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"I preferred her asleep": Gabriel García Márquez Reimagines Briar Rose

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In more than a half century of writing fiction, Colombian Nobel Laureate Gabriel García Márquez has crafted his share of fairy tales, but the story of Sleeping Beauty, or Briar Rose, seems to hold special meaning for him. Allusions to this fairy tale have appeared in several of his works, but García Márquez does more than just allude to Sleeping Beauty. He gives readers new incarnations of Briar Rose, reimagining her as a dead Caribbean dictator, a beautiful woman asleep on an airplane, and an adolescent girl christened Delgadina by the nonagenarian who falls in love with her. García Márquez's depictions of Briar Rose get progressively more ludicrous, as he mocks humanity's unhealthy romantic obsessions and our almost desperate need to believe in "happily ever after." García Márquez distorts the Sleeping Beauty archetype to show how absurd and even dangerous it is, challenging readers to re-examine their own romantic fantasies.

Keywords: Gabriel García Márquez / sleeping beauty / fairy tales / feminism / Yasunari Kawabata

In more than a half century of writing fiction, García Márquez has crafted his share of fairy tales. Numerous critics have analyzed the presence of mythic and fairy tale characters in García Márquez's work, whether it be Icarus in "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," Persephone in *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, or Cinderella and others in "The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother."[1] The story of Sleeping Beauty, however, seems to

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have special significance for García Márquez. Allusions to this fairy tale have appeared in several of his works, and much more directly than other stories, but García Márquez does more than just allude to Sleeping Beauty. He gives his readers new incarnations of Briar Rose, reimagining her as a dead Caribbean dictator, a beautiful young woman asleep on an airplane, and an adolescent girl christened Delgadina by the nonagenarian who falls in love with her. García Márquez's depictions of Briar Rose get progressively more ludicrous, as he mocks humanity's unhealthy romantic obsessions and our almost desperate need to believe in "happily ever after." García Márquez distorts the Sleeping Beauty archetype to show how absurd and even dangerous it is, challenging his readers to re-examine their own romantic fantasies.

The original story of Sleeping Beauty centers on a king and queen who finally have a daughter after years of longing for a child. At the princess's birthday celebration, one evil fairy, either because she was not invited or because she was given a substandard place setting, curses the baby. When Briar Rose, as she is known in several of the versions, turns fifteen she will prick her finger on a spinning wheel and die. Fortunately, one good fairy has yet not given her blessing, and she softens the curse: instead of dying, Briar Rose will fall asleep for 100 years. The king orders all spinning wheels in the land to be destroyed, but as the story of Oedipus taught us, you cannot escape your fate. On her fifteenth birthday, Briar Rose wanders through the castle, coming across a hidden room with an old woman spinning. The princess tries the spinning wheel, pricks her finger on a spindle, and falls asleep. After 100 years have passed, Prince Charming comes along and kisses her. Briar Rose then awakens, and she and her prince live happily ever after, though in some versions there is additional unpleasantness that must be overcome.

In her analysis of the seductiveness of the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale, Maria Tatar writes, "Feminists have targeted Sleeping Beauty as the most passive and repellent fairy-tale heroine of all, and many have done their best to make the story go away" ("Show" 142). Indeed, Sleeping Beauty has not enjoyed the same popularity as other fairy-tale princesses, such as Snow White and Cinderella. This could be because it is difficult to establish much action and drama around a character who spends most of the story asleep, but Tatar argues that this is actually what makes Sleeping Beauty so riveting: "Of all the fairy tales, 'Sleeping Beauty' is perhaps the most cinematic in its fashioning of a primal scene of visual pleasure. Curiosity and the desire to look mingle with a display that is both aesthetically and erotically charged" (143). Tatar's analysis easily applies to García Márquez's use of the Sleeping Beauty story within his own works, as his manipulation of the fairy tale employs ample use of aesthetics and eroticism.

