

**Rewriting the Sleeping Beauty Myth: Archetype, Cinema, and the
Ecofeminist Resurrection of Maleficent from Monstrous Feminine to Fairy
Godmother in Disney's *Maleficent* (2014)**

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Abstract

Canonical fairy tales have historically functioned as ideological apparatuses that naturalize patriarchal gender relations through romance-driven narrative closures. The Sleeping Beauty myth, in particular, encodes female passivity, aestheticized silence, and heterosexual rescue as normative ideals, culminating in the prince's kiss as the ultimate agent of awakening. Feminist critics such as Angela Carter have famously exposed these narratives as "sugar-coated lies" that conceal structures of gendered domination beneath enchantment and moral certainty. This paper offers a theory-heavy ecofeminist reading of Robert Stromberg's *Maleficent* (2014), arguing that the film radically revises the Sleeping Beauty myth by dismantling patriarchal archetypes, rescinding the masculine hero, and reconfiguring awakening through relational ethics and ecological consciousness. Drawing on feminist critiques of Jungian archetypal theory, ecofeminist philosophy (Vandana Shiva, Carolyn Merchant), feminist psychoanalytic criticism, and revisionist myth theory, the paper contends that *Maleficent* reappropriates myth as a site of resistance. By foregrounding *Maleficent* as the eponymous protagonist—aligned with nature, care, rage, and wounded agency—the film resurrects female subjectivity from the

symbolic death imposed by patriarchal fairy-tale traditions and reimagines love, power, and sovereignty beyond capitalist and masculinist logics.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Feminist Myth Criticism, Sleeping Beauty, Maleficent, Jungian Archetypes, Fairy Tales, Gender and Power.

The infallibly predictable conclusions of every fairy tale culminate to the defining moments of the lives of the Cinderellas, Rapunzels, Bellas and the Sleeping Beauties to the ‘happily ever after’, a resolution to the tippy-topsy lives of the naive, innocent heroines, waiting tirelessly through ages and centuries across cultures, to be rescued by a Knight with the shining armour, Prince of some exotic land or a warrior of unmatched wealth and power. Precisely, the very definition of all the ‘happily ever after’s for a damsel in distress is to find the Prince of her dreams. Every girl's dream, per se, seems to be deciphered by the fairy tale codes is to aspire for a fairy-tale ending in their lives. Fairy tales are not innocent cultural artifacts but powerful narrative forms that participate in the production, circulation, and normalization of social norms. Long before their institutionalization as children’s literature, fairy tales functioned as moral scripts that encoded culturally sanctioned behaviors, values, and hierarchies. As Jack Zipes argues, literary fairy tales have historically served “civilizing” functions, disciplining subjects into obedience through repetition, enchantment, and closure (Zipes 3). Gender ideology lies at the heart of this civilizing project.

Among canonical fairy tales, Sleeping Beauty remains one of the most ideologically saturated narratives, persistently reinscribing the fantasy of female passivity and masculine intervention as natural, desirable, and inevitable. The tale’s enduring popularity across oral, literary, and cinematic traditions suggests the tenacity of its gendered logic. Aurora’s prolonged sleep is not simply a narrative device but a symbolic suspension of female agency, desire, and voice. The narrative only resumes motion when the prince arrives, thereby aligning action, temporality, and history itself with masculinity. Masculinity becomes synonymous with action;

femininity with stasis. The trope of “happily ever after” functions as a narrative technology that forecloses critique. Female fulfillment is consistently achieved through heterosexual union, while the restoration of social order coincides with patriarchal succession and dynastic continuity. As feminist critics have noted, such endings disguise ideological closure as narrative satisfaction. The prince’s kiss; normalized as an act of romantic destiny, masks a unilateral intervention that denies consent, autonomy, and ethical reciprocity.

Angela Carter famously describes fairy tales as “the latent content of those traditional stories which express the fantasies of the culture that produced them” (Carter 38). Carter’s provocative description of fairy tales as “sugar-coated lies” exposes the ideological violence concealed beneath their aesthetic charm. Carter’s feminist revisions insist that myth must be interrogated rather than revered, deconstructed rather than inherited. Building on this feminist tradition, the film *Maleficent* (2014) reclaims the Sleeping Beauty myth not by centering the dormant princess but reorienting the narrative gaze toward the demonized villain, by narrativizing the marginalized and demonized figure of Maleficent. This radical shift in narrative focalization unsettles the patriarchal binary between the passive princess and the monstrous sorceress, thereby enabling a profound reworking of gendered archetypes.

