JASPER HARRIS- KAVANAGH

Differences in Meaning Between the Grimms' and Perrault's Versions of *Sleeping Beauty*

While many people are more familiar with Perrault's versions of popular fairy tales through Disney adaptations and see the Grimms' versions as macabre, it is the opposite with tale type 410, *Sleeping Beauty*. The two versions share many similarities—at least initially—but whereas the Grimms' version ends with a happy marriage, Perrault's continues to include another plot line that could easily be described in modern terms as a horror story. Both Perrault's and the Grimms' versions of *Sleeping Beauty* are very cathartic for the audience through their true depictions of the continual cycles of loss and gain on sensitive topics, and they have similar underlying messages about how people should live, especially regarding class and gender. However, because Perrault is careful to emphasize any moral lessons which he sees in the story and includes the ogre queen-mother plot line, his story acts also as a warning about choosing a spouse carefully and not hastily rushing into a marriage with youthful enthusiasm. Grimms' version contains no such moral. First, I will compare each tale's plot and motifs to familiarize the reader with each tale and to see how each tale's meaning differs. Next, I will search for aspects of each that are cathartic for the audience and prescriptive, teaching morals and appropriate behavior.

Differences and Similarities in the Plot and Motifs in Sleeping Beauty

According to the ATU index of folktales, there are five parts to the tale-type 410, *Sleeping Beauty*. The first four parts are shared between both tales and have similar plots, motifs, and meanings behind them. However, the Grimms' tale is lacking part five, the ogre queen-mother plotline, which greatly affects the meaning of the story. Initially, both stories are fantastical depictions of the challenges of royal family life, presented as ultimately good, but the fifth part present in Perrault's version turns that narrative on its head, de-sanctifying the family by presenting it as a potential source of danger. Interestingly, though family and marriage are presented as potentially dangerous and a mother is presented as evil, she must be dangerous to her daughter-in-law, rather than her son, preserving the mother-child relationship as one that is ultimately good.

The first part of the tale is *"[t]he wished-for child"* (Cardigos et al 2006, 92). Both tales are very similar here, and though the daughter arrives by different means in each story (one by a helpful talking frog in motif B211.7.1 and B4931.1, and the other simply with time), the meaning does not change. However, what happens next sets the tone for the rest of the story. In the Grimms' version, the King hosts a celebratory feast (motif P634) to celebrate his daughter's birth, but in Perrault's version the feast is after the Princess's christening (motif V87). This brings the audience's attention to religion and morality and grounds the tale more in reality than the nondescript fantastical fairy tale setting.

The second part of the tale, "*[t]he fairies' gifts,*" (Cardigos et al, 92), is nearly identical in the two versions. They share the same motifs: F361.1.1, *"[f]airy takes revenge for not being invited to a feast"* (Thompson 1966, 71); and F316.1, "*[f]airy's curse partially overcome by another fairy's amendment*" (61). These motifs are the driving force behind the main actions of the plot of this tale. Though the King attempts to prevent the curse from coming into fruition, it is ultimately in vain (motif M379), bringing the tale to part three, "*[t]he enchanted princess,*" (Cardigos et al, 61). Perrault's version is longer and more convoluted, though the same result is achieved and there is little difference in the meanings of each tale, save for the emphasis on morality. The Princess finds a spindle in a tower and pricks her finger, triggering magic sleep (motif D1364.17). All fall asleep in the Grimms' version, but in Perrault's version, the fairy who had altered the curse returns and puts the others to sleep so that the Princess would not be all alone in the castle when she awoke. Then, a magical hedge (motif D945) grows around the castle, protecting the sleeping Princess (motif D1967.1).

At the end of the hundred years, the curse is lifted in two different ways, starting part four of the story, "*[t]he disenchantment,*" (Cardigos et al, 92). Both are lifted at the end of the specified time (motif D791.1), but in the Grimms' this is done with a kiss from the Prince (motif D735). In Perrault's version, the curse is lifted just as the Prince enters the Princess' room and falls to his knees in awe of her beauty, (a perfect image of chivalry)—it is more chaste than the Grimms' version. All others awake, and the two get married happily. Up to this point, both tales are fairly simple, charming tales that give happy endings to

those whose fate had been unkind. Although Perrault's version does so a bit more directly, both enforce traditional roles of class and gender, emphasizing marrying and having children as central to life.

