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Citation: Seago, K. (2002). Constructing the Witch. In: Blayer, I. M. & Sánchez, M. (Eds.), Storytelling: Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Perspectives. (pp. 72-85). Peter Lang Publishing. ISBN 9780820451251

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Constructing the Witch

1. Introduction

Since the seventies, the work of feminist critics has drawn attention to and analysed the restricted gender roles fairy tales offer as role models to children. Studies have shown how gender specific behaviour is encoded into classic stories whose clearly enunciated framework of good and evil socialises children into ideologically inflected norms of femininity and masculinity.[1] These reward passivity, beauty and suffering as female virtues and identify most forms of activity, intellectual, physical or sexual power and attempts at self-determination as negatively inflected features when linked to a female character. Most importantly, female relationships are structured by jealousy and competition for male recognition and reward and thus the classic fairy tale heroine is usually persecuted by a female competitor, often an older woman, and saved by a prince-figure.[2]

'Sleeping Beauty' is often cited as *the* archetypal fairy tale and in popular, AngloAmerican reception the story certainly conforms to the paradigm of innocence, persecution and a clearly articulated dichotomy of good and evil. The storyline of the young princess cursed by an older woman with evil intent is most

clearly developed in Disney's film, in which the femme-fatale-witch engages in an elaborately drawn-out persecution of the innocent princess. The story ends up in a battle between the witch and the saviour prince which develops into an allegory of the fight of good vs. evil in explicitly Christian terms. Much critical attention has been paid to the role of the innocent persecuted heroine, (Bacchilega Perspectives) but in this paper I wish to concentrate on the role of the older, persecuting woman in 'Sleeping Beauty'. Relating the classic story to its sources and in particular its grounding in myth, I will analyse how the figure of the witch is constructed in dominant reception and how the character comes to express cultural anxiety over the unmarried woman.

2. 'Sleeping Bauty'-Traditions

The Anglo-American version of 'Sleeping Beauty' is based on two European traditions: Charles Perrault's late 17th century version, 'La Belle au bois dormant,' and the German story - 'Dornröschen' - collected by the Brothers Grimm in the early nineteenth century. In 1729, Perrault had been translated into English by Robert Samber and the story was extremely popular in chap-book format. But it was the translation of the German version by Taylor in 1823 which ultimately helped establish the fairy tale as acceptable children's reading in England. Grimms' tales were cited by authors arguing for and defending the moral value of traditional stories as appropriately educational reading throughout the

century. That the influential cultural critic John Ruskin wrote a respectful introduction to an 1868 edition of the tales is an indication of the high value placed on the Grimm tales. Thus, for much of the nineteenth century, the German tradition was the dominant tradition for English translations aimed at the children's literature market. However, in the case of 'Sleeping Beauty', in the course of the century, elements from the French tradition were increasingly incorporated, and further developed to form the canonic tale. I believe that this merging took place because the German version of 'Sleeping Beauty' was far more ambiguous in its value system, less clear-cut in its representation of the figure of the surplus fairy and not as judgmental as the French-derived versions.

The differences in the representation of the 'witch-figure' between the two traditions are as follows. In Perrault's elegant, aristocratic version, seven fairies are invited to the christening feast because the eighth, and oldest, fairy has withdrawn from society and cannot be traced. Nevertheless, she appears at the baptism and is annoyed that her table setting is less precious than that of the other fairies. Her spiteful mumbling is observed by the youngest fairy, who hides herself towards the end of the meal, anticipating mischief. When the oldest fairy duly curses the child with death, the youngest still has her blessing and can use it to mitigate the curse to a 100-year sleep and rescue by a prince. In the French version, the surplus fairy is responsible for her exclusion from the feast because

she had removed herself from society, and her character is clearly unpleasant: she is explicitly portrayed as old and spiteful which further justifies her exclusion. This is not the case in the German tradition where the 13th fairy is excluded by chance and human fallibility: the King has only twelve golden plates and therefore he only invites twelve fairies. The exclusion is not the surplus fairy's fault, it does not lie in her character, she could be any one of the thirteen, and she reacts to the slight by turning up at the end of the celebrations when the other fairies have almost done blessing the child. Clearly explaining herself, and identifying her action as a punishment for the exclusion, she curses the child with death. This is mitigated not by design (as it is in the French) but by chance: the 13th fairy arrived before the last of the fairies had blessed the child who therefore uses her good wish to turn the curse of death into a 100-year sleep.