In his last published work of fiction, the 2004 novella *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*, García Márquez tells readers an updated version of this classic fairy tale. The central premise of the novella is enough to give feminists fits: a 90-year-old man, believing he will soon die, decides "to give myself the gift of a wild night of love with an adolescent virgin" (*Memories* 3). To this end,

the unnamed narrator calls a friendly madam—named Rosa Cabarcas—asking her to find him what he desires. The madam does, but when the time comes, the narrator is unable to wake the sleeping fourteen-year-old, nor does he want to deflower her while she sleeps. What follows is a bizarre love story that, if read without acknowledging the intended irony, might make one wonder if García Márquez has lost his mind. The hapless nonagenarian protagonist finds himself in love with a young girl he has never spoken with, had sex with, or even met outside of the rented room in the whorehouse where he first sees her. Most bizarre of all, readers are told that the girl has also fallen in love with her elderly suitor, and the novel ends with a "happily ever after" sense that the two will enjoy a beautiful romance for another decade before the narrator is finally "condemned to die of happy love in the joyful agony of any day after my hundredth birthday" (115).

Perhaps the most offensive part of the novella for a feminist critic, however, is the fact that the narrator creates his own persona for the young girl, even calling her "Delgadina" and refusing to learn her real name.[2] When Rosa starts to tell him the girl's name, he says, "Don't tell me … for me she's Delgadina" (68). He fantasizes of a life with his Delgadina, imagining their conversations while rejecting opportunities to engage in actual dialogue with the real girl. In what is perhaps the strangest part of a strange little book, when Delgadina finally speaks to her suitor, he has an epiphany that is logical for him and horrifying for readers: "Her voice had a plebian touch, as if it belonged not to her but to someone else she carried inside. That was when the last shadow of doubt disappeared from my soul: I preferred her asleep" (77). The narrator completely negates the girl's true existence and persona. He is not interested in who she actually is, only in the fantasy he has woven around her sleeping form.

However, it is important to not take this novella at face value. García Márquez is known for his sly humor and irony, and one could dismiss *Memories* as a 115-page joke. A more nuanced reading of how García Márquez incorporates and interprets fairy tale conventions, though, shows that he is both poking fun at people's desire to romanticize their existences as well as demonstrating the inherent dangers of fairy tale conventions. The narrator and his beloved are the embodiment of Briar Rose and her rescuing prince,[3] and through them García Márquez mocks humanity's need to continue to believe in romantic fantasies. The narrator even reads fairy tales to his Delgadina, including Charles Perrault's versions of the classic tales and the stories from *Arabian Nights*, though only the ones "sanitized for children" (76). Even the name he gives her, Delgadina, is derived from a South American folk song about a young girl who dies after her father the king imprisons her for refusing his sexual advances. When her father makes his demand, Delgadina replies, "Neither the Lord of Heaven / Nor our most sovereign Lady / Wishes that I should lie / With the father who begot me" ("Delgadina" 11). In *Memories*, the narrator sings this song as a lullaby while he dries off the girl's unconscious, perspiring body. That the narrator sees no irony in singing this song to his Delgadina is a testament to his complete romanticization

of their encounters. Even when Delgadina leaves him a stuffed polar bear with a card that reads "For the ugly papá" (*Memories* 74), he still never makes the connection that his amorous love for this young girl is every bit as lecherous and wrong as the king's incestuous desire for his daughter.

Memories is not the first García Márquez work to include allusions to Sleeping Beauty. *The Autumn of the Patriarch* opens with what appears to be an homage to the fairy tale, as readers are introduced to a castle-like setting that has seemingly become frozen in time. The narrator states that entering the fortress was "like entering the atmosphere of another age, because the air was thinner in the rubble pits of the vast lair of power, and the silence more ancient" (1). Most telling are the "lunar-dust-covered rosebushes" which had "proliferated to such a degree in their abandonment that there was scarcely an odorless chink in that atmosphere of roses" (2). In most versions of the Sleeping Beauty story, the enchanted castle becomes completely engulfed by roses, whose thorns prevent suitors from making their way to the sleeping princess. The Grimms describe a constantly growing "hedge of briars" (100), while another version describes shoots that "swell and thicken and send out blossoms, forming a mass of thorns and roses to curtain the castle" ("An Embowered Sleep" 83). Roses are ubiquitous to the story of Sleeping Beauty and are often featured in artistic representations of the fairy tale, such as those by Gustave Doré, Edward Burne-Jones, and Thomas Spence.

