



On Putting Arthur Rackham's *The Sleeping Beauty* into Verse

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This article was first presented as a paper at 'Arthur Rackham in Sussex: A 150th Birthday Symposium', Chichester, September 2017.

Arthur Rackham's 1919 *Cinderella* and his 1920 *The Sleeping Beauty* are great, extended studies in the art of silhouette. That Rackham should have made such an extensive use of the medium at this time may have been in part a consequence of the straitened finances of post-war publishing. Nevertheless, the books would prove definitive demonstrations of how the silhouette's limitations may become its strengths, especially in the depiction of fairy tale. As a consequence, Rackham's fairy-tale silhouettes have proved an example to be learnt from by everyone from the early German animator Lotte Reiniger to a modern-day illustrator such as Jan Pienkowski.

According to Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*:

Fairy tales describe inner states of the mind by means of images and actions. As a child recognizes unhappiness and grief when a person is crying, so the fairy tale does not need to enlarge on somebody's being unhappy. When Cinderella's mother dies, we are not told that Cinderella grieved for her mother or mourned the loss and felt lonely, deserted, desperate, but simply that "every day she went out to her mother's grave and wept.

In fairy tales, internal processes are translated into visual images.¹

While traditional fairy tales may be about our inner life, then, the inner lives of their characters are never probed or spelled out. Rackham's silhouettes are perfectly fitted to delineating this quality of fairy story. The characters become their gestures and actions.

This fit suggests a different relationship between text and illustration from the one that tends to apply elsewhere in Rackham's fairy-tale work. When, for instance, Rackham illustrates the Brothers Grimm in ink and wash, he will often allow the viewer to look into characters' faces, and show through those faces the psychology and emotion left unspecified in the text. Similarly, while the fairy tales have very little in the way of

descriptive writing, Rackham fills in the detail and specificity the text lacks: it is by looking at Rackham's plates and drawings that we see what these particular castles, woodlands and dragons actually look like. In the silhouettes, in contrast, emotional depth and physical and detail is more or less blacked out. The gestures and actions of the characters are given tremendous life and distinctiveness, but not inwardness; castles, woods and dragons become not detailed but archetypal. Had Rackham been illustrating Grimm, this withdrawal of an imaginative supplement to the traditional fairy tale might have resulted in, from the early 20th-century purchaser's view, thin fair. But, in the case of the 1919 *Cinderella* and the 1920 *Sleeping Beauty* Rackham was not illustrating a straightforward fairy story, but the lengthy and garrulous text of C.S. Evans.

Evans was a long-term employee of the publisher Heinemann; indeed he went on to become its chairman and managing director in 1932, and these two books were, so far as I'm aware, the only ones he wrote. While Evans did a perfectly respectable job, and his humour, though dated, can have its charm, some of which certainly rubs off on Rackham's pictures, few would maintain that Evans's retellings qualify as classics in their own right as Rackham's illustrations, I think, do. Classics have the capacity to carry on speaking afresh, and to inspire times, eyes and sensibilities different from those that first appreciated them. Because of this, classic texts can over the years prove welcoming to more than one set of illustrations. Illustrations are inevitably more tied to their first text – it would, for instance, seem perverse to pair Rackham's *Alice in Wonderland* illustrations with words that weren't at least something to do with those of Lewis Carroll. But fairy tales are everyone's and anyone's and the tale of the *Sleeping Beauty* isn't the sole property of C.S. Evans. So there seemed no reason why Rackham's illustrations should not be supplied with a different set of words.

I therefore decided to supply Rackham's illustrations to *The Sleeping Beauty* with a new text of my own. Not, as Evans' text is, a text in prose, but one in verse. Sometimes I would let Rackham's silhouettes illustrate my narrative; sometimes I would 'illustrate' the silhouettes; sometimes I would be writing in the gaps between one silhouette and the next. As often as not, my job was that of filling in the silhouettes: putting in that individual psychology and surface detail that traditional fairy tale omits. Rather than using the usual style of verse employed for children's books – loose end-stopped ballad metres – I tended to employ a way of writing verse which, despite having a similarity to such ballad metres, was more regular and much more enjambed, where the sentences tend to flow over the verse line rather than to be governed by it. This allowed me to combine insistent metre and a high incidence of rhyme with a style of narration much closer to that we're familiar with from novels. Indeed, I made frequent use of the novelist's device of free indirect speech, making sure the narrative was flavoured with the thoughts, and sometimes the individual voice, of one or, occasionally, more of my characters. I was, you could say, supplying the ink and wash, and trusting Rackham to keep story and

characters in the world of the fairy tale. But I could also, when I needed to, let the verse become more sonorous and spell-like, or more stiff and formal, or more distant from the characters and their actions: the verse equivalent of penning a Rackham silhouette.

