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A Hair Closer to Freedom:

Retellings of Rapunzel as Self-Rescuer

Over the last several decades, fairy tale retellings for children and young adults have become increasingly popular. These recent retellings often focus on the female heroine and her strength and have become an influential means for understanding different forms of femininity and the performance of expected gender roles. In this article, I look at the Grimms' (1812) fairy tale "Rapunzel" and three young adult retellings to examine how the character of Rapunzel evolves from an adolescent in need of rescue to a woman who is her own rescuer.

The three tales under analysis here are the Disney film *Tangled* (Conli, 2010), the graphic novel *Rapunzel's Revenge* (2008) by Shannon and Dean Hale, and the young adult novel *Towering* (2013) by Alex Flinn. I have chosen these three out of the myriad of "Rapunzel" retellings for several reasons: 1) they are all fairly recent, having been created in the last 10 years; 2) they represent a range of media, allowing us to view how "Rapunzel" has been represented in film, graphic novel, and novel form; and 3) all of these tales differ from the original Grimms' fairy tale in that they imbue Rapunzel's hair with special qualities. These qualities will receive special attention here as we examine the ways in which Rapunzel's hair helps shape her identity, autonomy, and performance of femininity.

In the Grimms' traditional tale, Rapunzel's hair serves as a symbol of oppression and is something she cannot control; her hair merely serves as a tool used first by the fairy and then by the prince to climb up the tower. In contrast, the three retellings of "Rapunzel" featured in this article all give Rapunzel's hair a special quality other than its beauty, a quality that not only aids her in becoming a self-rescuer, but also gives her the agency to fully participate in and embrace her coming of age.

Female empowerment is closely linked to the coming-of-age process experienced by Rapunzel, as each tale begins with Rapunzel as a young girl and ends with her development into a woman. Thus, it makes sense to view these tales through the lens of Lincoln's coming-of-age theory, which he outlines in his anthropological study, *Emerging from the Chrysalis* (1981). He includes three stages in a female's rite of passage: confinement, metamorphosis, and reemergence. The Rapunzels in these retellings experience similar stages, as each Rapunzel is confined in a tower, undergoes metamorphosis as she encounters dangers and adventures, and ultimately reemerges as a self-aware young woman. These retellings of the Rapunzel story, unlike the Grimms' version, imbue the main character with agency, manifested in her hair, that allows her to successfully navigate the coming-of-age process through which she learns to make her own decisions about performing expected gender roles and establishes her own identity.

The Stages of Coming of Age

Lincoln studied and described women's initiation rites among four different people groups—the Tiyyar from the southwestern tip of India, the Navajo from the southwestern United States, the Tiv from West Africa, and the Tukuna from the northwest Amazon. Though

the initiation rites among women in these four groups vary greatly in practice and symbolism, they share similar stages of confinement, metamorphosis, and reemergence. Young girls on the verge of puberty and womanhood are often confined or secluded from the rest of their community, whether for several days (the Tiyyar) or several months (the Tukuna). This seclusion is seen as a cleansing process that girls must undergo to transition from girlhood to womanhood.

After seclusion, the girls go through a process of metamorphosis. For example, Tiyyar girls are bathed, dressed, and ornamented by other women; Navajo girls run long distances and grind corn daily; Tiv girls are taken to get skin markings; and Tukuna girls are painted with black genipa dye from head to toe and adorned in ceremonial regalia. They are, in essence, physically changed to demonstrate that they have left girlhood behind.

After these rites or ceremonies are performed, the girls reemerge into their community, no longer seen as children but as women ready for marriage, childbearing, and motherhood. As Lincoln stated, "Initiation [is] the rite in which an immature individual is perfected and brought to adulthood" (p 15). These coming of age stages are helpful in studying works like "Rapunzel" and its retellings because they, too, are stories about transitions, moving from girlhood to womanhood, or from ignorance to knowledge.

The Grimms' Traditional Tale of "Rapunzel"

The Grimms' version of the Rapunzel tale is found in the Aarne-Thompson Index under type 310: "Maiden in the Tower." The categorization itself highlights that Rapunzel's defining characteristic is that she is confined, with no agency to save herself (Getty, 1997, p. 37). In the Grimms' (1812)[1] version of "Rapunzel", Rapunzel's mother craves the rapunzel leaf while she is pregnant. Her husband, not wanting her to suffer, steals the rapunzel from a garden. However, the owner of the garden, described as a fairy, does not appreciate the thievery. When she hears why the man has taken the rapunzel, she allows him to continue to do so with one condition: he must give her the child his wife bears.