However, while the French tale shows some of the motifs relevant for today's story (namely the young-old dichotomy, the spiteful nature of the old fairy and the fact that she is herself responsible for her exclusion) neither the French nor the German version has a fully-developed witch-figure in the sense that there is no planning and no intentional persecution of the princess: in both versions, the curse is a response to the exclusion and that it is the princess who suffers is incidental. The excluded fairy merely sets into motion the main plot development but then disappears from the story. The old woman whose spindle brings about the

fulfilment of the curse is not linked to the witch figure but is portrayed in a neutral way and in the French tradition she is positively helpful. In this, both traditions are still recognisably influenced by the story's mythic sources.

3. Mythic Sources

Although the storyline of 'Sleeping Beauty' is dependant on literary tradition (see Opie 102-8), there are two strands of mythic and mytho-literary derivation based in Greek and Nordic myth which have contributed to the plot structure of 'Sleeping Beauty'. One strand provides the basis for the motif cluster of 'blessing-curse-mitigation', while the other strand accounts for the 'sleep (as punishment)-male awakening presence (kiss)-persecution' configuration.

The core motifs of blessing, curse and mitigation can be traced to the three Fates or Norns, goddesses in Greek and Nordic myth who spin the thread of life: one is responsible for the beginning of life, one ensures maturity, and the third cuts off the thread of life, representing death. This myth was popularised in oral stories, extant in medieval source books where the Fates or Norns are represented as travelling fairies, magicians or wise women who attend celebrations of birth and bless the child with their gifts- and where the gift of death is explained as a curse, which then is, fortunately, mitigated by the other Fates - instant death is delayed. (Jacob Grimm Mythologie 228-36 and Schriften 191-201)

The second strand of mytho-literary derivation providing the more complex motif configuration of 'sleep (as-punishment) - male awakening presence (kiss) - persecution' is the Nordic myth of Odin and Brünhilde, developed variously in the German Nibelungenlied, the Norse Edda, the Völsungasaga and Thidrekssaga. (Romain) Odin curses his daughter, the bravest of all valkyries, with sleep as a punishment for infringing his authority. In response to her pleas, he mitigates his humiliating decision that she should be woken and become the wife of the first man to pass by, so that only the bravest of all men, able to pass through the ring of flames (swords) surrounding her, should claim her. However, Siegfried achieves this feat and claims Brünhilde as wife for his lord Gunther who is himself not able to do so. In a quarrel between Siegfried's wife Krimhild and Brünhild, Krimhild taunts (persecutes) her rival with having been Siegfried's whore. This strand applies in different ways to the French and the German tradition and its relevance to the development of the persecutory witch will be discussed towards the end this paper.

4. Editorial Revision of the Grimms' Version

While the first strand of mythic-oral mediation is relevant for both traditions, it is particularly prominent in the German tradition where the three roles are more clearly demarcated than in the French: the role of the Fate or Norn responsible for birth is enacted in the Grimm version by a crab, later a frog, who

shares a bath with the Queen and prophesies the birth of a much desired child. The fairies invited to the birthday celebration of the princess who bestow their magical gifts fulfil the role of the second Norn of ensuring a prosperous life, while the excluded fairy plays evidently the role of the third Fate and her 'curse' of death. Even the motif of the slight can be traced: In some medieval stories, the third Fate's gift of death is presented as an angry response: the third Fate or Norn was accidentally tripped up, fell off her chair or was not given a knife. (Jacob Grimm Mythology 1401) Thus the inevitability of death is explained by inserting it into a human framework of emotional cause and effect. There is a difference though between this mythic representation and the spiteful fairy in Perrault or later mediations of the story. Despite the apparent tit-for-tat reaction in the medieval story, the mythic is not interested in a prescriptive didactic representation but is a contemplation of the human condition. Emotional reactions such as anger are an attempt to comprehend the fact of death but do not function within a judgmental framework: there is no reward-punishment scheme linked to desirable behaviour as we find in the classic fairy story.

The complete *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* had seven editions between 1812 and 1857 and the selected 'Small Edition' ran to ten editions between 1825 and 1857. Wilhelm Grimm continued editing these throughout, and his alterations to the corpus of tales and to the texts of individual stories are well documented.

