The Winter's Tale: Folktale, Romance, and the Disney Film Formula

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In the fall of 2003, a Shakespeare Comedies course I taught concluded with *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* as examples of the romances. Throughout the course the students had shown an interest in the folk elements of Shakespeare's plays appearing occasionally in some of the comedies and in great abundance in the romances. We therefore spent some time on the literary uses of folk elements and on romance traditions from the middle ages forward, and thus the students became familiar with folk motifs found often in romances, such as the fair unknown and the exile's return. By chance, I remarked that many Disney films, notably the animated fairy-tale based ones like *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid*, use many folk and romance elements, and I also suggested that our modern notion of folktale has been both sustained and skewed by popular Disney adaptations such as these. The resulting discussion of the connections between these films and Shakespearean romances was lively and instructive. And in the grand pedagogical tradition of no good deed going unpunished, I came up with a paper topic in which my students analyzed *The Tempest* for folk motifs it had in common with Disney's 1989 *Little Mermaid*.

This approach worked well in my academic setting: a non-traditional evening school with a small but vigorous English major, and I hope it will work for you—whether you are a student or a teacher. Since the papers went back to the students before I knew about the Wooden O Conference, however, my remarks in the first half of this essay connecting *The Tempest* and Disney film will derive from my memory of points made by the students. To illustrate its further application, I will then make the same sort of analysis with *The Winter's Tale* and Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* as my main bases of comparison.

When I assigned the paper, the students were given some labels and brief descriptions of folk motifs drawn largely from the Aarne-Thompson index, but I did not direct them to that daunting

resource. This more informal approach stemmed partly from their limited practice with folklorist methodology and from the little time then remaining in the course. Admittedly, replacing Aarne-Thompson with Disney as a resource is like using one of those popular instruction manuals for non-specialists: *The Dummy's Book of Folktale Motifs*, so to speak, but those books' utility derive from simplicity and transparency—and those were the advantages of using Disney film in this course.

In our discussion preceding the paper assignment, the students were particularly successful in finding features to compare and contrast between *The Tempest* and *The Little Mermaid* as their primary "text" from the Disney canon. They were first drawn to this film because of obvious points of comparison to the play. Both play and movie involve a struggle of wills between overbearing fathers (Prospero and King Triton) and nubile daughters (Miranda and Ariel). Both have settings in which contrasts of sea and land and storms at sea are important. And both, in fact, have characters named Ariel, although it so happened that none of the students remarked on that connection.

The students readily perceived, however, one important source of conflict in both works. Prospero and King Triton are widowers raising marriageable daughters over whom they maintain a jealous guard. While Prospero anticipates as inevitable the union of Miranda and Ferdinand, he makes the going rough for a while for the two lovers: "But this swift business / I must uneasy make, lest too light winning / Make the prize light" (I.ii.542-544). A more heavy-handed Triton forbids his daughter any contact with the human world. In defying her father, Ariel turns to Ursula the Sea-Witch who pretends to be sympathetic to the mermaid's wish, but like an evil step-mother of folktale tradition has her own interests in mind and intends to make Ariel her victim in achieving them.

The students also noted that the *Tempest* and *Little Mermaid* feature a frequently appearing folktale motif: the incomplete sets of parents. Like Miranda, Ariel is motherless, and Ariel's husband-to-be, Prince Eric, appears to have lost both parents. As a point of fact, the only Disney films our class could come up with in discussion that featured both parents were coincidentally dog-centered: *The Lady and the Tramp* and *A Hundred and One Dalmations*. The latter has both Pongo and Perdita (note the Shakespearean echo on that name) as mother and father to their own as well as an adoptive brood.[1] The human masters of Pongo and Perdita, though not parents themselves, constitute nonetheless a married couple—a true rarity in Disney film and folk narratives. A child

having both natural parents is, similarly, almost never found in Shakespeare's romances. Imogen has a father and step-mother; Perdita has a foster-father in the Shepherd and is separated for sixteen years from her true parents, one of whom is assumed by the play 's audience to have died; Miranda is motherless; Marina is brought up by foster-parents: first Cleon and the evil Dionyza and second the Pandar and Bawd. As in all of these Shakespearean instances, the fractured or incomplete parental set in folktale typically results in the hero or heroine as a child being raised by surrogates who are often odd choices for the role. The child is thereby often charmingly naïve about marriage and relationships and will find in marriage, presumably, completeness in a family after being raised in a single-parent home or as an orphan, step-child, or foster-child. The absence of all or some of the customary parental protections and nurturing, furthermore, makes the child susceptible or vulnerable to the influences of the larger world.

