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The Chaucerian Debate of *Auctorite* versus Experience in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* and *Maleficent*

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Disney claims *auctorite*—a Middle English term denoting textual authority—over *Maleficent*, for the purpose of supplanting its predecessor, *Sleeping Beauty*. The various modes of *auctorite* that are represented in *Maleficent* invite analysis of the sources that Disney claims in the composition of *Sleeping Beauty* and *Maleficent*. *Sleeping Beauty* claims a medieval source text, whereas *Maleficent* claims personal experience. By relying on such conflicting epistemologies, *Maleficent* puts pressure on the validity of textual *auctorite*, resonating with the medieval epistemic debate that emerges from heuristic practices that emerge in the twelfth century as a result of scholasticism, and later implicated in the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer. The narrator of *Legend of Good Women* and the Wife of Bath counter traditional textual *auctorite* with an *auctorite of experience* that resonates with a postmodern feminist epistemology of experience. Locating Disney's Sleeping-Beauty narratives, referring to both *Sleeping Beauty* and *Maleficent*, within the Chaucerian debate of *auctorite* versus experience, emphasizes the gender binary that facilitates the epistemological dichotomy, while privileging the experiences of marginalized people against male-dominated, textual traditions. Participating in this debate, *Maleficent* relies on an epistemology of experience to validate women's narratives, similar to the Wife of Bath. Deploying this epistemology of experience, *Maleficent* subverts the *auctorite* of its predecessor, *Sleeping Beauty*, for the purpose of revising the fantasy of the Middle Ages that is foundational to the Disney tradition. By claiming a medieval source text as *auctor*, the misogyny of earlier films like *Sleeping Beauty* is identified as a medieval social construction. Through the visual rhetoric and anachronism of *Maleficent*, Disney promotes gender politics that reflect contemporary social values to repair the misogynist fantasy of the Middle Ages that was authorized by the Disney heritage. Much like the epistemic debate taken up by Chaucer, *Maleficent* challenges male dominated textual *auctorite* and the histories and traditions that it codifies. I argue that citing both women's experience and Disney as the source for the film's *auctorite*, *Maleficent* strives to recuperate Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* narrative for an audience who is familiar with feminist criticism.

This article begins by identifying *Sleeping Beauty* as an androcentric cartoon that represents the early medieval denotation of *auctorite*, as well as hegemonic medievalisms. Then, *Maleficent* is interpreted through the paradigm of *auctorite* established by later medieval writers, particularly Chaucer. Finally, *Maleficent*'s epistemology of experience will be analyzed as a means of subverting masculine-dominated *auctorite* to revise Disney's fantasy of the Middle Ages, thus bolstering the *auctorite* of the production company as one that reflects the gender politics of the contemporary audience.

Beginning with *Sleeping Beauty*, this 1959 Disney Animated Classic opens with Aurora, the title character, as a newborn who is presented and betrothed to the adolescent Prince Phillip.[1] *Sleeping Beauty*, as the title hints, is an androcentric film because women merely appear; it is the men who act.[2] Aurora is continuously objectified before the male gaze, while supporting characters facilitate the narrative. She is commodified by patriarchal powers who negotiate her marriage to enhance their own wealth before she can even speak. The image of the child in the bassinette beneath the young Prince Phillip at their betrothal foreshadows their fateful reunion in her bedchamber when he

[1] *Sleeping Beauty*, directed by Clyde Geronimi, Les Clark, Eric Larson, and Wolfgang Reitherman (1959; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2014), DVD.

[2] John Berger, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb, and Richard Hollis, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972), 47.

revives her with his kiss. Phillip performs most of the action: he rescues not only himself but also Aurora and the slumbering kingdom. Women, like the good fairies, act as well, but only as caretakers to Aurora and as aids to Phillip as he battles Maleficent. Maleficent incites action, but as the monstrous feminine, who alters her shape at will and inhabits dank dungeon-like spaces, she represents a perversion of femininity in an androcentric text.[3] *Sleeping Beauty* is about masculine powers commodifying women for the patriarchy and conquering those who resist. It is a misogynist text that is framed as a retelling of a medieval fairy tale. The matter of *auctorite* is significant for both its resonance with medieval heuristics, and because Disney's *Maleficent* opposes the validity of the medieval source that inspired the preceding cartoon.