Although Rapunzel's hair plays a functional role in the Grimms' versions (it provides the means for the fairy and then the prince to enter the tower), her hair is only described in a brief section and has no extraordinary qualities besides its length and beauty:

> When the fairy wanted to enter, she stood below and called out: "Rapunzel, Rapunzel! Let down your hair to me." Rapunzel had splendid hair, as fine as spun gold. When the fairy called out, she untied it, wound it around a window hook, let it fall twenty yards to the ground, and the fairy climbed up it. (Grimm & Grimm, 1812, para. 21–23)

No mention is made of how Rapunzel's hair came to be so long or whether it has any special powers, although many retellings of "Rapunzel" focus heavily on these aspects. In the Grimms' tale, all we learn is that her hair is as fine as spun gold and that it is beautiful, suggesting that a woman has no power or agency of her own except her beauty—and even that beauty is a tool to be manipulated by others.

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In the *Dictionary of Symbols* (1996), Chevalier and Gheerbrant explain that "hair is one of woman's main weapons and therefore the fact of its being concealed or displayed, plaited or hanging loose, is often the sign of a woman's availability, surrender, or modesty" (p. 462). Yet, despite the fact that the dictionary references hair as a woman's weapon, it is a weapon used only in terms of the male gaze. She is available to a man, she surrenders to a man, or she is modest because she has not been with a man. A woman's hair, or more broadly her beauty, may be considered a kind of weapon that she is sometimes able to wield herself, but it is more often used by others to manipulate or control her. This is an apt picture of Rapunzel's hair in the Grimms' tale—powerless except for the power it gives others over her.

Just as Rapunzel's hair is a weapon that she cannot fully utilize for herself, Rapunzel's sexuality and ability to bear children (traditional markers of coming

of age) are outside her control and understanding. After the prince visits her, Rapunzel asks the fairy, "Frau Gothel, tell me why it is that my clothes are too tight. They no longer fit me" (Grimm & Grimm, 1812, para. 35). Though she has participated in a sexual relationship, she is unaware of the possible outcomes of it and does not know that she is pregnant. Although she becomes a mother, historically an indicator of womanhood, she is still really a child without the knowledge and agency to fully embrace womanhood. In Lincoln's study, girls are confined, then go through a process of change to then be ready for marriage and motherhood—that is, they move beyond confinement to transition into maturity and accept womanhood for themselves. Rapunzel, in the Grimms' original tale, never moves beyond confinement and is therefore unable to transition into maturity, despite becoming a mother.

[I]n the three retellings of "Rapunzel" discussed here, the main characters successfully navigate the coming-of-age process, assisted by unique characteristics and qualities given to their hair. Their hair becomes a weapon and tool they wield themselves rather than a tool used against them by others.

In contrast, in the three retellings of "Rapunzel" discussed here, the main characters successfully navigate the coming-of-age process, assisted by unique characteristics and qualities given to their hair. Their hair becomes a weapon and tool they wield themselves rather than a tool used against them by others. They are able to move beyond confinement in a way that the Rapunzel in the traditional tale never can. In the retellings, Rapunzel's hair becomes both a symbol and means of her own agency, allowing her coming-of-age process to unfold.

Magic within and without: Rapunzel in the Disney Film *Tangled*

I will first discuss Disney's film *Tangled*, as it is perhaps the most well-known retelling of "Rapunzel" out of the three and at first appears the most similar to the Grimms' tale. Perhaps a film is not a piece of literature in the strictest sense, but it is nevertheless a text that can be viewed (or "read") and then analyzed in much the same way as traditional written literature. Though Disney films are often directed at children, they appeal to people of all ages, including young adults. Additionally, Rapunzel in *Tangled* is a young adult who embarks on a journey of self-discovery and empowerment that teen girls today can identify with.

In *Tangled*, Rapunzel's hair is the reason she is locked away in the tower, as Mother Gothel (the fairy figure in the film) craves its magical properties. She tells Rapunzel that she is her mother and that she is keeping Rapunzel safe from the cruel, selfish outside world. But despite her pretense at caring for Rapunzel's safety, "Rapunzel's value to Gothel . . . is her hair, not what she does or who she is. What she possesses signals her worth as another's desired possession" (Lester, Sudia, & Sudia, 2013, pp. 86–87). Ironically, however, the same magical properties that first cause Rapunzel to be subjugated and locked in the tower are also what ultimately give her agency and power over her own life.

