The Confluence

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You Are Not the Hero: Women's Role in "Rapunzel"

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One of the ways that people learn socially acceptable behaviors is through reading or other forms of media. Whoever holds the power in a society determines what is written or considered "right." The issue then arises that problematic ideas and expectations of a group of people can be widely promoted, and many (if not most) will buy into it because the dominant power has deemed it the correct way of viewing the world. The feminist movement is a product of societal and political pushback against the controlling patriarchal powers. Feminist criticism, consequently, offers new perspectives on literature by pointing out the harmful stereotypes about women in older works. The Grimm fairy tale "Rapunzel," when viewed from the perspective of feminist criticism, enforces the dominant patriarchal ideology that men are superior to women, even going so far as to classify women into monstrous and angelic categories that either support or oppose a man's goals.

The Grimm's tale "Rapunzel" begins with the tragic circumstances of the mother's pregnancy, where her uncontrollable craving for the rapunzel herbs in a sorceress's garden drives her husband to steal the herbs in the night. When caught by the sorceress (Frau Gothel), he bargains for his life by promising her the unborn child. After the child's birth, Gothel takes the daughter and names her Rapunzel, eventually isolating the girl in a tower that can only be accessed by climbing her long hair. Rapunzel's singing attracts a prince who, after learning how to enter the tower, initiates a secret relationship with Rapunzel. Their plan for escape is discovered by Frau Gothel after Rapunzel accidentally reveals it in an innocent question. In retaliation, the sorceress cuts off Rapunzel's hair, banishes her to the wilderness, and blinds the prince. Years later, the two lovers are reunited (Rapunzel, having given birth to twins in the meantime), and her tears restore the prince's sight, allowing them to return to his kingdom and enjoy their "happily ever after."

Overall, the story of Rapunzel falls into several generic themes that feminist critics find to be concerning or unjust. Dobie notes that the uniting concept of feminist criticism is "the assumption that Western culture is fundamentally patriarchal, creating an imbalance of power that marginalizes women and their work" (Dobie 104). Her idea rings true (from a literary standpoint) in the Brothers Grimm's tale of Rapunzel, where the male prince takes on the role of the active hero even though the story itself is named after the girl, Rapunzel, who (ironically) has the least active role in the events of the fairy tale. The titular character has been shoved into the margins, a side-note in her own story with only two moments in which her voice is heard. Simone de Beauvoir, when speaking about real-life culture, made the general claim that "Lacking her own history, the female is always secondary or nonexistent […] women are not born inferior but rather are made to be so" (Dobie 107). While the concept of women being made inferior may not be entirely applicable to Frau Gothel, it is Rapunzel who is "locked in a tower that stood in a forest and that had neither a door nor a stairway, but only a tiny little window at the very top" (Grimm). Motherly Frau Gothel's actions, from a certain perspective, demonstrate a "wizened" belief that little Rapunzel is not meant to be someone who goes out into society but stays hidden, a lesser being who has no place in the world. On the other hand, her captivity could be interpreted as Frau Gother's attempt to protect Rapunzel from those who wish to harm or use her. However, the result is the same: Rapunzel is taught inferiority through the removal of her autonomy, primarily her entrapment in the tower and the severing of her hair, since hair often represents feminine power and sexuality. While there are more specific problems with the treatment of women in "Rapunzel," it is also important to understand the broader stance of feminist criticism regarding the fairytale.

"Rapunzel," despite being a relatively short fairy tale, frequently implies that women are

weaker beings compared to men through depictions of mental and physical weakness in women. At the beginning of the tale, Rapunzel's biological mother declares, "'If I do not get some rapunzel from the garden behind our house, I shall die,'" which spurs her husband to "heroic" action (Grimm). The mother's statement—played off as one of the temporary cravings of pregnancy — actually enforces the patriarchal viewpoint that women are delicate and fragile. She does not say that she simply has a powerful craving for rapunzel, but instead claims that death will take her if she does not get to eat some of the lettuce-like plant. Even if this scene were to be instead read as the mother dramatizing her cravings, then it still functions as an unflattering depiction of the mother. She is either fragile or silly, delicate or dramatic. Yet, readers pick up the cue that this is a desirable attitude for a woman (according to the patriarchy) because of her status as a married woman with a husband who is stirred to action by her dire words. Not only are they in a committed relationship, but the husband "loved her dearly" for her temperament (Grimm). On the other hand, Rapunzel's feminine weakness indicates the patriarchal belief that she is in need of a guiding husband. The plan for Rapunzel's escape is going well until she asks Frau Gothel why she is so much heavier to lift than the prince, who is due to arrive at any minute
(Grimm). With this question, readers are led to believe that Rapunzel is not smart enough to take care of herself because, without the prince there to aid her, she immediately gives away her plans to her captor. The foolish moment seems even more so when one realizes it is one of only two lines Rapunzel iterates throughout the tale. "Rapunzel" regularly conforms to the patriarchal idea that women are weaker beings than men.