The medieval concept of *auctorite* provides a particularly useful model for Disney's approach to the *Sleeping Beauty* narrative and representations of the Disney brand amidst changing social conditions. *Auctorite*, like the Modern English "authority," is the power to enforce rules or influence the thoughts and actions of others, but *auctorite* also refers to the textual authority that is composed of truth claims and literary traditions, namely those that can be attributed to a particular *auctor*.[4] In medieval literature, *auctoritas* refers to the facts established by the *auctor* through language. This word derives from the Lain verb *auieo*, "to tie," and the Greek *autentim*, "worthy of trust and obedience," according to Hugutio of Pisa's *Magnae derivations*, circa 1200. Based on this, then, an *auctor* is one who ties words together and who is worthy of trust and obedience.[5] But not all *auctorites* were held in equal regard in the Middle Ages. Older texts were valued more highly and possessed greater *auctorite* than compositions by medieval contemporaries. *Auctors* were hierarchically arranged beginning with the Bible, followed by the works of spiritual elders like Augustine of Hippo and Gregory I. This hierarchy would sometimes cautiously include ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. Finally, classical poets, Virgil and Ovid, would take precedence over writers of historical proximity. In fact, contemporary writers were admired for their appropriations, translations, or retellings of older, established texts.[6]

Sleeping Beauty references a distinct medieval notion of *auctorite*, one that proclaims the present cartoon to be a retelling by opening with a medieval illuminated manuscript that signifies a source text that is contemporaneous with the plot.[7] Identifying an older source text accords well with the Middle English denotation of *auctorite*. Looking at popular entertainment of the last century, Gwendolyn Morgan explains that "medieval authors' practices of turning to classical texts proper as well as of claiming non-existent classical texts for their *auctoritees*… establishes the primacy of the medieval texts as authority for modern fiction."[8] This is precisely the rhetorical strategy of *Sleeping*

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[3] See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), 2; and Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3.

[4] *Auctorite* is defined as "an authoritative book or writing[;] . . . an author whose opinions or statements are regarded as correct"; see *Middle English Dictionary,* s.v. "auctorite," accessed January 5, 2015, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED2984.

[5] Charity Jensen, "Spaces of Authority: *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*," in *The Canterbury Tales Revisited—21st Century Interpretations*, ed. by Kathleen A. Bishop (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 283.

[6] For the nuances of medieval English *auctorite* see Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans, eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 3-8. Gwendolyn Morgan provides an insightful overview of contemporary medievalisms and claims to *auctorite* in "Authority," in *Medievalisms: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), 27-33.

[7] Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* is actually based on Charles Perrault's "Le belle au bois dormant," written in 1697; see *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé* (Paris: Larousse, 2010).

[8] Morgan, "Authority," 28.

Beauty's citation of a fictional medieval manuscript that renders the cartoon a medievalism. The source has been fabricated, but Disney claims to be a credible medium for negotiating audiences' reception of the Middle Ages.

Referencing a medieval artifact at the introduction to *Sleeping Beauty* serves to invoke audiences' cultural memory of a fairy tale tradition that stretches back to the medieval period. In this context, "cultural memory" refers to the collective memory of a culture and its relation to historical narratives and ideologies.[9] It would seem that if Disney were to be blamed for the misogynist messages of *Sleeping Beauty*, it is because the production company maintained the integrity of its source text. The misogyny was not conceived, nor condoned, by Disney; rather conveniently, it is transmitted directly from the Middle Ages. Audiences' familiarity with the *Sleeping Beauty* narrative, combined with the ambiguity of the Middle Ages in the cultural memory, and the reverence with which older texts are still treated, are accessed at the opening of the cartoon to generate *auctorite* for the emerging Disney tradition. This rhetorical device was used when the Disney animation studio was growing but still young. By now, the production company has accumulated enough of these popular tales to refer to them as the Walt Disney Animated Classics, and so Disney now stands on its own *auctorite.*[10]

