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Writing Process

I first planned out my argument with evidence from the film so I had a thesis to work with, and then I structured my body paragraphs. I spent most of my time writing and organizing the evidence and research I found to support my argument in the most effective way. When I was content with the structure and ideas of my argument, I worked on my introduction and conclusion. In my introduction, I contextualized my discussion of gender roles in *Sleeping Beauty (1959)* with the gender roles in America at the time of the film, and with my conclusion, I tried to assert the importance of analyzing the gender roles in fairy tales like *Sleeping Beauty (1959)*.

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Gender Roles in 'Sleeping Beauty' (1959)

Lance Carrle

Walt Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* was released in 1959 and has become part of many children's upbringings ever since. The film, based on the tale "Briar Rose" by the Brothers Grimm, contains many of the same elements of the tale: a curse, a wooden spindle, an evil older woman, a prince, a happy ending, and more. Preserving much of "Briar Rose," Disney also relays some of the same messages that the Brothers Grimm did over a century earlier, some of these messages harmful. Specifically, Walt Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) reinforces the negative gender roles of the time and is a clear reflection of the post-World War II domestication of women. Commenting on women's roles at the time, Betty Friedan writes in *The Feminine Mystique*, "There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which [women] were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique" (50). Friedan then writes, "[the feminine mystique] makes certain concrete, finite, domestic aspects of feminine existence—as it was lived by women whose lives were confined, by necessity, to cooking, cleaning, washing, bearing children— into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity" (92). Since WWII, the domestic roles forced upon women have been questioned and protested by society, specifically in second-wave feminism launched by the publishing of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. While society has progressed from the gender roles of the past, fairy tales that we consume today, like *Sleeping Beauty,* preserve these gender roles in print and film. Recently, Jack Zipes has observed gender roles in fairy tales closely, and in "Breaking the Disney Spell," he writes, "the house for the Grimms and Disney was the place where good girls remained, and one shared aspect of the fairy tale and the film is the domestication of women" (430). In *Sleeping Beauty,* the film sends harmful messages about gender roles and reinforces the domestication of women using the trope of the curse, the prince's and princess's relationship, and magical characters.

The trope of the curse in Walt Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* allows for a greater depth of Sleeping Beauty's character due to her increased presence in the story, and the film uses her actions and character to directly reinforce gender roles. Contrary to the Brothers Grimm's tale, where it quickly transitions from when the evil wise woman casts her curse to when Briar Rose pricks her finger, in *Sleeping Beauty (1959)*, Maleficent casts the curse early--9:12 minutes into the film--and Aurora does not prick her finger until 51:07. In addition, the curse lasts less than a day in the film while in the Brothers Grimm tale, she sleeps for a century. This change from Brothers Grimm's "Briar Rose" to Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* shortens the time when the princess is in her slumber and increases her participation in the tale. Hence, Aurora has more depth, but due to Aurora's actions and character, the tale continues to propagate the gender roles of the past version. As Zipes remarks, "Though the characters are fleshed out to become more realistic, they are also one-dimensional and are to serve functions in the film" (434). Aurora is made one-dimensional and forced to serve a function early on in the film. In the first scene at the cottage, the audience sees her cleaning, and the good fairies soon tell her to go out, pick berries, and not talk to strangers. The film eventually jumps to Aurora in the woods, where she picks berries and sings and talks to the animals. While Aurora is singing and dancing, Prince Philip finds her and begins to sing and dance with her. Aurora remembers what the fairies told her about strangers, and she does not want to disobey them, even if she wants to talk to the prince. Although Aurora sings and dances with the prince for a moment, she eventually runs away when Prince Philip asks her name although she does defy the fairies by telling the prince where to find her. The scene and Aurora's kindness to the animals and dialogue give more insight into Aurora's character than provided in the Brothers Grimm's tale, but as Jill Birnie Henke, Diane Zimmerman Umble, and Nancy J. Smith say in "Construction of the Female Self: Feminist Readings of the Disney Heroine," "Aurora is obedient, beautiful, acquiescent to authority, and essentially powerless in matters regarding her own fate" (236). Aurora's powerlessness, housework, and obedience as a seemingly perfect princess suggest that it is a woman's role to act that way, reinforcing the domestication of women and patriarchal gender roles.