(Schoof, Rölleke Biographie and Nachwort, Tatar, Bottigheimer) However, due to the brothers' political motivation of proving their collection of tales to be evidence of an ancient German (mythically derived) literature (Kamenetsky 55-9, Michaelis-Jena 50-1), the early Grimm editions are at pains to remain close to the mythic/medieval sources in their portrayal of the thirteenth fairy and the curse as fate; as with the three Fates or Norns, she is in no way singled out but is part of the community of fairies. Furthermore, her reaction is not condemned but presented as a justified punishment which recalls Odin's punishment of Brünhilde. Wilhelm Grimm foregrounded the mythic character of the fairies in the second edition of 1819 by referring to them as 'wise women', giving them the status of (half-)gods in Nordic myth. Importantly, the 13th is not explicitly excluded from this descriptor and remains by implication a 'wise woman' throughout. Nevertheless, Wilhelm's continued editorial interventions affected the representation of the thirteenth 'wise woman' so that by the last edition of 1857 she had lost much of her mythic impartiality and power and her justified anger had become a transgression of bourgeois codes of conduct.

In the first edition of 1812, the 13th fairy gives a reason for the curse, identifying it as a punishment for her exclusion, and her direct speech is identified as the language of prophecy "ich verkündige Euch" "I prophesy you". In the second edition, Wilhelm removes the 13th fairy's own explanation of her action.

The narratorial voice instead interprets her motivation as revenge, rather than justified punishment, thus losing the link to Odin's anger. In addition, the 13th fairy's direct speech now only consists of the curse, resulting in a loss of rational characterisation and the association with prophetic language is replaced with the more emotive "Sie rief" "She called out". Her heightened emotional state is further foregrounded in 1840 and again in 1850 when Wilhelm adds descriptions of her behaviour which becomes increasingly offensive; she enters without greeting anybody or looking at them, she shouts in a loud voice and abruptly rushes out without saying anything else after she has cursed the child:

> da trat plötzlich die dreizehnte herein. Sie wollte sich dafür rächen, daß sie nicht eingeladen war, und ohne jemand zu grüßen und anzusehen, rief sie mit lauter Stimme "die Königstocher ... Nach diesen Worten kehrte sie sich um und verließ den Saal. suddenly the thirteenth entered. She wanted to revenge herself for the fact that she had not been invited, and without greeting anybody or looking at them, she called out in a loud voice "the king's daughter ... After these words she turned around and left the hall. (1850)

The character traits of impatience, arrogance and a temper which the 13th fairy acquires in the course of editorial changes are those which are identified in contemporary conduct manuals as those which will endanger a girl's chances of

catching a husband. (Held 108-51, Duden) The 13th fairy thus provides a warning foil for the princess's good behaviour; all the virtues the girl had been blessed with by the other wise women, and of which we are assured explicitly in the text that they are fulfilled and make the princess beloved of everybody, are precisely those which are named in conduct manuals as positive character traits, that is those which will lead to marriage:

> An dem Mädchen aber wurden die Gaben der weisen Frauen sämmtlich erfüllt, denn es war so schön, sittsam, freundlich und verständig, daß es jedermann, der es ansah, lieb haben mußte. But in the girl all the gifts of the wise women came true, since she was so beautiful, virtuous, friendly and understanding that anybody who looked on her, had to love her. (1850)

In addition, the negative characterisation of the 13th fairy not only functions in relation to the portrayal of the princess but also has an effect on the representation of the king. Because he had decided not to invite the 13th wise woman (due to the lack of plates), he was responsible for the curse on his child. This element was not changed in Wilhelm's editing, but with the increasingly offensive behaviour of the 13th fairy, an indirect exoneration of the king's behaviour is effected, justifying his decision to exclude her in a way similar to the motivation in Perrault's version. Nevertheless, despite these revisions, the German

texts still retain elements of the mythic context which do not allow a full exclusion and demonisation of the 13th fairy and there is no indication of the good-evil or young-old dichotomies.