Furthermore, the fairy tale perpetuates ideas of women's desirability as decided by the male gaze. After the prince states his intent to marry Rapunzel, she thinks, "'He would rather have me than would old Frau Gothel'" (Grimm). Rapunzel is a simple girl with no autonomy or power in her situation. She relies on the prince to get her out of the tower and is confined by Frau Gothel's authority. Frau Gothel, on the other hand, is an independent woman and a sorceress. With those attributes come the implications of monstrousness, as she is an unnatural woman who cannot be tamed into marriage. Being described as "old" also sets Frau Gothel apart as undesirable, unlike Rapunzel, who is young and beautiful. Her ancient age is a reflection of her disagreeable actions and attitude from the perspective of the men (or man) in power. Rapunzel further cements her place as the more appealing woman to the prince at the end of the fairy tale, when upon finding the prince staggering blind through the forest (after herself wandering for years with their twin children), "Two of her tears fell into his eyes, and they became clear once again, and could see as well as before" (Grimm). The healing qualities of her tears, whether magical or metaphorical, are an ability that only appears to benefit Rapunzel. While it is her gift, she uses it to repair the prince's eyesight—like an angel bestowing her blessing on the man, giving of herself for his glory. Rapunzel is separated from the monstrosity of Frau Gothel, depicted as a saintly woman whom no man could help but love in her caring and nurturing of her husband and children despite her own suffering. Rapunzel's appealing nature in the fairytale is determined and defined by the previous expectations of the male gaze.

Of course, "Rapunzel" exemplifies many of the concerns of feminist critics regarding the power dynamics of men and women. It is Kate Millett who believed that "power in both public and domestic life is held by males, and literature is a record of the collective consciousness of the patriarchy" (Dobie 107). "Rapunzel" supports this idea, since "He [the prince] *led* her into *his* kingdom, where *he* was received with joy" (Grimm, emphasis added). Despite Rapunzel saving the prince, he is the one who holds power over her public life, as she is the one who follows his

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lead as a shadow that is paid no mind by others. Furthermore, his decision to take Rapunzel away overshadows the approval and wishes of Frau Gothel, even though she serves as a stepmother of sorts with authority over Rapunzel. The prince's power overcomes both of these women in public affairs and in domestic life. When reflecting on the author's life and works, Dobie comes to the conclusion that Mary Wollstonecraft noticed "the imbalances of power between her own mother and father and having observed as an adult the indignities suffered by women of all classes, she recognized that they are born into powerlessness" (Dobie 106). "Rapunzel" takes this quite literally, as Rapunzel is born into a family powerless to prevent Frau Gothel from taking her and locking her in a tower. Her only hope of escape is from the man who sneaks in and offers her liberation—if she marries him. What Rapunzel has is merely the semblance of power and choice, but in truth, she remains just as powerless throughout the whole fairy tale as she was as a baby. By examining the power dynamics of the characters in "Rapunzel," readers see that the tale reflects the issues feminist critics noticed about the power structures between men and women in real life.

The dominant patriarchal ideology that women are inferior to men—a group organized into monsters and angels depending on their appeal to male wants and needs—is a prevalent issue in the fairytale "Rapunzel." There are several overarching topics of feminist concern that "Rapunzel" perpetuates, alongside more specific concerns such as depictions of womanly weakness and desirability according to male preferences. The fairytale also displays power dynamics skewed in favor of the male "hero," which aligns with real patterns observed by feminist critics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ultimately, this shows that even beloved stories (with empowering animated retellings) can hide harmful messages in the spaces between words for women and their role in the world.

References

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