At the beginning of the film, Rapunzel acknowledges her confinement and longs to explore the outside world; however, she also desires to be loyal to her "mother," truly believing that Mother Gothel has confined her for her own protection. But eventually the desire to explore overpowers her affection for Mother Gothel, leading her to the second stage in the coming-of-age model, metamorphosis. Metamorphosis can be equated with self-discovery, as it is a time of change and acknowledgement of identity. Although Rapunzel's metamorphosis begins in the tower, it can only be completed outside the tower walls, where she will be able to learn who she is—both her true identity as the lost princess and her inner identity as an empowered woman.

While Rapunzel's confinement and the fairy's use of her hair to climb the tower mirror the Grimms' version, *Tangled* begins to differentiate sharply from the Grimms' tale when the male protagonist comes onto the scene. In the Grimms' version, the prince calls to Rapunzel to let down her hair. She obeys the command, and he uses her hair as a tool to climb the tower. When the prince enters the tower, "Rapunzel was frightened, but soon she came to like the young

king so well that she arranged for him to come every day and be pulled up. Thus they lived in joy and pleasure for a long time" (Grimm & Grimm, para. 24).

Counter to the traditional tale, Flynn Rider (the prince figure in *Tangled*) does not use Rapunzel's hair as means to enter the tower, nor does he climb the tower in pursuit of a princess. In an act of desperation to escape the palace guards (he has stolen a valuable crown), Flynn climbs the tower by niching arrows into the cracks in the stone wall. When he reaches the top, Rapunzel attacks him with a frying pan, renders him unconscious, and then uses her hair to drag him across the room and tie him to a chair. Her hair becomes her strength and protection, a weapon used to subdue an intruder rather than help him enter. Instead of welcoming a strange man, she defends herself, first with one "feminine" tool (the frying pan) and then with another (her hair).

Flynn and Rapunzel strike a bargain, and she leaves the tower with him. But her first foray into the world is marked by distrust: she is wary of Flynn and his intentions, but she's also distrustful of herself as she vacillates between guilt for leaving Mother Gothel and joy in leaving the tower behind, between fear of the outside world and delight in its beauty. According to Kapurch (2015), "These awkward and hysterical expressions reveal the extent of Rapunzel's oppression in the isolated tower with a mother who denies her true identity" (p. 445). But while she is initially conflicted, Rapunzel eventually begins to embrace her own decision-making ability outside the tower, mirroring the transition from childhood to adolescence typical in Western society.

As children move into their teenage years, they become less reliant on their parents (or adult figures) and make more of their own decisions; by the time teenagers move into adulthood, they should ideally be self-reliant and responsible, making all of their own decisions. Rapunzel's decision to leave the tower is her first step toward adulthood, and she is able to make more of her own choices as she continues on her journey. Lester, Sudia, and Sudia (2013) noted:

> Rapunzel is clear-headed and head-strong even if she has not experienced life beyond the high walls of the tower prison. Once introduced to the possibilities of a whole new world beneath and beyond her seclusion in the tower, she makes choices and takes risks to discover her new world on her own terms. These moments reveal feminist potential as she does not define herself through the lens of her hair but rather uses her hair to experience life as she comes to know it. (p. 87)

Unlike the Grimms' tale, in which Rapunzel's hair serves only one purpose (to hoist visitors up the tower), Rapunzel in *Tangled* experiments with the many uses of her hair. Having used it as a tool to subdue a stranger, she now uses it to experience the outside world—like swinging from trees, among various other experiments. She continues to learn how to use her hair on her own terms and for her own entertainment, exercise, and delight.

Throughout her exploits outside the tower walls, Rapunzel illustrates that there is no one way to perform femininity; she cries, she is brave and daring, she fights when she needs to, but she also mothers, coddles, and heals.

Rapunzel learns that she has other tools and abilities at her disposal as well—intelligence, resourcefulness, and the art of persuasion, all of which she must use to rescue Flynn from a series of sticky situations. Despite being worldly wise, Flynn is the character in constant need of rescuing, and Rapunzel comes to his rescue, sometimes using her hair and sometimes using her brain as she talks her way out of treacherous situations. Again and again, the princess, not the prince, comes to the rescue.