5. Revision of the Witch-Figure in English Translation

The elements introduced by Wilhelm's editorial revision, namely the indirect exoneration of the king which shifts responsibility for her exclusion to the 13th fairy, her offensive and unjustified behaviour, and the beginnings of a judgmental attitude, are taken up and developed in English translations between 1823 and 1888. (Taylor 1823 and 1839, Wehnert, Davis, Gillies, Paull, Crane, Hunt, Gardiner) Adaptation into the context of children's literature further contributed to textual strategies with a socialising and prescriptively didactic impetus where the explicit articulation of good and evil became closely linked to emerging notions of manliness and femininity. The king's behaviour is adapted in translation to operate as a model of rational decision making, wisdom and controlled emotions, all traits of manliness foregrounded from mid-century. (Nelson 534-6) He is also a responsible father, who is not implicated in the decision to exclude the 13th fairy, or who does not leave his child on her fifteenth birthday (as the German king and queen do). In addition to the indirect shifting of blame which the Grimm source texts had initiated, various textual strategies are employed to exonerate the king from responsibility directly and the already bad

behaviour of the 13th fairy's conduct is further exaggerated which results in an even sharper polarisation of exemplary male behaviour and female transgression.

With the exception of Taylor's first translation in 1823 and Hunt's definitive translation in 1884, all of the texts I analysed introduce in varying degree the good - evil dichotomy in their treatment of the fairies by adding descriptors such as 'good' (Paull) 'benevolent' (Gillies), 'friendly' (Taylor 1839), 'good and kind to children' (Davis) to the 12 invited fairies and 'evil' (Wehnert, Gillies), 'spiteful'(Gillies, Paull) and 'wicked' (Paull) to the 13th fairy. Taylor's substantially revised 1839 translation is particularly explicit by introducing an elaborate iconography of differentiated clothing and attributes for the 'friendly' fairies who wear red clothes and carry white wands while the 13th fairy is clearly identified through her black clothing and the attributes of the witch: she carries a broomstick and wears a high black cap. While other translations do not take this up in their textual treatment, this is nevertheless carried over into paratextual elements such as illustrations.

In contrast to the German source texts where the unity of the 13 fairies is implicitly maintained, the English translations are intent on dissociating the 13th fairy from the other fairies. She is the threatening outsider who disrupts the social fabric, while the good fairies are integrated into human society. However, their power is reduced, domesticated and firmly aligned with the private sphere and the

family. Most texts do not refer to them as 'wise women' but as fairies, which in the nineteenth century had a strong association with diminutive size, scope of action and an impersonation of traditional female virtues due to the success of moral fairy stories in which flower fairies personified meekness, industry etc. Where the application of 'wise women' is retained in 1853 (Wehnert), it is interpreted within the domestic ideal as caring and nurturing with a special affinity to children. And in an 1855 text (Davis), the mitigation is even cast in the language of the nursery, describing the power to avert death as 'applying a remedy against the effect of the 13th fairy's decree.'

Thus, the good fairies are assimilated into the domestic setting while the 13th fairy comes to stand for deviating forms of femininity. Showing typical characteristics of the bad, or fallen woman, she is noisy which was seen as a sign of moral collapse, and her loud protest further compromises her: in popular articles and medical discourse a loud, harsh or hoarse voice was identified as one of the attributes by which a prostitute could be recognised. (Matus 48-9) In the fifties and sixties, great anxiety existed over the explosion of the 'social evil' of prostitution which was seen as a 'street disorder' threatening to infect 'healthy areas' (Walkowitz 41) and translations in the 1850s and 60s show similar anxieties in their concern over how to identify the bad woman and exclude her polluting influence.

The 13th fairy is angry and transgresses accepted codes of social conduct by acting in exactly the opposite way to how women were counselled to behave even when wronged. Influential conduct writers state that 'an enraged woman is one of the most disgusting sights in nature' (Chapone 45) and advise that woman demonstrates her 'rational being' by remaining silent and meek in an argument, bearing 'provocation' with 'equanimity.' (Freeling 32) The 13th fairy is delegitimated in a double move by texts which ridicule her anger by translating it as a trivial 'affront'(Davis) or as 'disrespect'(Gillies) and at the same time emphasising her reaction to the slight as exaggerated and inappropriate: she is 'greatly incensed' (Gillies), in a 'tremendous passion' (Wehnert), 'burning to revenge herself' (Crane). Her social exclusion and ostracism is legitimated by presenting it as the outcome of her own behaviour; she has placed herself outside the community by offending repeatedly against the rules of seemly womanhood when she not only complains about an injustice but when textual strategies imply that this 'injustice' 'objectively' does not exist. In effect, she is making a fuss over nothing, an established strategy by dominant ideology to invalidate protests against its exclusions.