Comparatively, *Sleeping Beauty* is narrated by a masculine voice, reading a traditional fairy tale from a manuscript, which implies a medieval male *auctor*; conversely, *Maleficent* undermines the Disney tradition that produced *Sleeping Beauty* by opening with a female narrator who challenges convention and cultural memory, playfully proposing: "Let us tell an old tale anew and see how well you know it." At the conclusion of the film she identifies herself as the one whom fairy tales have dubbed "Sleeping Beauty." The narrator accesses both the medieval past and the early Disney tradition to revise the *Sleeping Beauty* narrative with which audiences are familiar. *Maleficent* is presented as a more truthful account—suspending disbelief—in spite of the popular fairy tale, and even the earlier Disney animated classic, both of which dominate the cultural memory of the story. The narrator asserts her *auctorite*, implying that *Sleeping Beauty* has suffered corruption that occurs when texts are transmitted over centuries. Her experience validates her retelling, and subordinates the *auctorite* of the earlier narrative.

This epistemology of experience has deep resonance with medieval *auctors*. The medieval hierarchy of *auctorite* favored the Bible, Church Fathers, and classical writers, but scholars of the eleventh and twelfth centuries were using reason and logic in new ways, resulting in an epistemology that questioned language and authorial agency, and that gave credence to readers' evaluation of texts based on experience.[11] The lines of demarcation that separated the texts of church fathers from classical writers in the hierarchy of *auctorite* were crossed as the medieval church turned to classical texts to inform circumstance for which scripture did not provide clear answers. By the fourteenth century, poets like Chaucer were merely nodding at classical *auctors*, or even fabricating a heritage of *auctorite* for their own works.[12] A.J. Minnis explains that in "the later Middle Ages…certain vernacular writers…sought to locate and empower their writings and those of distinguished contemporaries in relation to the systems and strategies of textual evaluation which scholasticism

[9] See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory,* trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 92.
[10] Walt Disney Animated Classics is a classification of Disney films that extends from December 1937 with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and continues to the present day to include recent releases like *Big Hero 6* in November 2014.
[11] Jensen, "Spaces of Authority: *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*," 281-2.
[12] Morgan, "Authority," 27.

had produced."[13] This epistemic shift created rifts, whence emerged new approaches to traditional texts and practices, and wherein authors like Geoffrey Chaucer composed a literary *auctorite* of their own.

Chaucer begins *The Legend of Good Women* with the narrator's musing over knowledge about the conditions of heaven and hell that is disseminated via texts because no living person could have experienced such. He gives "feyth and ful credence" to books, and promises to show to them such reverence that "ther is game noon / That from my bookes maketh me to goon" because books codify human knowledge that surpasses the mundane, and because they transmit this knowledge through time, beyond the boundaries of a single life (F 31-34).[14] Still, in spite of all of the remarkable narratives and knowledge that books provide, the narrator abandons his devotional practices for his personal enjoyment of the meadow in May. The *auctorite* that he previously praised is complicated by the narrator's clever circumnavigation of an epistemological problem: *auctorite* is valued more highly than experience, and yet the written record must be undergirded by someone's personal experience. It is not long before the narrator foregoes his books, and thus *auctorite*, in favor of experience. Similarly, in *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's Wife of Bath claims that, "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me" (WBT ll. 1-2). Alison exercises a distinct *auctorite* that emerges from the epistemology of experience that resulted from the scholastic hermeneutic of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, as well as her standpoint as a woman. Peggy Knapp argues that Alison fully comprehends the Church teachings that she references in the prologue, and that she is capable of performing the "proper" misogynist reading, but that her experience reveals the falsehoods of doctrine.[15] She appropriates the texts to comprise a revolutionary narrative of her own life. Her narrative is revolutionary because it pits human nature against doctrine and results in a privileging of the single life against the church's preference for marriage.[16] Furthermore, her tale results in the male figure, a knight, learning through his own experience that he ought to relinquish his authority to women.[17] Feminist social theorist Patricia Hill Collins explains that experience is invoked by women to establish credibility when making claims and speaking across the borders of identity categories.[18] Even if Alison is a fictional character, Chaucer composes an *auctorite* that emerges from women's experiences via Alison's prologue and tale. In spite of the fact that the textual *auctorite* was prior to her personal experience, Alison imposes her standpoint onto texts to revise a literary tradition that marginalizes her experience. Similarly, *Maleficent* concentrates on the marginal villain of the prior Disney cartoon, using women's experience to revise the narrative that identifies women as either abject monsters or virgins assigned value by their social status and comportment. According to Chaucer's Wife of Bath and Disney's *Maleficent*, Women's *auctorite of experience* challenges the hegemonic notion that *auctorite* must be textual, hierarchical, and masculine.