The dangers Rapunzel and Flynn encounter serve not only to reverse expected gender roles, but also to further Rapunzel's coming-of-age process. Lincoln pointed out that some female rites of passage center on a cosmic journey, which liberates the initiate from the limitations of existence. He explained that a similar phenomenon to a cosmic journey

> . . . can be observed in the travels of students within our own culture after graduation from high school or college. The goal is not so much "to see the world," however much that is the stated intent, as it is to shatter confining restrictions, to win and exercise freedom *in general*, spatial freedom being merely the way in which this broader freedom is most easily demonstrated. If such travels involve some danger (as, for instance, travel by hitchhiking), so much the better, for the mastery of such dangers demonstrates the ability to deal with the dimensions of existence unlocked by the exercise of freedom. (pp. 96–97)

Rapunzel's leaving the tower gives her the spatial freedom that allows her to grapple with just enough danger to come into independence, demonstrating her continued metamorphosis as she moves from adolescence to adulthood. Throughout her exploits outside the tower walls, Rapunzel illustrates that there is no one way to perform femininity; she cries, she is brave and daring, she fights when she needs to, but she also mothers, coddles, and heals. In short, rather than adhering strictly to societal constructs, her behavior is fluid and ever-changing as she encounters different situations.

In *Tangled*, both Rapunzel and Flynn have a specific part to play in her "rite of passage." Their relationship rests on equal ground; she has saved him several times before, and now Flynn saves Rapunzel. It is not that one is stronger than the other, but they use what they have within their power (hair, cutting hair) to protect one another.

Although Rapunzel uses her hair as weapon, means of escape, and healing agent in *Tangled*, it ultimately remains the initial reason for her captivity. When Rapunzel discovers that her relationship with Mother Gothel is a lie, she confronts her: "You were wrong about the world. And you were wrong about me. And I will never let you use my hair again!" (Conli, 2010). But Mother Gothel has the upper hand, for she has Flynn, and he is injured. Rapunzel has been making decisions of increasing significance throughout the film, and now she is faced with the ultimate decision: fight to escape from Mother Gothel or stay behind and save Flynn with the magic from her hair. But before she can make a choice, Flynn makes the decision for her—he chops off her hair, simultaneously cutting off her power to heal him and the object of Mother Gothel's greed.

At first glance, the cutting of Rapunzel's hair is problematic, as it is an act done to her by another person, rather than her own volition. Indeed, in the Grimms' version of the tale, the fairy cuts off Rapunzel's hair as punishment for seeing the prince and to prevent her from hauling the prince up the tower. But the two incidents are distinctly different. The fairy's reaction is one of anger and selfishness, whereas Flynn's action is one of affection and self-sacrifice. And while Rapunzel does not make the decision to cut her hair, it may still be an essential step in her coming-of-age process. Lincoln noted that in some female rites of passage, "It is not a case of *either* men *or* women being in charge of the ceremony, but both sexes having responsibility for specific parts of the rite" (pp. 92). In *Tangled*, both Rapunzel and Flynn have a specific part to play in her "rite of passage." Their relationship rests on equal ground; she has saved him several times before, and now Flynn saves Rapunzel. It is not that one is stronger than the other, but they use what they have within their power (hair, cutting hair) to protect one another.

As Rapunzel weeps over Flynn, his wound now dire, she realizes that her tears contain the same healing power as her hair. Thus, we learn that Rapunzel's healing gift comes *not* from her hair but from herself, the ultimate reversal of Chevalier and Gheerbrant's (1996) observation that women's hair is their strength. With or without her hair, Rapunzel's strength comes from within. With the cutting of her hair, Rapunzel's coming-of-age is complete, for she is able to reemerge from the tower and enter into a connection with her true family. Her reemergence as an adult is not based on her readiness to bear children, but instead on her knowledge of her true self and true identity. She has discovered her inner strength, now no longer burdened by her hair.

A "Lasso-Toting" Heroine: Rapunzel in *Rapunzel's Revenge*

Another retelling that transforms Rapunzel's hair from an object used to manipulate her to her own tool and weapon is *Rapunzel's Revenge,* a graphic novel set in the Old American West. I analyze this text because, much like in *Tangled*, the Rapunzel character encounters dangers and adventures in her journey of self-discovery while using her hair as a tool to navigate her situations. In addition, this retelling portrays Rapunzel's hair in a way that imbues Rapunzel with agency, strength, and, in this case, a fiery personality: her hair is red. Even the title of this work (*Rapunzel's Revenge*) suggests that this version does *not* tell the story of a passive woman.

At the beginning of the novel, the Hales' Rapunzel lives in a fancy house surrounded by high walls. She, like *Tangled*'s Rapunzel, believes Mother Gothel to be her real mother, but Mother Gothel is a supervillain akin to a cattle baron. The magic Mother Gothel possesses in this version is the power to transform land into either fertile gardens or sterile wastelands. Through this power, she controls her "kingdom" and subjects who rely on her vegetation for survival.