6. Socio-cultural Context for the Representation of the 'Witch'

The dissociation of the 13th fairy from the rest of the fairies also identifies her as a single woman, a figure of great anxiety from the mid-nineteenth century.

The 1851 census had provided statistical evidence of the surplus of women and initiated the fiercely debated 'Woman Question'. Countless articles, primarily in the 1860s, discussed what was to be done with the 'dangerous' surplus of women. (Palmegiano 70-95) The 'odd woman,' as she was known, was treated with pity and contempt but she was also considered a social failure and was regarded with distrust. While ideological constructions of gender insisted on a complementary nature of the sexes, unmarried women posed a problem since their single state barred them from fulfilling their maternal role which their instinct and their nature assigned them, thus making them unnatural and deviant. (Poovey 4) The unmarried, or unmarriagable, spinster disrupts and threatens the stable unit of the couple and the family, like the witch disturbing the ceremony which welcomes a new member into its circle. The single woman as witch is marginalised, excluded from the company, and when she complains in protest, this negative behaviour is used as a further exoneration of the dominant social organisation to legitimise her exclusion on the grounds of her inappropriate conduct. Representations of femininity in 'Sleeping Beauty' are a good example for the nineteenth-century division of women into the elevated virtuous wife and mother, and the excluded negative side of femininity.[3] In this splitting into good and bad, the single woman, the working woman and the relatively new feature of the publicly protesting woman are made to occupy the same position and are linked by association with

the 'traditional' incarnation of deviant feminity: the prostitute. Freeling, in fact, establishes an explicit link between a wife complaining about her husband's mistreatment of her and the immediate danger of her seduction which was seen as the first, inevitable step towards prostitution. (38-9) As a result, any role defined outside the radius of male influence is criminalised by association.

A good example for this is the case of Caroline Norton who lobbied for the right to her earnings and the right to keep her children after she had been forced to leave her husband because of his abusive behaviour. She wrote two pamphlets in an attempt to influence public opinion and have the issue taken up by Parliament. Her first attempt, in 1837, *The Natural Claim of a Mother to the Custody of her Child as affected by Common Law Right of the Father* was unsuccessful, but her second pamphlet, *A Plain Letter* submitted under a male pseudonym, influenced the passing of the Infant Custody Bill in 1839. Although in every respect a good mother, nevertheless her actions excluded her from society and she found herself in the ostracised position of an, in effect, 'single' woman. (Moore 39-52) Her case also presents another instance where an identifiable response to a particular historic moment of cultural crisis and anxiety can be traced in how the translations deal with the representation of feminity. In Taylor's 1839 text the fairy is clearly identified as a single, bad woman who, like Norton, challenges authority with her 'scolding', disrupts the peace of the realm (palace) with her noise and

interventions, and makes herself the subject of gossip: all of which Norton was condemned for.

7. Conclusion

By the end of the century, the evil-good dichotomy had been so firmly etablished that even Margaret Hunt's definitive translation which was not aimed at the children's market but at restoring the Grimm collection to its status as a collection of scholarly source material, shows elements of emphasising the differences between the good wise women and the bad one. However, her identity as a truly persecutory witch had so far only been hinted at by Wehnert's 1853 text and its reprint in 1857. As outlined earlier, the second strand of mytho-literary sources provided the 'sleep (as punishment)-male awakening presence (kiss)-persecution' motif configuration, and the motif of justified anger and punishment had been linked to the German tradition. The element of persecution and jealousy plays no role in the Grimm texts but it is developed in the second half of Perrault's version where the prince's mother jealously persecutes her daughter-in-law. This plot development is displaced in later versions of the story onto the witch-figure, who also amalgamates the old woman in the tower. As indicated above, this was only initiated by textual and paratextual developments in Wehnert's editions which create a link between the evil fairy and the old woman in the tower, implying that her involvement in bringing about the fulfilment of the

