe, and their every action is in the interest of this desire. Maleficent's desire is exactly opposite: to harm Aurora, and so Maleficent's every action is in the interest of this desire, too. But it's not only her actions that make her villainous: Disney does what it does very well, and makes Maleficent's villainy apparent in her design. From her devil horns to her pointy red fingernails, everything about her screams EVIL. But the thing I find so intriguing about Maleficent is that she is one of the most beloved Disney Villainesses, and yet ... one thing about her is glaringly missing: motivation.

Here's the closest we get: [the following quote is a clip from the film] 'I really felt quite distressed at not receiving an invitation,' she says when she arrives at Aurora's christening. Except, everything about the way she delivers this line points to the opposite. She doesn't seem bothered at all. And throughout the rest of the film, she never once mentions her reasons for wreaking havoc – whether it's being left off the guest list or otherwise. Maleficent is curious, because unlike her predecessors – the Evil Queen and Lady Tremaine – she's not explicitly motivated by the envy of youth and beauty. She doesn't have anything to gain from killing Aurora. Maleficent is just evil for the sake of being evil. Because it's her brand, because she's having fun, because she found a devil-horn hat at a thrift store for two bucks and ran with the idea.

But I don't see it as a flaw of the film that Maleficent has no valid reason for being evil other than #aesthetic – because the Good Fairies have no valid reason for being good, either. The Good Fairies seek to protect, because they're good, and Maleficent seeks to harm, because she's bad. This film isn't about complex motivations and decisions. It's an exploration of pure good vs. pure evil.

[ominous orchestral music sound bite fades in and out to indicate a little break]

## Good vs. Evil

I framed the original fairy tale as a clash of mortals vs. magic, but Disney's film zooms in on the magical forces at play, and instead examines the conflict of magical good and magical evil. You want the bad news or good news? Let's start with the good: Flora, Fauna and Merryweather. These three cherubic fairies are such intense manifestations of goodness that it's even in their collective name. Their magic can only 'bring good, [...] joy and happiness' as Fauna reminds Merryweather – which is why they can only defeat Maleficent through Phillip. In the third act, they arm him with an 'enchanted shield of virtue' and a 'mighty sword of truth', for these 'weapons of righteousness will triumph over evil'. Maleficent, meanwhile, is no less eager to impress her evilness upon the audience. She declares herself the 'mistress of all evil' – a quote that served as the subtitle for the 2019 *Maleficent* sequel. Also, right before she transforms into a dragon, she says to Phillip: [the following quote is a clip from the film] 'Now you shall deal with me, oh Prince, and all the powers of hell! I love her so much! There's no doubt that the actions and dialogue of these characters place them in the camp of either good or evil. But what's also important is how these forces are represented through bodies and identities – what traits does Disney code as good and evil?

## Virtue vs. Villainy

*Sleeping Beauty's* design is a feature of the film that sets it apart from the others in the Disney Classic Era. Taking inspiration from medieval paintings and tapestries, the art style moved away from the soft roundness of *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, and instead opted for a more angular, stylised aesthetic. The backgrounds employ a heightened depth of field with structured layers, the treetops are square-shaped and the hills degrade in angular cliffs rather than grassy slopes. This angular style is present in the characters, too, most notably in Aurora herself. While *Snow White* and *Cinderella* had round faces and eyes and bowed

lips, Aurora has a pointed chin and more almond-shaped eyes. Her mouth, too, is less Betty Boop and more elongated. You can see the ripple effect of this animation style throughout the rest of Disney's brand; mostly in Belle and Jasmine, and also in the way Disney redesigned Snow White and Cinderella for marketing images to be more in line with Aurora. But despite *Sleeping Beauty's* stylistic deviation from its predecessors, it still uses the same visual shorthand to convey good and evil. Maleficent is a re-design of the Evil Queen in Snow White, and the Good Fairies are basically Cinderella's fairy godmother in different dresses. But how did these design elements become visual cues for good and evil?

The fairies' appearances conform to what is expected of women of that age in society. They are selfless and maternal, which Disney represents visually through their fresh faces and matronly dresses. Maleficent, meanwhile, is selfish and unmaternal, which Disney indicates through vanity: she has unnaturally arched eyebrows, painted lips and nails, wears jewellery and a fabulously ostentatious cloak. These visual traits are not inherently 'evil' – nor are the Good Fairies' traits inherently 'good' – but they are visual cues for female nonconformity vs. female conformity. And classic Disney loves to code female nonconformity as evil and something to be feared. Conversely, Disney codes conformity as inherently 'good'.