Early in the story, Rapunzel learns the truth about her identity and rebels. In response, Mother Gothel punishes Rapunzel by growing "a creepy tree, with a hollowed-out room high up, perfect for imprisoning a trouble maker" (p. 24). Mother Gothel visits Rapunzel occasionally and provides her food via her magic. It is this vegetative magic that makes Rapunzel's hair grow so long. Here, as in *Tangled,* readers are given an explanation for Rapunzel's long hair, unlike in the Grimms' tales. It is also interesting to note that here Mother Gothel is the source of magic, unlike *Tangled*, in which the source of magic is Rapunzel.

Rapunzel's life with Mother Gothel and her entrapment in the tree comprise the confinement stage in her coming-of-age process. Although her metamorphosis begins when she first learns the truth about her identity and rebels, she remains in captivity for several years. Eventually, Rapunzel grows bored and fantasizes about how to escape (p. 29). She puts her hair into two braids and explains, "To keep from going batty, I made use of my dratted hair" (p. 30). The panels accompanying these words include her using her hair as a jump rope, a swing, a whip to kill spiders, and a lasso. Just as in *Tangled,* Rapunzel uses her hair to her advantage, not as a form of oppression. She never lifts Mother Gothel up to her prison with her hair, instead ultimately using it to escape by lassoing a neighboring tree and swinging to freedom. Later, she even uses her hair to wrangle a wild boar, tame it, and ride it through the forest.

Not once does Rapunzel state that she is waiting for someone to come save her, nor does she dream of a "prince." In fact, it is a prince-type character who shoots her new pet boar, hindering her travel through the woods. He is portrayed as egotistical, claiming he is an "adventuring hero" (p. 40). He interrupts Rapunzel when she tries to speak and tells her:

> I was getting so bored watching the workers farm my fields all day. So I left behind the civilized comforts of Husker City, following tales of a beautiful maiden trapped in a high tower. . . . I can't actually rescue her, of course. The word is she's Mother Gothel's pet and I won't risk crossing the old lady. But I can tell her I'm going to rescue her. She's bound to be too naïve to know the difference, and it'll be such fun in the meantime! (pp. 40–41)

Disgusted with him, Rapunzel points him to the tall tree and tells him that the maiden is slightly deaf, so he'll just have to yell as loud as he can for a while. Thus, the first man Rapunzel meets proves to be an annoyance and hindrance, not a help, and someone to be ridiculed rather than relied upon. She disproves his thought that she is naïve by deftly outwitting him. She continues her metamorphosis into adulthood not by signaling to the first man she meets that she is available for marriage and childbearing but by using her brain and making her own decisions.

In *Rapunzel's Revenge*, Rapunzel is the epitome of cunning and high spirits, and throughout her actions of cunning, her hair is her tool, her weapon, and her strength.

Additionally, this Rapunzel's hair is not blonde, as is often depicted (due to the Grimms' description of it being as fine as spun gold), but red. Redheads are often portrayed as impassioned people, as their blazing hair is often meant to represent their fiery personalities. In *Rapunzel's Revenge,* Rapunzel has just such a personality. Through the course of the graphic novel, she becomes a "lasso-toting, justice-seeking" young woman who helps people who are oppressed by Mother Gothel, and her long braids lend themselves well to her active lifestyle (Printz, 2010, p. 20). Her braids are not used to lift people up to her tower, but rather as a tool for herself in her many adventures. Throughout the graphic novel, Rapunzel uses her hair as a whip, lasso, and rope as she fights off villains, escapes from Mother Gothel's minions, saves a town from a rabid wolf pack, catches a ferocious lake creature for food, and aids her real mother in escaping from the mines. She does much of this with her sidekick and later love interest, Jack, who sometimes helps her but who most often needs saving himself.

Rapunzel's escape from the tree and many risky adventures in the graphic novel coincide with Lin-

coln's statement of coming of age: she gains spatial freedom and learns to master the dangers she encounters as she navigates the stage of metamorphosis and moves from adolescence to adulthood. Walter Benjamin (2006) stated, "The wisest thing—so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day—is to meet the forces of the mystical world with cunning and high spirits" (p. 375). In *Rapunzel's Revenge,* Rapunzel is the epitome of cunning and high spirits, and throughout her actions of cunning, her hair is her tool, her weapon, and her strength.

