That Which we Call a Rose

The Grimms' 'Brier Rose'

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'The princess became known by the name Beautiful Sleeping Brier Rose,' the narrator of the Grimms' tale 'Brier Rose' (1857) tells us, 'and a tale about her began circulating throughout the country' (Grimm 187). In this essay, I will discuss the significance of the elements highlighted in this quotation: the name by which the heroine becomes known and the folkloric means by which this occurs.

To be a Brier Rose is to be a flower among thorns. Our heroine 'prick[s] her finger' and soon a 'brier hedge' surrounds and conceals the castle in which she lives: she falls foul of a needle's point and is subsequently hidden away in an impenetrable fortification composed of thorny plants. This mirrors the protectiveness with which the princess has been raised throughout her life, however. She is protected from the thirteenth wise woman's curse by the twelfth's wish, and '[s]ince the king wanted to guard his dear child [...] he issued an order that all spindles in his kingdom were to be burned' (Grimm 187). Though this royal order is not supernatural as the hedge and the intervention of the wise women are, it is at least extraordinary. The king's prerogative power ostensibly enables him to destroy every spindle in his kingdom, however essential these devices were to feudal societies, to protect his daughter. Likewise, the supernatural protection of the hedge encloses the princess and the royal court in a private space, sheltering them from the dangers of the external world.

In the 1812 version of the tale, the princess 'took a great liking to the old woman and joked with her and said she wanted to try spinning one time' (Zipes and Dezsö 163). In the 1857 version, she does not even know what spinning or a spindle is (Grimm 187). Her parents have sheltered her to such an extent that she is ignorant of the threat that faces her. Thus, her touching the spindle transforms from an; act of 'jok[ing]' recklessness to one of pure ignorance. Her parents' enterprise is a failure: they attempt to protect their child, and in doing so they make her unprepared for the threat that faces her.

It is for this reason that the princess is pricked under such circumstances as she is: 'it happened that the king and queen were not at home,' leaving the princess 'alone' and free to 'explor[e],' eventually finding 'an old woman [...] busily spinning' (Grimm 186–87). In other words, the moment the princess is left alone, she strays outside the confines of her usual protective environment and encounters her fate, archetypically personified as an elderly female spinster. The fateful nature of this moment is particularly emphasized in the 1857 version by the added detail of 'the bed that was standing there' ready for her collapse. Spindles are an essential part of feudal societies: this fact cannot be avoided or erased, even by the royalty, who may never spin anything with their own hands. In sheltering the princess, the monarchs prevent her from becoming a woman, which in a feudal world meant domestic responsibility. The spindle signifies the domestic chores

that a pampered princess does not have to encounter, but through which other women in a feudal society learn adult responsibility, an education denied to her as a royal.

Becoming a woman also means sexual maturation, which is equally suggested by the symbolism we have discussed. The rose for which the princess is named has prominent sexual connotations: the flower suggests virginity, its red color the flush of sexual arousal and the blood of the menstruating woman. The prick of the spindle, occurring on her fifteenth birthday, also seems to suggest the blood of female puberty, an inevitable reality that is part of her fate as a woman. By sheltering the princess from knowledge of the spindle, her parents have made her vulnerable to it: by preventing her from maturing into adulthood, she is not prepared for the sexual maturation that accompanies it.

The solution to this problem, it transpires, is further symbols of penetration. Brier Rose, the delicate flower vulnerable to needles, is surrounded by thorns to protect her from harm, but when the prince arrives 'he found nothing but beautiful flowers that opened of their own accord' (Grimm 188). The princess has now sexually flowered—symbolized by the transformation of the briers into flowers—and the prince is permitted to penetrate her protective barriers, which open for him like the expansion of the female genitalia during arousal. Though he wakes her with a simple kiss, her awakening is, on the symbolic level, a fundamentally sexual one.

A somewhat different emphasis on maturation is to be found in Perrault's version of the tale (1697). The princess pricks herself because 'she had been hasty, a little thoughtless, and moreover, the sentence of the fairies had ordained it to be that way' (Zipes 690). The role of fate in the event is more explicit here, but the dimension of haste and thoughtlessness is absent from the Grimms' version. Perrault's princess, on waking, gives the prince 'a look more tender than a first glance might seem to warrant,' which recalls the haste that resulted in the prick, but the narrator emphasizes that her slumber had given her 'time enough to consider what she should say to him' (Zipes 691, 693). The tale's moral, though claiming not to 'deplore' or 'preach,' argues that only 'a very rare woman' will 'wait one hundred years' and '[n]othing [is] lost after a century or so,' thus seeming to esteem patience (Zipes 695). The princess, overly hasty in her first penetrative experience with the spindle, has time to mature into a marriageable woman. The enchantment ends at the very moment the prince arrives, allowing her to actively participate in their first meeting, and since there is not even a kiss, the scene lacks some of the sexual emphasis found in the Grimms' equivalent moment. Perrault's princess is content to wait until she is married and the 'curtains of their bed [are] closed' (Zipes 693).

This image of privacy reflects a concern absent from the Grimms' telling. In Perrault's version, there are no sexually suggestive brier roses, only 'trees [...] brambles and thorns' that do not turn to flowers in preparation for the prince's arrival. However, 'the trees closed up as soon as [the prince] passed by them, and none of his attendants could follow him': the enchantments ensure that the prince and princess are alone for their first meeting, just as the maid of honor will ensure that they are alone for their first sexual encounter (Zipes 691). Perrault also has his fairy put everyone '[w]ith the exception of the king and queen' to sleep along with the princess, so that she may become an adult in her own right, without the intrusion of her parents. Though the Grimms did not include this element, it does show a comparable emphasis on the princess escaping the protectiveness of her parents and fully maturing.

The two versions of the tale also share the employment of folklore as a plot device. In Perrault's telling, the range of stories about the castle's occupants, none of them inviting, holds up the prince' progress while he 'trie[s] to make up his mind what to believe,' but the 'old peasant' explains the truth, leading the prince to his destiny (Zipes 691). The Grimms employ these elements in reverse: the 'tale [...] circulating' about Brier Rose is the truth and commonly known, while the 'old man' serves to 'dissuade' the prince from attempting to enter the castle (Grimm 187). Not only is the

folklore surrounding Brier Rose accurate, but it provides her with a name, the only name for her that the reader is given: it determines her identity. Brier Rose, unlike her alter ego Sleeping Beauty, is defined by her status as a flower among thorns, a sexual being blooming within an overprotective prison, just as much as Cinderella is defined by her phoenix-like rise from the ashes of squalor and servitude to the splendor of royalty. Brier Rose comes to the prince's knowledge through her folkloric reputation—hence her identity in his eyes is that of a flower waiting to be plucked; this is what draws him to her as a prize to win through questing. Folklore thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; the tales about Brier Rose within the tale 'Brier Rose' facilitate and ensure the trajectory of the latter. The spinning wheel, symbolic of both fate and folklore, comes full circle as tale begets tale.

Works Cited

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