Mythological Genealogy of the “Mistress of All Evil”

Maleficent as the “mistress of all evil” emerges from a complex literary and mythological lineage; a longer tradition of excluded female power. The figure later consolidated in cinema as Maleficent culminates from a source as old as *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* (1697) by *Charles Perrault* who portrays the antagonistic fairy as an excluded enchantress whose curse arises from humiliation. Her rage is socially produced. Exclusion from the christening ceremony marks her as politically illegitimate within royal structures of power. The curse becomes retaliatory justice against aristocratic arrogance. Likewise, in *Little Briar Rose* (1812), Brothers Grimm retain the motif of a slighted aristocratic figure excluded from royal

ritual, thus social humiliation precedes vengeance. In both versions, rage is not ontological but politically produced through exclusion. Earlier antecedents complicate this genealogy. The medieval romance *Perceforest or Le Roman de Perceforest*; an anonymous chivalric romance, written in French sometime around 1340, features the goddess Themis cursing a child within dynastic politics, embedding supernatural retaliation within structures of sovereignty. Classical mythology offers resonance with Nemesis as “woe to mortal men” (Hesiod, line 223), deity of retributive justice who punishes hubris rather than embodying arbitrary evil. Nemesis is not gratuitously evil but an agent of cosmic correction. Similarly, the French legend of Mélusine; a liminal fairy associated with serpentine or draconic transformation encodes anxieties surrounding female autonomy and hybridity. Such figures suggest that the “evil fairy” archetype historically functioned as a corrective force against unjust authority. The consolidation of the villain as aestheticized evil occurs most strikingly in the fairy tale of *Sleeping Beauty*. Designed with angular, gothic elegance, Maleficent becomes the self-proclaimed “Mistress of All Evil”; a spectacular embodiment of gothic femininity whose dragon metamorphosis codes female power as chaotic excess. Her green flames and climactic transformation into a dragon, aestheticize female power as spectacular monstrosity. Here, evil is ontologized. Unlike her literary predecessors, she appears motiveless. Disney's 1959 musical fantasy animation *Sleeping Beauty* encodes Maleficent as the archetypal femme fatale—autonomous, childless, sexually ambiguous, and narratively punishable. Patriarchal narrative logic solidifies female figures into binary opposition: Aurora as passive purity; Maleficent as destructive ambition. The prince's sword penetrates the dragon's body, restoring order through symbolic masculine conquest.

The Patriarchal Logic of *Sleeping Beauty*

In the traditional *Sleeping Beauty* narrative, female subjectivity is fractured between two archetypes: Aurora as the passive ingénue and Maleficent as the destructive femme fatale.

Aurora's beauty is inseparable from her silence; her body becomes a site of aesthetic contemplation rather than lived experience. Her prolonged sleep renders her an object of preservation rather than participation, reinforcing what Simone de Beauvoir identifies as woman's historical positioning as the "Other."

Maleficent, by contrast, is demonized for her autonomy, anger, and refusal to conform to patriarchal expectations. Her exclusion from the christening ceremony symbolically marks her as socially illegitimate, and her curse functions as narrative punishment for female rage. These archetypes operate ideologically to discipline female behavior: power in women is coded as monstrosity, while submission and passivity are romanticized as virtue.

As Barbara Creed argues, the monstrous feminine often emerges as a projection of male fear rather than an inherent threat (Creed 7). The fairy tale thus externalizes patriarchal anxiety by casting the powerful woman as villainous and the compliant woman as desirable. The prince's role as savior consolidates this logic. His unearned heroism restores order without ethical interrogation, reinforcing what Kate Millett identifies as the myth of masculine authority. The awakening kiss becomes a symbolic assertion of patriarchal entitlement over the female body, sanctioned by romance and destiny.