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[13] A.J. Minnis, "DeVulgari Auctoritate: Chaucer, Gower and the Men of Great Authority," in *Chaucer and Gower: Difference, Mutuality, Exchange*, ed. R. F. Yeager (Victoria, B.C.: University of Victoria, 1991), 39.

[14] All references are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

[15] Peggy Knapp, "Alisoun of Bathe and the Reappropriation of Tradition," *Chaucer Review* 24.1 (1989): 49-50.

[16] Thomas R. Lounsberry, *Studies in Chaucer: His Life and Writings*, vol. 2 (New York: Russell, 1962), 523-524.

[17] Judith Slover, "A Good Wive Was Ther of Biside Bath," in *Chaucer's Pilgrims: An Historical Guide to the Pilgrims in The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Laura C. Lambdin and Robert T. Lambdin (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 251-253.

[18] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 257. Also, for an overview of experience as an epistemology of the second wave and a defense for experience as the means by which bonds are forged across cultural boundaries, see Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 131-152.

The *auctorite* of experience that the *Maleficent*-narrator claims is reinforced by the live-action aesthetic of the film, which overrides *Sleeping Beauty* as a mere cartoon fantasy.[19] Animators shaped the androcentric aesthetic of the Disney tradition, and so Aurora's unnaturally delicate and unblemished appearance is an affect of the male gaze that controls her form. In opposition to this, *Maleficent*, presents flesh-and-blood actors. This is not meant to suggest that Angelina Jolie is not also controlled by the same pressures of the male-gaze—she is, after all, a Hollywood icon. Rather, Jolie has a persona that extends beyond the film, and indeed this persona informs the *Maleficent*-character whom she portrays. Angelina Jolie imbues the character with a vitality that the cartoon aesthetic limited to the realm of make-believe. The life and oeuvre of the actress reinforces the *auctorite* of *Maleficent* over *Sleeping Beauty* because elements of the film extend beyond the film's boundaries, registering with audiences as more real based on their exposure to popular culture. Audience experience, then, informs interpretation of the film.

Audiences, however, are faced with the conundrum that *Sleeping Beauty* and *Maleficent* are suspended in contradiction because they have radically divergent endings, and yet Disney authorizes both. But the Disney trademark that brands *Maleficent* in the opening sequence is deployed in such a way that contrasts the present film with its cartoon predecessor. *Maleficent* uses the *auctorite* of the Disney studio to deviate from the Disney tradition, while reifying Disney's *auctorite* by coopting a modern feminist epistemology of experience. *Maleficent* opens with the standard Disney trademark: a sweeping aerial view of a diverse landscape, under a gloaming sky, punctuated by the Disney castle. As the view rests on the ivory fortification, the color scheme shifts to the dull earth tones of a functional fortification that is dimly lit by fire. The Disney trademark castle dissolves into the medieval castle of the present diegesis. This kingdom remains nameless through the film, befitting the ambiguity of the medieval period in the modern imagination, but the transition synthesizes the medieval castle with Disney. This conflation bolsters Disney with medieval *auctorite* by suggesting the film studio's rootedness in medievalisms.

In addition to the narrator's *auctorite* of experience, Disney represents itself as a medieval *auctor* at the outset of *Maleficent*. The conflated castle orients the audience as viewers and denizens of the Disney tradition. Just after the Disney castle transitions into the functional castle of the story, the camera veers off sharply in the exact opposite direction of Maleficent's home, the moors. The establishing shot that orients the audience to the Disney kingdom simultaneously identifies the ideological vantage point that informs the audience's hermeneutic. Audience familiarity with Disney conventions that have been indoctrinated into the cultural memory provides interpretive strategies for the film, even when the film deliberately defies Disney conventions. Audiences' expectations, another epistemology of experience, are invoked by *Maleficent* to bolster the film's *auctorite*. Even when the narrator challenges this conventional knowledge by interrogating how well we know the tale, our experience is called upon for validation because the cultural memory of *Sleeping Beauty* provides a foundation for play and revision in *Maleficent*.