Roses also appear in *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*, most notably in the name of the madam, Rosa. The name is terribly ironic, as there is little beautiful about the madam. As Elizabeth Wanning Harries argues, Rosa's "matter-of-fact cruelty and moral indifference to 'Delgadina' mark her as another evil fairy" (7). Roses surround the narrator in a more explicit way, as his long-suffering housekeeper Damiana leaves vases of red roses all over his house on the morning of his ninetieth birthday, with the note "I hope you reach a hunnert" (García Márquez, *Memories* 40). On one of his visits to Delgadina, the narrator wants to stop by a florist to buy her "a nice vase and a bouquet of yellow roses … but nothing was open and I had to steal a bouquet of newborn alstroemerias from a private garden" (61–62).

The presence of roses is an intentional move on the author's part to evoke the fairy tale, both in *Memories* and *The Autumn of the Patriarch*. Rather than a princess asleep in a cursed castle, however, in *Autumn* it is a nameless dictator who rests somewhere inside the fortress, and the people who venture forth discover him "stretched out on the floor, face down, his right arm bent under his head as a pillow, as he had slept night after night every night of his ever so long life" (4). The dictator is obviously dead, but the people who find him "did not dare believe in his death because it was the second time he had been found in that office, alone and dressed and dead seemingly of natural causes during his sleep, as had been announced a long time ago in the prophetic waters of soothsayers' basins" (6). Despite the allusion to Sleeping Beauty, a dead dictator does not look like a fairy tale princess. Regina Janes writes, "in a parody of sleeping beauty we move

through a world stopped in the middle of things to the sleeping beauty himself, dead in the posture predicted by the pythonness. In this fairy tale, the happy ending consists in Beauty's not waking up" (31). In *Autumn,* the entire land has been under a curse, stuck in time and unable to move forward. But as in the fairy tale, the only way to break the spell is to brave the enchanted castle and locate the "sleeping" cause of it all. Once the death of the dictator is confirmed, the curse may be broken, although the ending of the novel is ambiguous as to whether the people are truly saved.

Allusions to fairy tales, myths, and legends in this novel help to establish the omniscient presence of the dictator who has become so powerful that he transcends human existence. A visit to a seer confirms that the dictator will die exactly as he does, "at an indefinite age somewhere between 107 and 232 years" (*Autumn* 79). The dictator's near-mythic influence even causes time to stop, and he is seemingly able to rearrange time to his liking. Mayder Dravasa argues, "Given this context of an immortal being's victory over temporal constraints, it should come as no surprise to find García Márquez's patriarch defined and described by means of metaphors that also characterize the God of the Bible … it is easy to see how the patriarch's ability to resist the erosion of time is implicitly likened to God's recreative power" (400–1). The last phrase of the novel, "the music of liberation and the rockets of jubilation and the bells of glory … announced to the world the good news that the uncountable time of eternity had come to an end" (García Márquez, *Autumn* 255), reiterates this power: with his death, the stagnation of time that has trapped the people of this land finally ends. This moment mirrors the close of many versions of Sleeping Beauty, in which the entire land rejoices in the end of the curse. In the Grimms' version, the wedding of Briar Rose and the prince is celebrated with "great splendor" (104); in another, bells ring throughout the castle when the sleeping princess awakens ("An Embowered Sleep" 87). In both the fairy tale and *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, the citizens erupt in joyful celebration because they are finally able to move forward in their existences.