The live-action revision of the fairy tale in the film adaptation of Stromberg, the protagonist Maleficent, destabilizes this essentialism. Cinematically, the evolution of the mythical figure of Maleficent marks a crucial ideological shift in the 2014 and 2019 adaptations that destabilize that coding by foregrounding trauma, ecological guardianship, and maternal care. Portrayed by Angelina Jolie, Maleficent is reimagined as guardian of the Moors whose descent into vengeance follows betrayal and bodily mutilation. Stefan's severing of her wings reframes the "evil fairy" as a victim of patriarchal ambition and the curse becomes a trauma response rather than innate malice. The sequel, *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019) further situates her within a persecuted lineage of Dark Fey, exposing how hegemonic regimes

construct resistant female power as monstrous. The epithet “Mistress of Evil” becomes ironic revealing how hegemonic structures name resistant female power as evil. Thus, Maleficent’s mythological evolution exposes a recurring pattern: powerful women outside dynastic legitimacy are narratively demonized. The cinematic revision interrupts this pattern by granting subjectivity to the previously monstrous feminine. This genealogical shift is ideologically significant: monstrosity is revealed not as feminine essence but as patriarchal inscription.

Jungian Archetypes and Feminist Critique

Carl Jung’s theory of archetypes conceptualizes myths as manifestations of the collective unconscious; recurring symbolic forms that transcend historical and cultural specificity (Jung 42). From this perspective, fairy tales operate as “culturally elaborated representations of the contents of the deepest recesses of the human psyche” (Walker 4). The Sleeping Beauty myth may thus be read as an archetypal narrative of death and rebirth, psychic dormancy and renewal.

Within Jungian analysis, the sleeping maiden often symbolizes latent potential awaiting activation, while the heroic male figure embodies consciousness, rationality, and transformative agency. However, feminist critics have consistently challenged Jungian archetypal theory for its tendency toward reductionism. By presenting gendered figures like ingénue; the passive maiden, the femme fatale; the monstrous feminine and the heroic male savior—as universal psychic truths, Jung’s framework seems to affirm naturalizing historically produced ideologies. What appears as psychic inevitability is, in fact, cultural conditioning. The femme fatale and monstrous feminine are less timeless psychic truths than projections of patriarchal anxiety toward female autonomy. Feminist myth criticism therefore insists on archetypal mutability. Maleficent exemplifies revisionist mythmaking by dismantling the binary between ingénue and the femme fatale.

Toril Moi cautions that such universalization forecloses political critique by rendering gender hierarchy ontological rather than constructed (Moi 58). Similarly, feminist psychoanalytic critics argue that archetypes often function as repositories of patriarchal fantasy rather than neutral symbols. As Barbara Creed demonstrates the concept of the “monstrous feminine” as the psychological projection of the male anxieties onto powerful women. The femme fatale, the witch, the dragon and the monstrous mother are less expressions of universal psychic forms, than ideological repositories of patriarchal fear toward female autonomy and power.

Feminist myth criticism does not reject archetypes outright but insists on their mutability and historical situatedness. Archetypes are not static essences but narrative forms subject to revision, resistance, and re-signification. As Alicia Ostriker argues, revisionist mythmaking enables women to “enter the old texts from which they were excluded and rewrite them,” transforming myth from an instrument of oppression into a medium of resistance (Ostriker 317). *Maleficent* exemplifies this feminist intervention by dismantling the binary opposition between the ingénue and the femme fatale and rearticulating feminine power outside patriarchal valuation.

Maleficent and the Rewriting of Archetypes

Robert Stromberg’s *Maleficent* radically destabilizes these archetypes by granting narrative centrality to the villainized figure. Maleficent is no longer a flat embodiment of evil but a complex subject shaped by betrayal, loss, trauma, and ethical struggle. Her transformation from benevolent guardian of the Moors to agent of vengeance is framed not as innate malice but as a response to patriarchal violence.

Stefan’s mutilation of Maleficent’s wings functions as one of the film’s most potent metaphors. Wings symbolize autonomy, mobility, and transcendence; their removal literalizes the cost of masculine ambition under capitalist patriarchy. This act of bodily violation parallels

historical practices of controlling female bodies and territories in the pursuit of power. The betrayal is not merely personal but systemic, revealing how patriarchal success is predicated upon dispossession.