However, part five: "*[t]he jealous mother-in-law*" (Cardigos et al, 92), changes and complicates Perrault's story because it presents family and marriage as a potentially dangerous problem. Firstly, the Prince lies to his parents about finding the castle, marrying the Princess, and having two children. This is the behaviour expected of a trickster character, not a prince, making the audience question whether or not the Princess should have married him. Then it is revealed that, "He never dared to trust [his mother] with his secret; he feared her, though he loved her, for she was of the race of the ogres […] [and] had ogreish inclinations" (Perrault 1998-2023) to eat children. This statement preserves the Prince's good character by clarifying that he is choosing to fulfill his duty as a husband and father over his filial duty to his parents because of less than ideal circumstances, rather than lying for malicious reasons. Naturally, when the Queen mother finally learns about the children, she decides to eat them in secret, ordering them to be killed and prepared for her meals. The helpful cook (motif N842) deceives her by substituting their flesh with various animals (motif K1840) and hiding them away. Upon the discovery of his deception, she tries to brutally put them to death, but is surprised by the King's early return and kills herself instead in a rage. The last moral addition is that the King was saddened by her death but comforted with his wife and children, highlighting the importance of replacing one's family with another through

marriage and mitigating some—but not all—of the negative connotations associated with it at the beginning of part five.

Cathartic Aspects of Sleeping Beauty

Though Perrault's version is most clearly prescriptive, both are very cathartic. The themes of the tale are universal and pertain to what was often the most central part of life; problems are solved in ways that appeal to most people's sense of justice; and the plot line, rather than follow one greater arc, follows multiple smaller and more realistic struggles to gain what one lacks and prevent the loss experienced in everyday life. The main themes of this tale revolve around family: marriage, children, and death. These are relevant in every human era, but especially in earlier French and German societies before modern healthcare greatly reduced child death rates; when marriages had great social, political, and financial implications; and divorce was religiously impossible. Since the tale is so relevant to everyday life, it is also extremely engaging for the audience, expertly fulfilling one of the roles of folklore: entertainment (Bascom 1954, 342-343).

The initial problem at the beginning of the tale is infertility, which is miraculously solved; yet their hard-won daughter immediately faces an undeserved death curse, a fate she cheat magically through the intervention of a fairy. Just like in real life, the fact that the Queen successfully delivered her daughter did not mean that the daughter was out of danger. Instead, there were completely new deathly dangers to avoid. The oft-magical miracles in this tale would be cathartic releases of tension for the audience, who had almost certainly experienced at least one of these

problems, and offered solutions that would provide the happy ending an audience never received with the children in their lives.

The struggle against a mother-in-law (a problem caused by marriage) is relieved in a cathartic way in part five of the tale. The Princess must live with the repercussions of having not just a terrible woman for a mother-in-law, but an *ogress*, heightening the tension of the tale by adding the additional fears of losing one's children through death, murder, and cannibalism. Resolving this situation by hiding the children away and the mother-in-law's brutal death by her own designs are therefore extremely cathartic and satisfying for the audience—even if they cannot rid themselves of their terrible in-laws, they can emotionally experience something similar through relating to the young Queen when engaging with this tale.

Prescriptive Aspects of Sleeping Beauty

Both versions of *Sleeping Beauty* contain a plethora of underlying messages about how people should behave woven directly into the plot and characterization, fulfilling another role of folklore: education (Bascom 344-345). Perrault's version goes one step further, directly stating to the audience the morals he perceived in the tale at the end. Normally the audience should look to the main character as a role model. However, the Princess, like the other good female characters, actually does nothing that is not pre-ordained by fate. The good fairy, though she has agency, uses it only to help others. The evil female characters have personal agency and use it to do terrible

things to those around them for their own pleasure. The male characters are all good—save for the brief mention of the little boy in Perrault's tale misbehaving—and have personal agency. Though it is doubtful that these portrayals were purposeful, they nonetheless reflect certain ideals of female behaviour.