The Autumn of the Patriarch was published in 1978, *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* in 2004. In between, García Márquez made his most direct allusion to the fairy tale in the short story "Sleeping Beauty and the Airplane." Written in June 1982 and first published in *Playboy*, this work reads like a forerunner to *Memories*. This short tale is also told from the first-person perspective of an unnamed older man, who marvels at the beautiful young woman asleep beside him on a plane. She does not wake for the duration of the flight—even sleeping through turbulence—and never speaks to the narrator. Moreover, her sleep approximates death. García Márquez writes, "Her sleep was so steady that at one point I had the distressing thought that the pills she had taken were not for sleeping but for dying" ("Sleeping" 59). The narrator spends the flight in contemplation of her beauty, unable "to escape even for a moment from the spell of that storybook creature" (58). His reference to her as a "storybook creature" reinforces the allusion while demonstrating how he objectifies her.

Like the narrator of *Memories*, the narrator in "Sleeping Beauty and the Airplane" weaves elaborate fantasies around the object of his adoration: "I lowered the back of my seat to the level of hers, and we lay together, closer than if we had been in a marriage bed" (59). The narrator imagines the two of them sleeping together, and he wants to believe that the simple gold band on her ring finger is an engagement rather than wedding ring, as if that would somehow make her more available to him. He hopes that the plane's turbulence will wake Beauty, as he calls her, and cause her "to take refuge in my arms to escape her terror" (60), even though such a scenario is wildly unlikely. When she finally awakes, looking "as beautiful and refreshed as if she had slept in a rose garden" (61), the narrator is dismayed when she leaves "without even saying good-bye or at least thanking me for all I had done to make our night together a happy one" (61). He feels the "devastation of love" (60), but his beloved is just a beautiful stranger who happened to be seated next to him on a plane. Indeed, as Adriana Granados argues, the woman's entire persona is developed strictly from the narrator's own sense of self (11). His complete romanticization of an everyday occurrence borders on the ridiculous—and would be had García Márquez not been so sympathetic to his protagonist.

This story is, at its heart, about an old man longing for his past. The narrator tells us as much: "I had to resist the temptation to shake her on some pretext, because all I wanted in the last hour of the flight was to see her awake, even if she were furious, so that I could recover my freedom, and perhaps my youth" ("Sleeping" 61). But he does not, and at the end of the flight Beauty gets up and leaves with barely a glance at him. The story is not melancholy, but bittersweet, giving a glimpse inside the head of an older man whose youth and vigor have left him but who is still a romantic at heart. Brett Weaver reads this story as García Márquez's articulation of the courtly love convention and offers an interesting comment on Latin American literature: "Latin American authors tend to be somewhat anachronistic (as 'sleeping beauty' is with an 'airplane'), perhaps due to their belief that the present is an accumulation of pasts that reinterpret and constantly replay themselves" (11). The Sleeping Beauty motifs in García Márquez's writing attest to this: the author knows that those fairy tale conventions are always with us, no matter how far from them we would like to think we have progressed. Our past informs our present, and the fairy tale tropes we encountered as children rest just below the surface of our consciousness.

Psychoanalysts have made extensive analyses of fairy tales, none more famous than Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment*. Bettelheim argued that the story of Sleeping Beauty symbolized the period just before the onset of puberty in females, which he argued was characterized by sleepiness and social withdrawal. Sleeping Beauty's "awakening," the onset of puberty, signified that she was ready to begin sexual relations—in socially approved ways, of course. The idea that the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale is nothing more than an extended metaphor for sexual maturation has some purchase, but what is more interesting is Bettelheim's contention that Briar Rose "is the incarnation of perfect femininity" (236). Putting

those two ideas together, with a feminist spin, would indicate that the perfect female is one who is wholly absent from society until she becomes useful as a sexual partner and a bearer of children. García Márquez toys with this idea in his stories, giving us female characters who are "absent" from life in one way or another, and he even seems to venerate these females as "incarnation[s] of perfect femininity," as Bettelheim puts it.