Miranda and the mermaid Ariel are types from folk tradition known as "the fair unknown." This means that their true identities are mistaken or unknown by themselves and/or by people important to them until revealed near the story's end. The motif appears in the Disney film after Ariel surrenders her voice to the Sea Witch in order that she may be changed from a mermaid into a human. The princess arrives in Prince Eric's court but cannot identify herself in any way or succeed in winning his love without her voice. Eric would know her by the voice he heard when she rescued him, but without it, he finally disregards her in favor of the Sea Witch who has assumed Ariel's voice and a more pleasing shape in which she intends to marry Eric.

One of the students noted that *The Tempest* uses the fair unknown motif differently. When in Act One Miranda is first seen by Prince Ferdinand, he elevates her in his imagination instead of denigrating her, wondering if she is a goddess or a woman. This is interesting because often the fair unknown's worthy qualities are hidden from view to some extent, and usually under an appearance of poverty. The student also noted, however, that the princely lovers in Shakespearean romances (including Ferdinand and *The Winter's Tale*'s Florizel) love blindly and overlook the supposedly humble position in life of lowly maids, and in this play Miranda's nobility is obscured by her exiled condition. While Miranda quickly assures Ferdinand that she is a maiden and no goddess, he does not know her for what she truly is, the daughter and heir of the Duke of Milan, until Act Five.

The student was responding to an interesting characteristic of the fair unknown motif which in class discussion as a follow-up to the papers we gave the label: "noble humility / humble nobility." This was our means of describing how the fair unknown characters benefited, so to speak, from their disadvantages. The fair unknown is typically—if not universally—extraordinarily attractive and capable, as well as patient and mild in temperament. The beauty or ability of the fair unknown makes her stand out among the common people. (My pronoun references to the Fair Unknown in this essay will be female since the Disney and Shakespearean examples are, but the fair unknown can be male. The Old French label also has the masculine alternative *libeau disconnu* , examples of which include Percival, Moses, Oedipus, and even Jerry Lewis as Cinderfella). And oftentimes, the fair unknown is felt instinctively by them to be of noble origin. Moreover, it was assumed that the fair unknown's upbringing among the commonalty improved her; it made her better than a noble person who never benefited from substantial contact with the humbling influences of everyday life. Folk narratives, in fact, express a need in which the fair unknown figure, although invariably of noble birth, be better than her birth. And she is bettered by being less than exclusively noble, with all the self-interested, proud, and obnoxiously superior posturing that a privileged station in life normally suggested to the non-noble classes (Disney's *Cinderella* demonstrates this particularly well by contrasting the title character to her evil and loutish stepsisters). The nobly born Ariel and Miranda have the common touch. They accept as companions whoever is at hand, or they actively seek friends outside of an exclusive social set. The examples in the Disney film are a fish named Flounder and hermit crab named Sebastian. Miranda, on Caliban's behalf, as she reminds him, "Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour / One thing or other" (I.ii.425-426) until he attempted to violate her. Ariel and Miranda are never disdainful, and they accept with admirable patience their disadvantages. Ariel differs from Miranda in being more fully aware of what it means to be and to reject being a princess, but both are intuitively or deliberately improved by their sympathizing and humanizing contact with a larger, less exclusive world. This trait makes them powerfully appealing characters, and it is what the class termed "noble humility." When, furthermore, as is often the case, the fair unknown is loved by a prince who cares nothing for her apparently lowly condition, we have an instance of "humble nobility."