The extracts that I reproduce here show, to my mind at least, both my 'ink and wash' and 'silhouette' styles. But, whether my words succeed or not, Rackham's images are glorious. In some, Rackham is more or less faithfully illustrating and enhancing the story as given in his original text. In others, he is floating somewhere a little above it, as in his vivacious and multifaceted young princess – so much more exciting than Evans's standard issue princess, or indeed the harp-playing beauty she becomes. Even more free-floating are two images Rackham supplies that have nothing to do with any words of C.S. Evans, or, for that matter, Grimm or Charles Perrault: the pictures of children running and of an old lady telling a tale on the front and back inside cover and first page of *The Sleeping Beauty*. They are at once a narratorially sophisticated framing device and as simple as saying 'Once upon a time'.

Chapter One: An Announcement

Ambassadors had come that day,
As they so often did. The way
They bobbed and bowed was flattering,
If you should like that sort of thing.
The King and Queen had duly smiled,
And their great longing for the child
That they had never had was clear
Only to themselves.



The air
Within the throne room had been stuffy,
The robes both heavy and uncomfy,
So, when the final speech was over,
The Queen decided to recover
Her weary self within the cool,
Clean waters of the garden pool.

It is lovely swapping palace
For the shelter of a trellis,
To have a too-tight chest and waist
Unfastened, loosened and unlaced,





Lovely to just breathe, lovely
Too to step out from the folly
Of far too many clothes, to slip
Out stitchless, then to feel the tip
Of one's big toe first touch the water
While a fountain drops in laughter.
So, if the Queen felt something stir
As she got in, it did not occur
To her to think the pool would hide
A frog, till one popped on the side
Proclaiming:

‘Queen, the coming year
Will flower, fall and disappear
As all years must, but this year you
Shall know your inmost wish come true:
Your baby will be born.’ The glistening
Queen, sponge in hand and listening,
Felt she had closed a stiff small door
On years of attic dust before
Heading down to join the folk
Below.

Yet when at last she spoke
To ask him more, the frog had gone
While she was left to look upon
An unkempt corner of the garden
Where, delightful, if half-hidden,
Was what she only could suppose
To be an untrimmed briar rose.



Chapter Nine: What the Young Princess Liked Best

What the young Princess liked best
Was skipping, also getting dressed
Up in her costumes, also drawing,
Also lessons – even boring
Ones. She knew of course she would
Need to know everything she could
When she was Queen one day. (Would they
Be able sometime soon to pay
For fencing lessons?) She really
Did like riding and she dearly
Wished to trot out in the future
To some quest or grand adventure.



But there was nothing quite like singing –
Climbing up around the ringing
Notes until one felt as though
Now was made so long ago,
And somehow time had stopped. And, oh,
How she did like dancing! Though
She realised each bow and curtsy
In the court must be thought a fancy
Minuet, those moments she
Spiralled up a melody
Reeled from a violin, she found
That she forgot those gathered round



And floated free as any fairy.
Yes, she knew that she was very
Lucky being her, and, yes,
She did like being the Princess.



Chapter Fourteen: Falling

The 13th fairy grabbed Time's arm
And wrenched him from the Palace. A charm
Of sleep was threaded through the air.
Everybody breathing there
Was bound by it: the cook scolding
The kitchen boy, the scribe holding
His pen. Maids, who had been sweeping,
Pillowed brooms; the guardsmen keeping
Watch put down their pikes and swords;
Grave ministers were lost for words,
As was a man about to fall
Downstairs.

A jester's dog, his ball
Poised on his nose, stayed balanced
On hind legs, his master silenced
In his bells. Flies slept in cream;
Cat and mouse became a team
Of snorers, and a king and queen,
Grown tired because they both had been
Out hunting, quickly came to be
Stitched into a tapestry.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Ever After

It is a happy ending: late Spring
Slides to summer as a ring
Upon a finger starts a marriage.
We see them waving from the carriage,
Yes, the Prince and the Princess
Are right before our eyes. Unless
We call out now, they will have passed
Us by. We give to them the last
Fond cheers.



The carriage disappears
Into the fog of future years
While we head back home, the street
Changed to a glimpse of our young feet
Chasing through the grass, our skin
In leaf-drawn shadows. We begin
To remember where we are, the old
Lady we forgot who told
Us stories, realising we
Might be turning round to see
Our mothers and our fathers pick
Us up, or else by a strange trick
Of time discern ourselves become
The parents taking children home
To bedtime and more stories. Then
At their end, the moment when
Day has nothing more to keep,
The light is out, and we can sleep.



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Notes

All images taken from C.S. Evans, *The Sleeping Beauty*, illustrated by Arthur Rackham (London: William Heinemann, 1920).

1. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin, 1991), 155.