Clothing in *Rapunzel's Revenge* also plays a large part in her character and her performance of expected gender roles. When she is trapped in the tower, she wears the same dress for four years, which literally deteriorates into rags. As the story progresses, her clothing is not focused on beauty but rather practicality. She starts in the worn-out dress and moves to a white shift over green long johns provided by Jack. When she first puts them on, Jack exclaims, "AAAH! You're in under clothes!" (p. 49). But Rapunzel is not concerned much with how she looks but rather with how her clothing affects her movement. She would have preferred trousers for riding, but as she can only find the long johns, she makes do. She is not a damsel in distress; thus, the story does not linger on her beauty but focuses on her actions.

Towering (2013) at first seems to have a traditional take on gender roles, though it is a modern retelling of "Rapunzel" (with cell phones and the Internet).

Later, Jack gives her a cowboy outfit, complete with trousers, boots, vest, gloves, hat, and a belt to hang her lassoing braids on. When he hands her the new clothes, he states, "The present's really for me. If I have to see you in that getup another minute I might scratch out my own eyeballs" (p. 80). After changing into the new outfit, Rapunzel emerges and asks, "So what do you think? Are your eyeballs safe?" And Jack can only answer, "Whoa" in surprised approval (p. 80). Jack's reaction to her in the cowboy outfit suggests that what looks most beautiful on Rapunzel is not what Old West society expects her to wear (i.e., frilly dresses), but instead what suits her own tastes and needs. Instead of being mutually exclusive, beauty and practicality go hand-in-hand, as evidenced by Jack's "Whoa" when he sees Rapunzel in her practical cowboy outfit. The cowboy outfit also allows her to move freely during her many adventures, and each adventure is a stepping stone she crosses over on her way to rescue her mother and on her journey of self-discovery.

The last outfit Rapunzel wears *is* an elaborate dress. Though she looks beautiful in it, as noted by the astonished Jack, Rapunzel feels awkward. It is significant to note that she wears the dress as a disguise to get into Mother Gothel's party—once again, usefulness, and not beauty, is the focus. At the end of the novel, when Mother Gothel uses her growth magic to entrap Rapunzel in long vines (after she has chopped off Rapunzel's braids), Rapunzel uses the same scissors to cut off the bottom of her dress and escape said vines. The dress that was once a tool for her entry into the party is now a hindrance, so Rapunzel frees herself from it. The style of her clothes is always subordinate to the utility they provide. Printz (2010) noted that the Rapunzel we see on the cover of the graphic novel is wearing the iconic cowboy outfit "not because it makes her the most beautiful, but because it makes her the most heroic and gives her somewhere to hang her most viable weapon at hand—her long hair" (p. 23).

Rapunzel allows neither her clothing nor her hair to dictate her actions; rather, she uses both as tools to navigate the world on her terms—much like Rapunzel in *Tangled*. Even after Mother Gothel cuts off Rapunzel's hair, divesting her of her main weapon, Rapunzel maintains her bravery and cleverness, highlighting that neither her hair (nor her appearance) defines her; rather, she consistently defines herself. She is able to succeed, despite not possessing any magic as Mother Gothel does, because she uses her intellect and fortitude. Her metamorphosis into a self-aware young woman allows her to reemerge, out of Mother Gothel's grasp, as a strong and intelligent heroine who saves her real mother and claims her true identity.

Quiet Power: Rachel in *Towering*

The final "Rapunzel" retelling I will discuss is *Towering*, a young adult novel by Alex Flinn. This retelling was selected because it illustrates how the fairy tale can be reiterated in a modern setting with a teenage heroine who must take initiative to save herself and

those she loves. I discuss this retelling last because it deviates the most from the original tale, and the heroine undergoes the most dramatic change of the three. *Towering* (2013) at first seems to have a traditional take on gender roles, though it is a modern retelling of "Rapunzel" (with cell phones and the Internet). Rachel, the Rapunzel figure, stays in a tower hidden in the woods next to a lake because the woman she calls Mama (even though she knows she is not her real mother) is trying to protect her. At the beginning of the novel, Rachel is completely cut off from the outside world, technologically and otherwise. She is told that her real mother was murdered and that she must remain hidden if she does not want to meet the same fate. The novel is told in chapters from alternating perspectives, voiced by Rachel and Wyatt, the "prince" figure.[2]

Like Rapunzel in *Tangled*, Rachel's only encounter with the outside world is through Mama. She is completely unfamiliar with modern technology and only knows about relationships based on the books she has read, such as *Little Women* and *Wuthering Heights*. Because most of the books she reads are over a hundred years old, her understanding of identity and femininity is based on traditional patriarchal concepts. She wears a white dress, which suggests her innocence, and flimsy shoes. She is pale and beautiful and at first appears to be timid. She has literally been in the confinement stage all her life, which causes her to be ignorant of the outside world.