Folktale frequently features an evil charm, a curse, or dilemma which must be resolved—often through white magic and often with a *deus ex machina* effect. One student noted that Prospero and King Triton alone are possessed of such white magic. And while Triton's magic is opposed by the Sea Witch's evil magic, Prospero has no comparable foil, except that before the play's action commences, he undoes the charm made by an evil witch Sycorax which had enclosed the sprite Ariel in a tree. Both Triton and Prospero use their magic to achieve eventually a happy ending. Prospero first calls down the storm which causes the shipwreck and separates different parts of the ship's company. He then uses Ariel as his means of keeping them apart until he can orchestrate his resolution. (By the way, the Little Mermaid, unnamed in the Hans Christian Andersen original, was given a name by the Disney screenwriters which suggests they had the *Tempest* at least remotely in mind—perhaps because the stories' two Ariels are held in submission by both white magicians [Prospero and Triton] and black magicians [Sycorax and Ursula]). The opening of the curtain to reveal Miranda and Ferdinand at chess is not magic, but it has that effect on Alonso. And before Prospero relinquishes his magic forever by breaking his staff and burying it "certain fathoms in the earth" (V.i.64), he releases Alonso and the court party from their charmed state. Triton in the Disney film gives up his fatherly possessiveness and transforms his daughter from mermaid to human in one wave of his magical trident, which, like Prospero's staff, is the instrument of his magical powers. Several students noted that point of comparison, and one of them saw in the Sea Witch's desire to get Triton's trident a parallel to Caliban's conspiracy with Stephano to deprive Prospero of his magic by possessing his books. When the Sea Witch does, in fact, get the trident, she uses it to brew a terrific storm which ends only when Prince Eric kills her.

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My Disney analogue to *The Winter's Tale* is the 1959 *Sleeping Beauty*, based on Charles Perrault's telling of the fairy tale. It features two kings, Hubert and Stefan: the fathers, respectively, of Prince Phillip and Princess Aurora. The evil fairy Maleficent (literally, 'the evil-doer'), offended by not being invited to a celebration of the birth of the princess, curses the infant, declaring that she will prick her finger on a spindle before her sixteenth birthday and die. However, Meriwether, one of three good fairies, has not yet given the princess her blessing which, while it cannot perfectly

countermand the curse, can modify it so that Aurora will not die but sleep until awakened by true love's kiss.

To hide Aurora from Maleficent, the good fairies change her name to Briar-Rose and raise her up humbly in an abandoned woodcutter's home deep in the forest. Fearful of drawing Maleficent's attention, the fairies even give up use of their wands, which means they have no magic to ease this straitened existence. When we see her next, after sixteen years have passed, the princess is now the fair unknown: barefooted and in neat but patched clothes. Wearing her poverty unselfconsciously and gladly accepting her share of the chores, she walks out on her birthday to gather apples. In the woods, she meets Prince Phillip who instantly loves her without knowing her true identity. Thus we have both the noble humility of Briar-Rose and the humble nobility of Phillip so typical of the fair unknown motif as well as its frequently attendant love-is-blind characteristic. Similarly, Perdita, *The Winter's Tale*'s fair unknown, reappears in the play after sixteen years of a modest but comfortable pastoral upbringing in the home of the Shepherd who, when he found her as an infant, recognized her superior birth, speculating that her mother was "a waiting gentlewoman in the scape" (III.iii). Prince Florizel sees her as desirable, no matter what her parentage is. His father Polixenes, although he acknowledges Perdita's charms, is infuriated that Florizel intends to marry a shepherd girl. All of these are typical reactions to the fair unknown figure.

Like *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Winter's Tale* features the triumph of white magic (or at least a seeming triumph) in the way Paulina brings Hermione to life in the play's last scene. Figures comparable to Paulina in *Sleeping Beauty* are the three good fairies who take upon themselves responsibility for preserving the princess in safety for sixteen years and use their magic to restore her to her former life at the story's end. For the same span of sixteen years, Paulina safeguards Hermione who, like the awakened Aurora, then returns from apparent death to life and is restored to her proper noble station.

Yet another folktale motif is the riddling prophecy. In *The Winter's Tale*, this is supplied by the oracle: "The King shall live without an heir, if that which is lost be not found" (III.ii). In *Sleeping Beauty*, the riddling prophecy is replaced by a prophetic curse and an ordeal which function like the riddle in throwing up seemingly insurmountable obstacles to a happy resolution. To prevent Maleficent's curse, King Stefan orders all spinning wheels in the kingdom destroyed, but Maleficent hides one in a secret chamber of the castle where Aurora, of course, pricks her finger.