Disney exhibits a shift in ideology and authority that mirrors the later medieval shift in epistemic sources and values as a result of scholasticism, particularly Chaucer's dichotomy of gendered epistemologies. The misogynist *Sleeping Beauty* touts medieval *auctorite* to validate the fairy tale, but the more progressive *Maleficent* presents a confluence of textual traditions and personal experience that results in an *auctorite of experience*, akin to that deployed by Chaucer's Wife of Bath. Compared with

[19] See Kristie McKiernan, "Occupying Space Outside Porn-Chic: Female Heroes in Contemporary American Cinema," *Media Report to Women* 42.3 (2014): 15.

the medieval *auctorite* cited by *Sleeping Beauty* in 1959, Disney's *auctorite* in 2014 seems monolithic. One need only to have been in a public theater for a screening of *Maleficent* to witness the appeal of this retelling, which assembled multiple generations of Disney audiences who implicitly acknowledge the cultural capital proffered by such a production. *Maleficent* concludes with a progressive, feminist moral that empowers women, deliberately diverging from *Sleeping Beauty*'s representation of women as passive commodities. Disney imposes present ideals onto the past, while uniting generations of audiences with a common narrative.

The epistemic sources, as well as the aesthetic of the contrasting Disney productions, also serve to underscore the medievalism of *Sleeping Beauty* and the neomedievalism of *Maleficent*. *Sleeping Beauty* self-identifies as a medievalism: the cartoon references a medieval manuscript as the source of the narrative that is presented to modern audiences via a modern medium. Disney is implicated as an authorized facilitator of postmedieval reception of the Middle Ages. *Maleficent*, on the other hand, is neomedieval in that it references an ambiguous medieval castle, indistinctly located somewhere in the English Middle Ages. The film depicts a fantasy that invites feminist interpretation long before the advent of feminisms. *Maleficent*'s ideology is postmodern, but locating it within a medieval tradition disrupts the long heritage of male-dominated *auctorite* that identifies the Middle Ages as misogynist in the cultural memory. *Maleficent's* neomedievalism destabilizes assumptions drawn from the cultural memory of the medieval period. This ideological anachronism challenges the history codified by textual *auctorite*, and illuminates the complexities of personal experience that resonate across the imposed, hegemonic, temporal boundaries that separate Chaucer's epistemic debate from the debate implicated in Disney's Sleeping-Beauty narratives.

Maleficent revisits Disney's fantasy Middle Ages, and the medieval debate between *auctorite* and experience in the process, at a time when Disney's gender politics are being interrogated.[20] *Sleeping Beauty* represents one of the foundational texts of the Disney tradition, but it is also a component of Disney's tradition of misogyny. The dated gender politics of *Sleeping Beauty* clash with contemporary ideologies that recognize the disparity of power between men and women. By returning to the medievalism of Disney's past, Disney attempts to revise the gender ideology of its own heritage. The nuances that separate Disney's retelling of *Sleeping Beauty* and Disney's explicit *auctorite* over *Maleficent* continues the Disney legacy of happiness, a happiness that is maintained by repairing representations so that they adhere to current social constructions of morality.[21] Whether *Maleficent* is directly engaging contemporary gender issues, or simply placating critics who are conscious of misrepresentations of women in media, recent Disney releases, including *Brave*, *Frozen*, and *Maleficent*, appear to be sensitive to the problematic depictions of women in prior Animated Classics and the social consequences of Disney's *auctorite*. *Maleficent* is far from a radically feminist film, but conflicting with the *Sleeping Beauty* narrative, in an effort to revise the misogyny therein, indicates a conscious recognition of Disney's antifeminist past. The "happily ever after" conclusion to *Maleficent* depicts an ideal medieval past, and perhaps the promise of a Disney kingdom of inclusiveness to come.

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[20] Monika Bartyzel, "Disney Spent $15 Billion To Limit Their Audience," *Forbes,* May 13, 2015, http://www.forbes.com/sites/monikabartyzel/2015/05/13/disney-spent-15-billion-to-limit-their-audience/.

[21] Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan, "Dazzled by Disney? Ambiguity and Ubiquity," in *Dazzled by Disey? The Global Disney Audiences Project*, ed. Janet Wasko et al. (New York: Leicester University Press, 2001), 334.