By situating *Maleficent* as both victim and agent, the film rejects essentialist readings of female anger and reclaims rage as a politically intelligible response to injustice. Her curse against Aurora, while ethically troubling, is contextualized within a framework of trauma, thereby complicating moral judgment and resisting simplistic binaries of good and evil.

Ecofeminism, Nature, and Capitalist Patriarchy

Ecofeminism provides a crucial theoretical lens for understanding *Maleficent*'s critique of power. Thinkers such as Vandana Shiva and Carolyn Merchant have demonstrated how patriarchal capitalism constructs both women and nature as passive resources to be exploited, enclosed, and controlled. The domination of the environment and the subjugation of women operate through parallel logics of extraction, instrumentalization, and violence (Shiva 14).

The film visualizes this critique through the stark contrast between the Moors and the human kingdom. The Moors function as a non-hierarchical, communal, and ecologically balanced space governed by coexistence rather than conquest. In contrast, the human kingdom is defined by militarization, territorial expansion, and resource extraction. Stefan's ascent to kingship exemplifies what Merchant terms the "death of nature"—a worldview that legitimizes domination in the name of progress and security (Merchant 2).

Maleficent's identification with the Moors positions her as an ecofeminist subject whose body, power, and identity are inseparable from the natural world. Her violation thus signifies both personal trauma and ecological rupture. The assault on her body parallels the assault on the Moors, reinforcing ecofeminism's central claim that gendered and environmental oppressions are structurally interconnected.

Reconfiguring Love, Awakening, and the (S)hero

One of the most radical interventions of the film *Maleficent* lies in its redefinition of “true love.” The failure of the prince’s kiss exposes the emptiness of heteronormative romanticism of fairy tales and dismantles the central fantasy of the Sleeping Beauty narrative. Romantic love, long positioned as the highest and most transformative force, is revealed as insufficient and ideologically hollow.

Instead, Aurora is awakened by Maleficent’s kiss—an act rooted in remorse, care, and ethical responsibility rather than desire or conquest. This moment represents a decisive rupture from patriarchal romance plots and aligns with what Nel Noddings underscores as the “ethics of care”, which foregrounds relational accountability, empathy, and moral responsiveness (Noddings 24). Love is reimagined not as possession but as recognition and responsibility. Thus, Female bonds displace patriarchal heroism. Sovereignty is no longer secured through dynastic succession but through ecological and relational balance. The rescinding of the traditional hero redistributes agency among female characters and destabilizes masculine centrality. The prince is rendered narratively redundant, while female bonds become the primary site of transformation and healing.

Resurrection of Female Subjectivity

The symbolic resurrection in *Maleficent* operates on multiple levels. Maleficent’s restoration of her wings signifies the reclamation of autonomy, voice, and embodied power. Aurora’s ascension as queen of both realms envisions a post-patriarchal sovereignty grounded in coexistence rather than conquest, care rather than control. Unlike the original Sleeping Beauty, where order is restored through patriarchal succession, *Maleficent* imagines a future beyond binary power structures. Female subjectivity is no longer split between passivity and monstrosity but articulated through agency, ethical care, ecological consciousness, and relational power.

Conclusion

Maleficent (2014) functions as a thought provoking feminist and ecofeminist revision of the Sleeping Beauty myth. By interrogating Jungian archetypes, dismantling patriarchal romance, and aligning feminine power with ecological consciousness, the film reclaims myth as a dynamic site of political, ethical, and environmental intervention.

In revising awakening as an act of care rather than conquest, *Maleficent* exposes the ideological violence of traditional fairy tales and offers an alternative mythic imagination—one in which female subjectivity is resurrected, nature is re-sacralized, and power is redefined beyond domination. By tracing *Maleficent*'s evolution from Perrault's excluded fairy to Disney's dragonized villain and finally to ecofeminist guardian, the film exposes how patriarchal narratives construct female power as evil. The live-action adaptation does not merely redeem a villain; it reveals the ideological machinery that produced her monstrosity. In revising awakening as care rather than conquest, *Maleficent* transforms myth into a site of feminist and ecological resistance.

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