The good fairies intervene, as already remarked, by softening the curse with the counter-charm to replace death with sleep until Aurora is awakened by true love's kiss. The fairies also cause all in the castle to sleep, because they mistakenly believe that Prince Phillip intends to marry someone else, and they need time to solve that problem. To complicate things further, Phillip is ambushed on a visit to Briar-Rose's cottage by Maleficent, who imprisons him and taunts him with the spectacle of his release long after he has grown old and feeble while Briar-Rose in her enchanted sleep remains young. The good fairies help Phillip to escape, but Maleficent places a forest of thorns around the castle where Aurora sleeps. When he is about to hack his way through, Maleficent assumes the shape of a fire-breathing dragon and attacks him. She is, of course, killed; the kiss delivered; Briar-Rose revealed as Aurora; and—to everyone's joy—the Princess and Prince will marry.

Shakespeare also uses the ordeal. Ferdinand in *The Tempest* is made to carry logs while Alonso and Antonio are made to suffer for their roles in depriving Prospero of his dukedom and sending him into exile. In *The Winter's Tale*, Perdita is denigrated and threatened by Polixenes, but the most important ordeal is Leontes'. He suffers for the actual death of Mamillius and the supposed deaths of Hermione and Perdita. When Perdita (literally, 'the lost one') is recovered, the play's riddling prophecy appears answered. But one more 'lost one,' Hermione, will also be miraculously recovered—in a surprise ending for the audience and a release from his ordeal for Leontes.

When Briar-Rose and Perdita leave the court, sojourn in a wilderness, and journey back to court to discover their true origins, they enact the folk motif of the exile's return, an element as old as the story of Moses or Oedipus. *The Winter's Tale* has, in fact, two exiles in Perdita and Camillo. Restored to Leontes' favor, Camillo comes back to Sicily where he will wed Paulina. After her return and once she is revealed as the lost princess, Perdita will marry Florizel and unite the houses of Sicily and Bohemia.[2] In the Disney films, Briar-Rose, Snow White, and even Cinderella are restored from exile, if you consider that Cinderella has been banished from her proper place in her own household to a dilapidated tower. Briar-Rose will shed that name and with it a mistaken identity as a poor foundling. When Prince Phillip's father, King Hubert, saw her as such, he violently opposed his son's intention to marry a peasant girl. Restored to her proper name and birthright, Aurora can marry Prince Phillip as had been arranged at her birth with his father's blessing. However, like Perdita's and Florizel's, their union

is prompted by true love, and not some dynastic or political advantage, because they met and fell in love when Aurora was the fair unknown, the seemingly humbly born Briar-Rose.

Using Disney alongside Shakespearean romances led my class to one last insight. After the students got their papers back, we looked at the story of the Little Mermaid as Hans Christian Andersen first told it. In Andersen's story, the Little Mermaid never marries her beloved prince. Her bargain with the Sea Witch was that should she fail to win him in marriage, she would in fact die. The Little Mermaid's sisters intervene, however. They cut off their hair and give it to the Sea Witch to induce her to change the bargain so that the Little Mermaid can save herself by killing the Prince before his wedding night is over. Her sisters bring her the knife to do the murder, but she throws it away. At that, the daughters of the air appear and grant her other great wish by giving her an immortal soul. The Disney formula, by contrast, requires that its heroine, after suffering for love, be fetched up in a marriage to her Prince Charming. And the Disney version, in my students' opinions, was preferable for the way it corrected what they saw as a failure in Andersen's conclusion. Andersen's deeply moral tale, with its surprising extension of the "happily-ever-after" ending to an eternal afterlife, jarred with their sense of literary propriety.

The students' reaction to the ending in Anderson's original *Little Mermaid* provided a useful revelation and a way of replying to what critics sometimes regard as the clumsy plotting or unconvincing character motivation of Shakespeare's romances. In *The Winter's Tale*, for example, Leontes's sudden onset of suspicion over Hermione's marital chastity, Paulina's notion that the sight of his newborn daughter will soften Leontes's heart, and the death of Antigonus by a bear have all been criticized as inadequate to the genius of Shakespeare. Those criticisms do not take into account that folktales in crude form were a sort of literary *lingua franca* whose conventions Shakespeare could depend on his audience to recognize and accept—despite their irregularities. The equivalent *lingua franca* of folktale for us today may well be the Disney film formula in animated fairy tales such as those sketched here. But to meet modern tastes, Disney 's fairy tales fix many of the problems in plotting and characterization so typical of folktale. When the Disney writers adapted Perrault's version of the Sleeping Beauty folktale, they also simplified it and reduced it to a formulaic plot used over and over since the 1937 release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*.