curse is not innocently accidental but the result of scheming. This was only fully developed in the twentieth century, when Disney's 1960 film fully established the demonisation of the witch, whose curse on the princess is followed by her scheming plans to find her in the fifteen years when she is hidden by the good fairies in the forest. When the princess is brought to the palace on the last day that the curse can be realised, the witch lures the girl to her doom by manifesting as a green flame (the shape in which she is introduced into the film originally) which hypnotises her and leads her up into the little room. There the green flame turns into the spinning wheel and when the princess hesitates to touch the spindle the witch's voice tells her to do so, just before the good fairies rush in. The witch assumes her own shape and gloatingly reveals her triumph over the princess, identifying herself as the mistress of all evil. Not only has she extended her malevolent influence into the little room, assuming both the spindle and the presence of the old woman for her persecution of the girl, she also extends her efforts of keeping the princess from happiness by appropriating the hedge of thorns which becomes yet another impersonation of her evil force in the fight against the prince and the extended persecution of the princess. In Disney's film, the witch and good fairies are clearly differentiated, they look different and, in fact, are in open conflict. The elements of persecution and jealousy have been emphasised to such a degree that they have become the motivating factors in the

story and raison d'être for the witch who actually personifies 'burning jealousy' in her shape as the green flame - green is the colour of jealousy.

Disney's film has played a crucial role in the understanding of this fairy tale and for many represents the definitive form of Sleeping Beauty. However, while Disney's version is a climax in the development from wise woman to evil witch, it also marks an end point to this process of construction. With deconstructive and feminist approaches to criticism, an increasing awareness of the constructedness of fairy tales and fairy tale characters has focused attention on the way gender roles are encoded into fairy tales in dogmatic ways. Increasing information on the processes of canon formation in the individual cultures and, perhaps even more so, in the international fairy tale corpus has foregrounded the mechanisms of selection, de-selection, editing and adapting which have shaped fairy tales over a considerable period of time. Access to oral precursors, alternative versions and cultural variants of popular stories which do not conform to the dominant models of gender organisation has allowed insights into fairy tales as a naturalised artifact. Thus, fairy tales, far from being a straitjacket which enforces restricted meanings have increasingly been recognised as a genre which is, historically, defined by change and adaptation. This 'proteanity' of the fairy tale has been critically analysed by feminist critics and appropriated, or made use of, by writers and editors. Supported by the understanding that that which has

been constructed, can also be de-constructed , the figure of the witch has been reclaimed and revalidated in much of feminist revisionary rewriting of fairy tales. In Angela Carter's 'The Lady of the House of Love', for example, the curse originates from male tradition and heritage, in Irmtraud Morgner's *Trobadora Beatriz* the princess-figure herself asks to be put to sleep in order to awake in less patriarchal times and in Sheri Tepper's *Beauty* the 'evil' fairy turns out to be one of the few good characters in the novel, intent on saving both the princess and the world by her 'curse'. Stories such as these query the figure of the witch, introduce complexity into narrative motivation and return the character to some of its original roundedness, or conflicted and ambiguous nature.[4]

Notes

[1] See Bacchilega's excellent summary of the history of feminist criticism of the fairy tale (Introduction 10-1) and Zipes for reprints of classic examples of early work (185-226).

[2] It should be noted, however, that this description relates primarily to a narrow core of popular stories such as 'Cinderella', 'Sleeping Beauty', 'Snow White', 'Beauty and the Beast' or 'Bluebeard' and disregards the many other types of fairy tales in which such stereotypical representations are not prevalent. However, in the processes of canon formation, many of these 'alternative' tales were either excluded from influential print collections or were adapted to fit the pattern

described above. One outcome of the work of feminist scholars and writers has been that many more of these stories are now available for a wider readership. Nevertheless, the popular idea of the typical fairy tale still continues to be shaped by the passive princess-male-saviour paradigm.

[3] The good fairies, however, also present a challenge to this dichotomy, calling into question the mutual exclusivity of the two categories of 'the angel by the hearth' and 'the fallen woman'. Although they are unmarried, and thus single, textual logic requires that they have to be seen as 'good'. I believe that their representation as a community of twelve (i.e. *not* single), the emphasis on familial terms in describing them, such as sisterhood, and their integration into the nursery are an attempt to deal with this difficulty. Thus the emphasis on their caring, nurturing and kindness to children codes them as good, since they are seen to participate in the activities of motherhood.

[4] For a more detailed discussion of the feminist revision of fairy tales ßand interpretation of Tepper's, Morgner's and Carter's versions see Karen Seago, (1999) 'Let Sleeping Beauties Lie? On the difficulties of revisioning the tale.' New Comparison, 27-28, pp. 98-117.

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