Another way *Sleeping Beauty* upholds traditional gender roles is the fairy tale element of the romance between prince and princess. Despite the differences in the prince and princess relationship from "Briar Rose" that provide more depth, Aurora's strong desire for a man, the presence of an arranged marriage, and her reliance on Prince Philip to save her uphold similar gender roles as the Brothers Grimm's "Briar Rose." Aurora's strong desire for a man is seen in the scene where she is singing with the animals before Prince Philip finds her, and her song and dialogue show her overwhelming desire for a man. Aurora sings to the

animals, "I wonder, I wonder, if my heart keeps singing will my song go winging to someone who will find me and bring back a love song to me!" Through Aurora's singing and dialogue, the audience sees more of her personality than what the Brothers Grimm tale was able to convey. Still, most of her dialogue refers to her want for a man, limiting her character development and encouraging her primary role as a romantic partner. Even before her song, Aurora's betrothal to Philip upon her birth limits her character. Aurora has no say in her husband, and even though she ends upbeing betrothed to Philip, whom she met in the woods and likes, Aurora's lack of power in a betrothal and the arranged marriage decided at birth again suggests her primary role as a romantic partner whether she wants that or not.

A third element of the prince and princess relationship that promotes harmful gender roles is Prince Philip saving Aurora and the kingdom from Maleficent. In Brothers Grimm's "Briar Rose," the evil wise woman does not reappear in the story after cursing Briar Rose. In *Sleeping Beauty*, Maleficent is more of a villain, so she needs to be defeated by someone for all to be well. When Aurora pricks her finger on the spindle, the fairies cannot help her without the prince, and he specifically must come to Aurora's rescue because only true love's kiss can save her. The fairies free the prince from Maleficent and provide him with weapons to fight, but ultimately, he is the one who kills Maleficent and saves Aurora. The addition of Maleficent as a greater villain and the portrayal of Aurora as deeply needing a man suggests she needs saving and that she is weak. Consequently, with Aurora as a model of the perfect traditional woman, Aurora's desire for a partner, her betrothal to the prince, and her rescue at the hands of the prince, the film implies that women need a partner and need saving, minimizing women's independence and perpetuating gender roles.

Another fairy tale element in *Sleeping Beauty* used to directly reinforce gender roles is magical characters, particularly the three good fairies, through their depiction as motherly, foolish, and powerless. The three good fairies are characterized by many of their actions throughout the film; the most consistent throughout is their motherliness, suggested by their desire to do what's best for Aurora whether that is keeping her safe in the woods or trying to comfort her when she was told she could not see Philip again. Another of the fairies' traits is their lack of practical skills, observed in their inability to cook and make Aurora's dress without magic which, although intended to be comedic, mocks them for their lack of ability and knowledge.

Lastly, the fairies are portrayed as helpful yet ultimately weak. They help the prince escape and provide him with weapons with their magic, but they are unable to do any fighting themselves, suggesting their weakness and lesser importance

than the prince. The combination of the fairies' traits as motherly, incapable, and weaker sidekicks further suggests the role of women as caretakers and secondary to men, upholding sexist stereotypes and gender roles.

The tale of Sleeping Beauty, although in circulation many years prior, is often remembered today by the film produced by Walt Disney. As Donald Haase states, "When Disney called his animated fairy tales by his own name . . . he was not simply making an artistic statement, but also laying claim to the tales in what would become their most widely known, public versions" (443). Considering the dominance of Disney's films and the massive audience they reach, the messages they send are important to the many who watch them. Thus, even if *Sleeping Beauty* was released in 1959 and its messages mirror society at the time, the continued popularity of the film means the now outdated messages it sends are still important. In *Sleeping Beauty,* one can observe the reinforcement of sexist stereotypes and domestication of women through the elements of the curse, the prince's and princess's relationship, and the three good fairies. The analysis of these elements and their messages is important because it identifies the reflection of societal pressures in fairy tales and opens discussion of possible effects the presence of such pressures may have.

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