García Márquez's use of source material, however, goes beyond the original fairy tale, and it is his other literary influence that is more important for understanding his intentions with these stories. "Sleeping Beauty and the Airplane" is not as disturbing as *Memories*, but both works were inspired by the same source: "House of the Sleeping Beauties" by Japanese writer Yasunari Kawabata. Kawabata's work centers on a secret club where old men pay to sleep next to beautiful, naked, drugged young girls.[4] Francisca González Flores argues that both *Memories* and "House of the Sleeping Beauties" focus on the "voyeuristic experience" of the protagonists (335), men observing young women who sleep deeply and whose real voices are never allowed to be heard. This also applies to "Sleeping Beauty and the Airplane," whose narrator has just finished reading Kawabata's text, and that "as [he] watched over Beauty's sleep, [he] not only understood that senile refinement but lived it to the full" (60). González Flores points out the young women's lack of discourse distances them from any specific social, economic, geographic, or temporal ideal (342), which renders them the perfect blank slates upon which the male protagonists may write any fantasy they wish.

A quote from Kawabata's novel also serves as the epigraph to *Memories*. Its tone clearly reveals that what the reader is about to encounter should not be taken that seriously: "He was not to do anything in bad taste, the woman of the inn warned old Eguchi. He was not to put his finger into the mouth of the sleeping girl, or try anything else of that sort" (Kawabata 13). That same sense of absurdity is found in many of García Márquez's works, including *Memories*. García Márquez obviously enjoys showing humanity at its most foolish, but the added element of a happy ending love affair between a ninety-year-old man and a teenaged girl complicates an interpretation of *Memories* as simple mockery. García Márquez shows how we have internalized fairy tale archetypes to the extent that they inform our everyday lives. By inverting and exaggerating those archetypes, García Márquez forces us to reconsider what they truly mean. Should women's ultimate goal in life be rescue by a prince, especially if that prince happens to be a 90-year-old man in the habit of frequenting whorehouses? Should men grow up believing that they need to rescue women? García Márquez shows readers just how disturbing these fantasies are, by presenting them with a grotesque version that cannot help but make readers uncomfortable. By distorting our fairy tale archetypes, García Márquez forces us to see these stories as they truly are: tales that perpetuate destructive gender-based stereotypes about the "proper" roles of men and women. He asks his readers to reconsider these gendered expectations and, more importantly, to reject them outright.

Like Briar Rose, Delgadina is the "perfect" fairy tale heroine. They are both are completely passive, sleeping through the majority of their stories. Both have a prince who rescues them from the banality of their existence: Briar Rose from the hidden enchanted castle and Delgadina from the vagaries of extreme poverty. Of course, the prince does not actually save Briar Rose from her cursed existence; in some versions of the story she is condemned to sleep for 100 years and the prince just happens to arrive at her bedside at the exact right time. The same could be said of Delgadina. The narrator meets her at that age when she is the most vulnerable, between fourteen and fifteen. The fact that she is willing to sell her virginity proves how dire her situation is, and it is entirely conceivable that, had it not been for the narrator's intervention, Delgadina would have wound up a regular prostitute in Rosa Carbarcas's brothel. So while the narrator clearly exploits her, he does prevent her from being exploiting by others. Jeremy L. Cass argues that "the thematic designs of García Márquez's novels often boil down to power and abuse, and *Memoria de mis putas tristes* is no exception" (118). However, Cass warns that readers should not forget "a fundamental reality in the twisted power commentary. Delgadina is placed under the objectifying gaze of a whiter, richer man—convoluted dialectics of race, class, and gender relegate the adolescent girl to a victimized existence despite the obsessive peculiarities of the old man's odd brothel routine" (120–1). It would be wrong, though, to conflate Delgadina's victimization by the narrator as victimization by García Márquez.

Delgadina is not at all well-fleshed-out as a character. She does nothing. She says nothing. She barely exists as a person. Repeatedly in the novella, the narrator claims that she does not seem quite real to him. When he learns that she has turned fifteen, he thinks, "It troubled me that she was real enough to have birthdays" (71). Esperanza Granados writes that various circumstances in the novella reinforce the idea that Delgadina is primarily a product of the narrator's imagination (706). Delgadina's aged prince is in love with a fantasy he has created, and Delgadina is in love with the first man who shows her any affection and attention. This is a weak basis for a relationship, a fact that readers cannot escape.