Similar to the Rapunzel characters from *Tangled* and *Rapunzel's Revenge*, Rachel's hair possesses a unique quality: it grows at an abnormal rate. Unlike the traditional Rapunzel tale, Mama does not use her hair to reach the tower but instead uses the stairs. Far from benefiting from Rachel's hair, Mama actually keeps Rachel's hair cut above her waist because she fears that the people who murdered Rachel's mother wish to harm Rachel or use her for her hair. Mama is not depicted as an evil character in *Towering*, another reason why *Towering* is the farthest removed from the original tale, and she willingly provides Rachel with the things she asks for. Although Rachel does not view Mama as her captor, the traditional tales and stories she has read lead her to believe that someone will come to set her free. Thus, she waits patiently, day after day, far from hating her life, yet convinced there is more for her than life in the tower.

One day, Rachel's hair begins to grow at an even faster rate than normal. She wonders if, perhaps, it is for a reason, and she begins to take initiative. When her hair is long enough to reach the ground from her window, she cuts it off and braids it into a rope, hiding it under her bed. Her decision to save the rope without Mama's knowledge is the first step she takes into the metamorphosis stage. Previously, she has never disobeyed Mama or gone against her wishes. Her decision to follow her intuition and act for herself launches her on a journey of knowledge and self-awareness.

Meanwhile, Wyatt has been hearing Rachel singing from her tower as he passes through the woods and eventually comes in search of her. When Rachel spies him from her window, her first thought is he has come to free her; however, as she watches him approach, she witnesses him fall through the ice on the lake. Realizing that her rope of hair is the only means to rescue him, she uses it to lower herself to the ground and save Wyatt from the freezing water. This is the first time she has ever left the tower.

Though Rachel initially believes she is the one who needs rescuing, she in fact rescues Wyatt. She moves away from the traditional idea of femininity found in her books and acts in accordance with the situation at hand. Zipes (1986) stated:

> In the fairy tales for younger readers the most noticeable change in the narratives concerns the heroine who actively seeks to define herself, and her self-definition determines the plot. As she moves to complete this task, traditional fairy tale topoi and motifs are transformed to indicate the necessity for gender rearrangement and the use of power for achieving equality. (p. 14)

Within the confines of her tower, Rachel remains passive, but when the plot pushes her into action, she begins to understand her strength. As stated earlier, Lincoln noticed that in female rites of passage, both men and women were often responsible for specific parts of a rite. In Rachel's move away from confinement into the first tentative steps of metamorphosis, not only does she save Wyatt, but he also assists her, helping her climb back into the tower after the rescue. Thus, Rachel and Wyatt begin their relationship on equal ground.

Besides Rachel's magically growing hair, she also possesses tears that heal, establishing early on in the novel that her power goes much deeper than

her hair—quite unlike the traditional Rapunzel tale in which her hair forms the sole basis for her identity. Rachel and Wyatt also discover that they possess some sort of telepathic bond by which they can hear one another's thoughts. Their relationship is not based on the patriarchal standards of Rachel's old novels but instead on how they can help one another. As she begins her journey in her metamorphosis stage, she redefines what she views as femininity based on the needs at hand and acts accordingly.

Rachel begins to view her hair as essential to not only her identity but also her role as a rescuer. Ultimately, her hair allows her to move into the world to attain spatial freedom and realize her role as a rescuing agent, even as she encounters danger in the process.

After rescuing Wyatt, Rachel decides to remain in the tower for safety; both she and Wyatt want to discover who might be hunting her before she emerges for good. They later discover the key to the mystery: two town men, Carl and Henry, grow a psychedelic drug called rhapsody, which quickly addicts its users. They lure teenagers with the drug and then kidnap and imprison them underground as slaves to continuously manufacture the drug. Rachel is the key to a prophecy that will end the drug trade, which is why Carl and Henry are after her.

Rachel remains in the tower until—once again—she discerns that Wyatt is in trouble, this time via their telepathic connection. Her reason for leaving the tower is distinctly different from that seen in *Tangled* and *Rapunzel's Revenge*. While the Rapunzel in *Tangled* leaves out of curiosity and a desire to see the world, the Rapunzel in *Rapunzel's Revenge* leaves out of sheer boredom and later helps people along the way. Both initially leave for their own interests and desires; however, Rachel leaves her captivity out of a self-sacrificial desire to save another.