Flora, Fauna and Merryweather are the heroes and protagonists of the story, yes, but they are only permitted to be so within the parameters of female conformity. They perform only good magic, are completely selfless, and never wield the sword, only a glittery, twinkly wand. And I wouldn't take issue with it in *Sleeping Beauty*, if it weren't for the fact that I know it contributes to a pattern that has shaped our understanding of what a good woman vs an evil woman looks like. I actually think the three fairies are some of the most endearing, sympathetic and truly heroic characters in the whole classic era of Disney – female or otherwise. And the truth is, slapping a female character in a traditionally male role and calling it feminism isn't always successful or believable. Leigh Butler writes in her article *How Sleeping Beauty is Accidentally the Most Feminist Animated Movie Disney Ever Made*:

'*Mulan* [...] is a great movie that does some lovely meditations on being a woman in a man's world, but [...] *Mulan* is the *only* female character in it who matters. *Mulan* is still an anomaly, an exception, an oddity in her world. Which is okay as far as it goes, but what's awesome about *Sleeping Beauty* is that the Good Fairies are *not* exceptions or oddities (at least not in the sense that they are female), but simply who they are: heroes who happen to be women.'

Butler makes a great point here: the fairies' heroism is distinctly different from the type of heroism that male Disney heroes exhibit, but it's believable, sincere, and it makes sense within the story. And despite the silent pretty girl and the Prince who saves the day, *Sleeping Beauty* is still a film driven by four powerful, magical female characters, who we either sympathise with or fear, but with whom we ultimately connect.

## The Moral ™

And so what's the whole moral of Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*? That good always triumphs over evil? Well ... yeah? I know it sounds kinda boring. But what I like about *Sleeping Beauty*

is that doesn't stray too far from the limits of a simple fairy tale story. It functions in hyperbole, where people are unequivocally good or bad, there's no in-between, and the stakes are literally always life or death. And I think *Sleeping Beauty* tops its two predecessors because our three main characters offer the comedic dynamic we got from the dwarfs in *Snow White*, they offer positive and powerful female role model we got from the fairy godmother in *Cinderella*, and they offer the charisma that all three of our heroines lacked. Have I changed your mind yet?

But how does the moral of the film tie into the moral of the original fairy tale? Well, the role of fate in the film is harder to discern. Maleficent decrees that 'before the sun sets on her sixteenth birthday, she shall prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and die.' Which makes it sound like that's simply the deadline, and Maleficent has sixteen years to get Aurora to a spindle. The fairies thwart Maleficent's plan by hiding Aurora until the night of her sixteenth birthday, when they believe she is safe and they bring her back to the castle. This all suggests that it wasn't an unavoidable fate, such as it is in the original fairy tale. But the idea that good and evil exist in equal measure is present in both texts. And both stories offer us a world in which goodness always prevails.

## My conclusion

And how do I feel about all this? Up until this point, I've managed to keep my opinions to myself, mostly because as I wrote this episode, I wasn't sure how I felt about it. I love how *Sleeping Beauty* tells a simple story of unequivocal good vs. unequivocal bad. But then, you know, I don't think this dichotomous thinking is always helpful in the real world. And I don't like the way *Sleeping Beauty* – and most fairy tales – encourage us to rely on fate or the fairies or the magic of Disney to ensure everything will be okay in the end, rather than encouraging us to be proactive.

But then I realised: I'm looking at this from the wrong angle. I'd been trying to carve out a lesson while looking at the story from the perspective of Aurora's dreamworld of blissful ignorance – simply watching good and evil clash, and relying on a saviour. But I needed to look at it from the perspective of the fairies: to face the reality that we are the action-takers, not the passive bystanders. I've been reading *We Are the Weather* by Jonathan Safran Foer, which is about the climate crisis, and he talks a lot about the danger of apathy. Apathy is a lack of emotion or feeling – it's indifference. It's a hopeless kind of feeling that feeds inaction. And what I like about *Sleeping Beauty* is that the fairies don't give in to apathy. Despite a terrible curse, the good fairy still does everything she can to make sure things turn out alright in the end.

And this is what I want to highlight here: I think we can learn something from this story by framing ourselves not as the hopeless mortals, but rather as the magical beings whose decisions have real impact. *Sleeping Beauty* teaches us about the importance of having the courage to be active in the face of hardship. And it gives us powerful role models: three fairies who do everything in their power for a happy ending – not for themselves, but for Aurora, for the King and Queen, for the whole Kingdom. Whether goodness always prevails in the real world, I'm not so sure. I guess it depends what you define as 'goodness' and also who you ask. But what I do know is that we are not Aurora, asleep and out of action. We're

also not the King, whose decisions amount to nothing. We are the fairies whose choices directly impact our future. And we have to make the decisions that will lead us to the conclusion we all want. As Fauna watches Aurora dance happily with her prince she says: [the following quote is a clip from the film] ‘Oh, I just love happy endings.’ Don’t we all?

[theme music fades in]

## **Outro**

Thank you very much for listening! And seems just in time to wrap this episode up because all the dogs in my neighbourhood have started barking! It was a lot of work to create this episode, but it was also a lot of fun, so I hoped you enjoyed it. Of course I didn’t do it alone – I consulted many articles, videos and books to help with this episode, all of which will be listed on my website, [angourieslibrary.com](http://angourieslibrary.com). You’ll also find all my citations for all the quotes I used. We love a good bibliography! There you can also find a full transcription of this episode [hi transcription readers!]. So, I will chat to you in two weeks’ time, and until then, I hope you’re all being the magical fairy protagonists in your own story. Bye!

[theme music fades out]