García Márquez gives us a modern fairy tale that throws our superficiality and our failings back into our faces. We dream of true love and romance and happily-ever-after, but García Márquez makes us realize that those things exist only in our fantasies and in our fairy tales. Perfect, passive princesses become trapped by patriarchal conventions that inhibit their growth as human beings, and rescuing princes ultimately fail to live up to the expectations society has for them. García Márquez is not telling us to abandon our romantic yearnings, but he is telling us to accept that these are too often the stuff of children's tales; love in the real world will never measure up and we should not expect that a prince or princess is going to swoop into our lives and make everything better.[5] García Márquez's use of fairy tales demonstrates his belief that these conventions are dangerous for both women and men.

Analysis of fairy tales and their modern incarnations often includes commentary on how ubiquitous these stories are. As Jack Zipes explains it, "the best of our tales do not die" ("Changing" 7). However, many critics worry that modern versions of fairy tales serve only to weaken the original tale's strengths. Tatar argues that "magical thinking is enacted nowhere more successfully than in fairy tales" in which children learn the power of words and thoughts to produce physical action and change ("Why" 61). Tatar believes that modern retellings of fairy tales "[undercut] precisely their original power to give us a bite of reality" (58). García Márquez's retellings certainly border on the fantastic, but he does still present us with a realistic image of the world and its people, though not necessarily one we like. García Márquez's thinking seems to be more in line with Zipes's idea that "we need the fantastic for resistance" to social ills ("Why" 3). Zipes believes fantasy allows readers to learn to resist the urge to knowingly hurt others: "Fantasy matters because it can enable us to resist such criminality, and it can do so with irony, joy, sophistication, seriousness, and cunning" (11). García Márquez does not present these abhorrent situations because he believes they are right but because he believes they are wrong. His use of the Sleeping Beauty story as his underlying archetype helps readers to identify with situations that are wholly unfamiliar, to perhaps even see such situations as they may appear in readers' own lives.

In "Innocent Eréndira: The Reversal of a Fairy Tale," Jasbir Jain argues that García Márquez's famous novella "The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother" offers an inversion of fairy tale archetypes "not only by the ending but by the subversive element which is present in the narrative" (105). Jain sees in the story a place "where the normal relationships of the world are reversed; and there is a constant contrast between the expected and the actuality" (105). In his use of the Sleeping Beauty tale, however, García Márquez offers not so much a reversal as a hideous exaggeration of reality, meant to repulse while also seeming disturbingly familiar. He does not hold Sleeping Beauty up to his readers as an ideal—more as a warning about what can go awry when we let our romantic fantasies get away from us, when we fail to critically analyze what these fantasies and fairy tales mean. García Márquez's use of fairy tale tropes never seems to be mere fantasy. Indeed, it seems all too real.

Notes

1. See Sheppeard, "Some Thoughts on Gabriel García Márquez's 'A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings'"; Holdsworth, "Two Contemporary Versions of the Persephone Myth"; and Hancock, "Gabriel García Márquez's 'Erendira' and the Brothers Grimm," among others.

2. Though it bothers me to do so, I will refer to her as Delgadina throughout my article, for simplicity's sake; like the narrator, the young girl is never named in the novella.

3. A colleague in the psychology department at Washington & Jefferson College, Dr. Beth Bennett, pointed out that in *Memories*, García Márquez inverts the story of Sleeping Beauty by giving readers

an old prince and a young girl. Technically in the fairy tale, Briar Rose awakens when she is 115 years old, while her rescuing prince is a young man.

4. The 2011 film *Sleeping Beauty* was almost certainly influenced by Kawabata's story. In this Australian film, the character Lucy is given drugged tea so that wealthy men can molest her while she sleeps.

5. In my analysis, the narrator and Delgadina do not experience real love, but many critics would disagree. Esperanza Granados argues that *Memories* reveals the absurd moral prejudices that prevail in macho societies, but, at the same time, gives readers a story that reiterates the importance of love as an infallible way to heal the "evils of the soul" (708); in this case, that evil is the narrator's "sick dependence on prostitutes" (706).

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