Discerning that Wyatt is in trouble, she once again frees herself from the tower via her rope of hair. During this time, Rachel's hair begins to grow faster and faster, and she recognizes that her hair grows when she needs it. Just as her hair grows to serve her needs, she becomes more knowledgeable, self-aware, and bold as situations dictate. Though "Mama" is afraid that Rachel's hair is a curse (it is the reason her safety is at risk), Rachel begins to view her hair as essential to not only her identity but also her role as a rescuer. Ultimately, her hair allows her to move into the world to attain spatial freedom and realize her role as a rescuing agent, even as she encounters danger in the process.

Although at the onset of the novel Rachel believed that someone would come to free her, she ends up being the one who frees herself, rescues the imprisoned drug workers, and heals Wyatt once again with her tears. Wyatt's selflessness allows her to fulfill what she sees as her destiny, and together they form an equal partnership. Rachel's journey through the novel—being confined in the tower, venturing out into the world, and reemerging as she learns the truth about her past and identity—allows her to transition from a naïve adolescent to a strong, self-aware young woman. Unlike the Rapunzels in *Tangled* (2010) and *Rapunzel's Revenge* (2008), who are outgoing and quite daring, Rachel remains quiet and shy at the end of the novel, even after her acts of bravery and courage. However, her shyness does not take away from her inner strength or her willingness to act when needed.

Happy Endings: Self-Discovery and Feminine Power

Though each of these retellings concludes with a typical "happy" ending as in the traditional Grimms' tale—Rapunzel and Flynn get married in *Tangled*, Rapunzel and Jack kiss at the end of *Rapunzel's Revenge*, Rachel and Wyatt are dating and attend school together in *Towering*—the stories differ from the traditional tale because the Rapunzel character makes her own decisions and discovers that her identity lies in more than her hair.

In *Tangled*, Rapunzel learns that her healing abilities come not from her hair but from within herself. Even with her hair shorn, she retains the essential elements of who she is: her strength, her agency, and her ability to heal. In *Rapunzel's Revenge*, Rapunzel uses her hair to her advantage, rather than allowing others to dictate her behavior or use her hair as a tool against her. Her fiery red hair, as well as her wardrobe, are tools that are fully in her control and that she can wield as practicality and individual circumstances

dictate. In *Towering*, Rachel's hair at first appears to be a threat, but it ultimately serves her in times of need and empowers her to follow her intuition, take initiative, and become a rescuer.

In each of these three retellings, the unique qualities attributed to Rapunzel's hair help transform her hair into a tool. With the aid of her hair, she learns to navigate the world, overcome obstacles, and transition from childhood to adulthood. Each version of Rapunzel uses her hair to aid her through the stages of coming of age as she moves from a naïve girl in confinement, takes her first steps toward metamorphosis and self-awareness, and finally reemerges as a strong and knowledgeable woman who knows the truth about her past and embraces her newly discovered identity.

Even when her hair is cut off, which occurs in all three retellings, Rapunzel remains smart and independent because her identity, while shaped by her experiences with her hair, is ultimately not dependent on her physical characteristics. These tales suggest that modern retellings of "Rapunzel" for children and young adults frequently resist the concept of the female as a passive character and shift the power back to Rapunzel by redefining her hair and her sense of self. While the Grimms paint Rapunzel as a passive character who is only acted upon, Disney's, the Hales', and Flinn's Rapunzels are all very active. They are strong, adept, and clever. By retooling Rapunzel's hair as an asset instead of a form of oppression, these stories allow Rapunzel to develop and utilize the feminine power within herself. They are not just the "Maiden[s] in the Tower," but young women who escape from the tower by themselves.

Though the *Dictionary of Symbols* (Chevalier & Gheerbrant,1996) stated that the cutting of hair equated "a loss of power" (p. 462), Rapunzel is still Rapunzel whether her hair is 20 yards long or cropped close to her head. Her power is not in her hair, but resides within herself. The themes of self-awareness, cleverness, autonomy, and feminine power found in these retellings of "Rapunzel" are important for teenage girls and educators of teenagers, as they highlight the potential that these traits lay within us all.

Endnotes

1. The Grimms wrote two versions of "Rapunzel" (1812 and 1857). In this article, I reference the 1812 version because it includes Rapunzel's pregnancy, a marker of womanhood that coincides with my analysis using Lincoln's coming-of-age stages; the pregnancy is omitted from the 1857 version.
2. Wyatt has a traumatic past of his own, which he escapes by fleeing to the small upstate New York town, coincidentally near Rachel's "protective" prison.

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