The Prince is noted as behaving in a certain way in both versions. In the Grimms' version during the Prince's quest to wake the Princess, he hears of the dangers of the hedge but is "not afraid of that" (1998-2023). In Perrault's version, he is "pushed on by love and honor," and it is written that "a young and amorous prince is always valiant" (1998-2023). Love, honour, and courage are the Princely ideals.

Lastly, Perrault's story contains a perplexing poetic moral, adding on new meanings to his tale. He states that, "Late or early, [it] matters not" when love comes into one's life, and the contrary, "some old folk will even say [i]t grows better by delay" (1998-2023). In the final stanza, he notes that even though it is wiser to wait (presumably to marry), "young blood must when young blood will" (Perrault 1998-2023). These statements, when considered in reference to the tale which they are about, have the effect of warning the audience not to rush into marriage, for the Princess nearly lost the lives of her children and herself by having an ogre mother-in-law.

Conclusion

Perrault and the Grimms' versions of *Sleeping Beauty* share a lot of the same plot points and motifs. The stories are cathartic, engaging, and relevant to most audiences in the

way they solve fantastical versions of common problems. Their characters and plot act as a teaching device for the audience, modeling good behaviours for upper class men and women. However, Perrault's ogre-mother plotline and poetic reflection of the morals of the tale add new meanings. Both the Grimms' and Perrault's versions of *Sleeping Beauty* emphasise the importance of marriage through its prominent role in the plot, but only Perrault's version includes a warning about the potential negative aspects of marriage, encouraging the audience to be careful when choosing a spouse.

Bibliography

Bascom, William R. 1954. "Four Functions of Folklore." *The Journal of American Folklore* 67 (263): 333-349.

Cardigos, Isabel, Paulo Correia, and José Joaquim Dias Marques. 2006. *Catalogue of Portuguese Folktales*. FF Communications, no. 291. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica.

Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. 1998-2023. "Little Briar Rose" In *Sleeping Beauty: Tales of Aarne-Thompson-Uther type 410*, translated and edited by D. L. Ashliman. Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. Folklore and Mythology Electronic Texts. Accessed September 8, 2025. https://sites.pitt.edu/~dash/type0410.html#grimm

Perrault, Charles. 1998-2023. "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood" In *Sleeping Beauty: Tales of Aarne-Thompson-Uther type 410*, translated/edited by D. L. Ashliman. Folklore and Mythology Electronic Texts. Accessed September 8, 2025. https://sites.pitt.edu/~dash/type0410.html#perrault

Thompson, Stith. 1966. *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature; a Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends:* Vol. 3. Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Jasper Harris-Kavanagh
Jasper Harris-Kavanagh est étudiante de premier cycle à l'Université Memorial de Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador. Harris-Kavanagh étudie la philosophie, mais s'intéresse également à toutes les matières liées à la culture, particulièrement le folklore.

*

Jasper Harris-Kavanagh is an undergraduate student at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador. Harris-Kavanagh is studying Philosophy, but also has an interest in all subjects related to culture, especially Folklore.

Mary A. Griffiths Memorial Award
2025 Undergraduate Research

The *Mary A. Griffiths Memorial Award for Folklore Field Research* was established in 1990 by the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore Society to honour the memory of Mary Griffiths (1967–1990), a student of folklore from Ship Harbour, Placentia Bay. Active in the Folklore Society and preparing to pursue graduate studies in folklore at Memorial, Mary exemplified the curiosity, dedication, and community engagement that continue to inspire students today.

At the undergraduate level, the award recognizes an outstanding paper grounded in original field research, completed as part of the requirements of an undergraduate folklore course during the previous year. In celebrating this work, the award affirms the importance of student fieldwork to the vitality of folklore scholarship and honours Mary Griffiths' commitment to advancing the discipline.

Culture & Tradition is proud to present the following essay, "Differences in Meaning Between the Grimms' and Perrault's Versions of *Sleeping Beauty*" by Jasper Harris-Kavanagh as the 2025 undergraduate recipient of the *Mary A. Griffiths Memorial Award for Folklore Field Research*, as a testament to both academic excellence and the enduring legacy of Mary Griffiths.