The Disney *Sleeping Beauty* actually derives from a highly literary re-telling, Charles Perrault's *La Belle au Bois Dormant* (1683). Although Perrault, a member of the Académie Française, was a neo-classicist who took rough and illogical folktales of the past and gave them smoother polish, his version nonetheless possesses a more complex plot, unmotivated action, and superfluous characters—all of which the Disney version has refined away and which may remind us of the sometimes problematic Shakespearean romances. The Disney screenwriters of *Sleeping Beauty* collapse Perrault's seven good fairies into three and replace an old fairy whom the king and queen forgot to invite to the celebration of their daughter's birthday with Maleficent. The old fairy in Perrault then disappears entirely from the narrative. His Sleeping Beauty pricks her finger on her sixteenth birthday because she happens to find an old woman in a remote garret of the castle who has not heard the edict which banned all spinning wheels. Drawn by curiosity to the spindle, Perrault's Sleeping Beauty touches the needle and falls into her one-hundred year's sleep. As it happens, everyone in the kingdom, except the king and queen who leave the castle and continue to grow old until their deaths, falls asleep, and all growth and motion cease except that a wall of thorns grows up which proves impenetrable until a hundred years elapses and a worthy prince undertakes the rescue. For this unnamed hero, the thorns part and dissolve away.

Disney collapses Perrault's old fairy and this old spinning woman into the film's more substantial and frequently appearing villainess Maleficent. Disney's Prince Phillip appears in the very beginning as the destined husband to Princess Aurora, and that prompts a great portion of the film's action. However, for the Disney story to proceed thus, the original story's hundred-years sleep—one of the folktale source's most distinctive features—is replaced by a slumber of a few days. Furthermore, in Perrault, the story is only a little more than halfway completed with the marriage of the Prince and Briar-Rose. Here, briefly, is the rest. The Prince and Sleeping Beauty have two children, a son named Day and a daughter named Dawn (Fr. *l'aurore*, hence the name for Disney's Aurora). The Prince's mother, a descendant of ogres, intends to eat them and Sleeping Beauty while her son is away. She orders her steward to kill and cook for her dinner first the girl, then the boy, then the mother. The good steward (a figure from folktale tradition who may be likened to Shakespeare's Camillo and Antigonus or Laius's shepherd in *Oedipus Rex*) replaces them in turn with a lamb, a kid, and a hind. The evil mother-in-law learns

of the deception and orders a vat of "vipers and toads, with snakes and serpents of every kind" in which to throw Sleeping Beauty, the children, and the steward, but the Prince arrives at just that moment. His mother, enraged, throws herself into the vat and dies.

The Disney model of adaptation from folktale differs significantly from what Shakespeare did when he drew on the ancient practices of folk literature for his romances. Folktales with their older and less literarily perfect qualities were familiar in Shakespeare's day—as they still were in Perrault's—in their unimproved states, and these authors respected their essential folktale qualities. It appears that the more polished and simplified versions of folktale such as Disney's have chased from our collective memory the way folktale worked when they were the products of illiterate or semi-literate persons telling a story at the hearth and not those of screen-writers in Burbank, and this may go a long way in explaining why students and critics react disapprovingly to the occasional rough spots in Shakespeare's romances. When, however, we contrast Disney's adaptations to their earlier antecedents, we can be reminded that Shakespeare's original audience knew folktale in its less sophisticated form. In both Disney fairy tale and Shakespearean romance, we will find a common fund of folktale elements, but we must not expect that Shakespeare's romances, like Disney's fairy tales, will employ the more logical plotting and characterization that we moderns have come to expect.

Notes

1. Even the more recent Disney collaborations with Pixar, *Toy Story* and *Finding Nemo*, with their highly original story-lines continue the tradition of the single-parent home.

2. In *The Tempest*, Prospero will return as Duke to Milan, his villainous brother Antonio will be displaced, and the houses of Naples and Milan will be united by the marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand.