

Searching for Moral Lessons in "Rapunzel"

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The Grimms' fairy tale "Rapunzel" does not portray the stereotypical evil stepmother, perfect prince, or immediate fairytale wedding. Hence, when adapted into various mediums, such as the movies *Tangled* and *Barbie as Rapunzel* or the graphic novel *Rapunzel's Revenge*, the story is often misinterpreted and reinvented since the world no longer values the tale's implied morality and coming-of-age issues. While Bettelheim's Freudian approach to fairy tales has been widely criticized, he and many others, especially Sheldon Cashdan, illustrate that fairy tales can hold deeper moral lessons. Rather than bypassing possible morality lessons in modern adaptations of the tale or cheapening it by victimizing Rapunzel and vilifying Mother Gothel, "Rapunzel" should be viewed as an important story portraying complex issues of morality, growing up, and parenting.

Undoubtedly, fairy tales could potentially be important for children and their moral development, but the issue is greatly contested. Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* proclaims that fairy tales provide a child with "a moral education, which subtly, and by implication only, conveys to him the advantage of moral behavior" (5). In an essay contained in his book *Breaking the Magic Spell*, Jack Zipes argues that Bettelheim shows "betrayal of the radical essence of Freudianism" and "corruption of the literary meaning of the folk tale" and calls his therapeutic methods "authoritarian and unscientific," although Zipes admits fairy tales are valuable in the "socialization process" ("On the Use" 164, 160). Maria Tartar also faults Bettelheim's "interpretations," noting readers with dissimilar cultural values would have alternative viewpoints ("Preface" xxiii). She believes Bettelheim "endows children with a power over the text that they do not in reality possess," and that not helping child readers can constitute "neglect" (Tartar, "Wilhelm Grimm" 77-78). But, rather than becoming bogged down by arguments about the validity of Freudian psychoanalysis, Rose Oliver redirects our attention to uncovering moral meanings, since he believes it is hard to argue for or against an "unconscious" reading of fairy tales and claims "perhaps it is more pertinent to ask what universal values they serve" (86).

Aside from Bettelheim, Michael Hornyansky also notes fairy tales allow children to absorb lessons without knowing it (131). An excellent contemporary position, made by Dr. Sheldon Cashdan in his book *The Witch Must Die: How Fairy Tales Shape Our Lives*, is that fairy tales "offer us a means of addressing psychological conflicts" (ix). Cashdan wrote his book from the "theme"

of "the seven deadly sins of childhood" (ix). He claims, "Every major fairy tale is unique in that it addresses a specific failing or unhealthy predisposition in the self" (Cashdan 13). He also believes in the rewards of teachers and parents "subtly" having children see a fairy tale's "underlying sin" (Cashdan 15). In Cashdan's theory, the witch in these stories dies to "ensure that bad parts of the self are eradicated and that good parts of the self prevail" (35). Finally, Cashdan believes adult ties to fairy tales result from childhood experiences with them, since "it is in childhood that the seeds of virtue are sown" (20). In order to understand certain complex tales such as "Rapunzel," it is believed that a symbolic, historical, or psychoanalytic analysis is not enough—these tales must also be viewed from a didactic or moral viewpoint.

Indeed, "Rapunzel" addresses many moral issues. Zipes claims "Rapunzel" is not meant to be "didactic," but that it has "the initiation of a virgin, who must learn hard lessons when she defies her maternal protectress" ("Witch as Fairy" 78). However, Cashdan believes "Rapunzel" is about "premature sexuality," that is, "precocious sexuality" (155, 266). This makes sense, since Rapunzel has twins in the Grimm's version before getting validly married (Grimm 36-38). Since Rapunzel was taken to the tower at twelve, Bettelheim argues the story is about "a pubertal girl and ...a jealous mother who tries to prevent her from gaining independence" (17). Dr. Cashdan and Kay Stone also highlight Rapunzel's puberty and the tower's purpose in protecting her virginity, with Stone adding that the tower might protect her from female "competition" or perhaps indicates the masculine response to the "threat of female sexuality" (Cashdan 157; Stone 46-47). Rapunzel receives "disfigurement and banishment" and exile, as "punishment for her sexual recklessness" (Cashdan 159). Cashdan believes her and the prince's sufferings illustrate "the seriousness with which premature sex is treated in fairy tales" (159). While Bettelheim suggests her children occur solely from love, since a marriage doesn't take place and there is no allusion to sex, Kay Stone acknowledges the children as actual (not symbolic) children, which is why "translations" exclude her babies (Bettelheim 113-114; Stone 46). Cashdan also asserts they do have sex (158). As Maria Tartar relays, the Grimms' first edition of *Nursery and Household Tales* has Rapunzel say, "Tell me, Godmother, why my clothes are so tight and why they don't fit me any longer" (qtd. in "Sex and Violence" 18). Sexuality is often considered inappropriate for children, but due to the sexual revolution, there is more sexual freedom today. Hence, adaptations are at an impasse and thus avoid controversy by removing the children altogether. However, if presented true to the Grimm version, "Rapunzel" may serve as a warning against premarital sex or, at bare minimum, premature sex.

"Rapunzel" also concerns overall maturity, a message which adaptations present as independence desired by a girl unjustly wronged. One of Bettelheim's

most important insights about Rapunzel is that she and her lover “act immaturely” (149). Bettelheim points out that the prince “spies” and “sneaks” around rather than speaking with Gothel, and that Rapunzel “also cheats” by not being forthright with Gothel (149). Because of this, Bettelheim remarks, their happiness is delayed and “a period of trial and tribulation, of inner growth through misfortune” occurs (149). Moreover, the fact that both Rapunzel and the prince stay in their wretched conditions instead of actively attempting to find each other indicates their immaturity, although, their tribulations presumably allow them to become mature adults (Bettelheim 150). Overall, although the young couple was placed in a difficult situation, some of their trials are the direct result of their rashness and immaturity.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty of “Rapunzel” and its adaptations occurs in what this essay calls the “Gothel problem,” where Rapunzel's surrogate mother is often demonized and even punished with death. In the Grimm version, Rapunzel is compensation for her father's theft from Gothel's garden and she locks Rapunzel away in a tower (Grimm 34-35). She also uses terroristic threatening against the prince, cuts Rapunzel's hair, and banishes Rapunzel (Grimm 36-37). If anything, Gothel could symbolize the fine line between protective and over-protective parents. Bettelheim addresses Gothel's role in the story: “Having acted foolishly and selfishly, the sorceress loses out—but since she acted from too much love for Rapunzel and not out of wickedness, no harm befalls her” (149). For, he notes, all she does is “gloat” over the prince, and his “tragedy is the result of his own doing” (Bettelheim 149). Cashdan interprets the exchange as Gothel “mocks him and issues a curse,” quoting her as telling him, “The cat has got her, and will scratch out your eyes as well” (Grimm, qtd in 159). He says, “The curse is fulfilled when the prince leaps from the tower in despair and is blinded by thorns” (Cashdan 159). Whether the prince was cursed or not, the Grimms are ambiguous, only writing Gothel has “an angry, poisonous look in her eye,” and that the prince jumps from the tower “in his despair” (Grimm 37). But, regardless of whether she curses the prince or not, Gothel does not fit the prototype of a villain or even an evil stepmother and her fate is unknown. Cashdan asserts that unlike Snow White's stepmother, Gothel “is not evil through and through” and “wants to protect Rapunzel,” so killing Gothel “would be tantamount to destroying parts of the self charged with safeguarding one's sexual well-being” (Cashdan 160). So, Gothel may actually symbolize the need to control our sexual impulses. Cashdan also cites the importance of protecting children from “prematurely engaging in sex,” but notes the folly of “an all-out attack on sex,” stating “we cannot lock children in their rooms to protect them from sexual perils” (Cashdan 162). In this sense, Gothel could symbolize how parents can be too protective, a sobering reminder to parents reading the tale to their children. The solution to worldly peril is proper education and cultivation of morals, not

keeping a child hidden away in ignorance. She could also serve as the example of the loving but harsh parent, too consumed by personal beliefs to realize the need to forgive children after they make mistakes instead of disowning them. Zipes claims that after the prince “seduces Rapunzel,” Gothel “justifiably punishes both the maiden and the prince,” and Zipes seems to hint that the story's happy ending is “an apparent mercy shown by the old woman/witch/mistress of the forest, who remains alive and powerful” (“Witch as Fairy,” 78). Perhaps Zipes is onto something since the witch doesn't die in the Grimm story, the situation begs the question: if Gothel were totally evil, would she not exact further revenge upon Rapunzel and the prince (Grimm 37-38)?

The “Gothel problem” is exacerbated in today's media. Stone notes that Disney's film versions of *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, and *Snow White* all support “the already popular stereotype of the innocent beauty victimized by the wicked villainess” (44). This is a theme that is somewhat reinforced by *Tangled*. Zipes criticizes this film, noting that *Tangled*'s “major conflict is between a pouting adolescent princess and a witch,” and that “Disney films tend to demonize older women and infantilize young women” (“They'll huff,” n.p.). He says, “gone are any hints that Rapunzel might reflect a deeper meaning and history: the initiation ritual of young girls led by older wise women who keep them in isolation in order to protect them” (“They'll huff” n.p.). Instead of receiving Rapunzel as compensation for theft, in *Tangled* Gothel is a greedy woman obsessed with youth, staying young through the use of a magical flower (Grimm 33-34; Greno and Howard, *Tangled*). When the flower is used to save Rapunzel's mother's life, Rapunzel's uncut hair gains magical properties, so Gothel kidnaps Rapunzel (Greno and Howard, *Tangled*). Gothel also stabs Flynn (Rapunzel's rescuer), mortally wounding him (Greno and Howard, *Tangled*). When Flynn cuts Rapunzel's hair, Gothel's power is broken, causing her to hyper-age, and Rapunzel's pet chameleon helps trip Gothel out of the tower's window and she becomes dust when she hits the ground (Greno and Howard, *Tangled*). Hence, the movie makes Gothel a vicious, selfish woman bent on keeping her source of youth no matter what the cost to other human beings, and Rapunzel a victim with untainted innocence.

In *Barbie as Rapunzel*, the story is altered just as much, if not more so, than its successor *Tangled*. Rapunzel lives in a villa and for sneaking off to explore a local village and meeting a guy, she is imprisoned in the tower (Hurley, *Barbie*). All alterations and talking dragons aside, the tale also demonizes Gothel. Rapunzel, daughter of a King, was taken by Gothel because Gothel believed the King had loved and rejected her, so she viewed Rapunzel as what should have been hers (Hurley, *Barbie*). Rapunzel gives Gothel a chance to redeem herself, but Gothel's desire for revenge cannot be appeased, so Gothel ends up in the tower trapped by her own curse that was originally intended to keep

Rapunzel locked away forever (Hurley, *Barbie*).

Since she is a morally ambiguous, conflicted character, Gothel can be troublesome in adaptations of "Rapunzel." Cookie-cutter fairy tale films require the stereotyped "good guy" and "bad guy" with clear morals portrayed. Perhaps Gothel is vilified partly because young children need polarized rather than realistic "ambivalent" characters (Bettelheim 9). Even in mediums presumably intended for a slightly older audience, Gothel can still be demonized. In Shannon and Dean Hale's graphic novel *Rapunzel's Revenge*, Gothel is a witch with the ability to make vegetation grow or die, a tyrannical woman building an "empire" in a Western-setting through taxation and slavery, and Rapunzel is determined to free her mother and stop Gothel's reign of terror using her long braids of hair as weapons and the help her new friend Jack (4-144). Rapunzel, imprisoned in a tree tower for four years, escapes after Gothel leaves her there to "rot" once her hair has magically grown long enough to escape (Hale and Hale 23-35). At one point, Gothel is called a "Small-time greedy lucky crazy hack-witch" (Hale and Hale 82). Rapunzel claims Gothel would "keep hurting people and ending families" (Hale and Hale 99). Gothel also attempts to have her henchman kill Jack (Hale and Hale 130-132). When evidently ready to hurt or kill Rapunzel, Jack pushes Gothel into a forming tree, presumably killing her (Hale and Hale 138-140).

To the essayist's knowledge, one of the closest film adaptations to the Grimm's tale is the 1983 *Shelley Duvall's Faerie Tale Theatre* film *Rapunzel*. Gothel locks Rapunzel in the tower because "you can't trust men" and to prevent a man from separating them (Cates, *Rapunzel*). The story keeps important elements of the original tale, notably; the prince finding Rapunzel, their plan to escape using braided silk skeins, Rapunzel's desert banishment, the prince's blindness, and Rapunzel's twins (Cates, *Rapunzel*). However, some alterations again demonize Gothel and obscure the warnings against premarital sex. The "witch" causes Rapunzel's mother to long for a champion, she wants to find the man lurking around the tower (the prince) in order to put out his eyes and make brain soup, and she directly causes the prince to fall from the tower (Cates, *Rapunzel*). The Prince suggests talking to the witch about his love but Rapunzel says, "She'd kill you—or worse" (Cates, *Rapunzel*). Also, Rapunzel and the Prince "exchanged their vows" in the tower and "considered themselves husband and wife" after that (Cates, *Rapunzel*). This makes the prince seem more honorable and attempts to absolve any moral ambiguity surrounding their sexual relations (Cates, *Rapunzel*). The tale's ending adds that Gothel died from "a hardened heart" (Cates, *Rapunzel*). While a less egregious adaptation, *Rapunzel* still cannot completely resolve the complex and troubling aspects of the Grimm version, which perhaps explains why Gothel is the movie's villain and why the film explicitly portrays Rapunzel and the prince as a married couple.

Rather than bypassing possible morality lessons in modern adaptations of the tale, or cheapening it by victimizing Rapunzel and vilifying Mother Gothel, "Rapunzel" should be viewed as an important story portraying to adults and children complex issues of morality, growing up, and parenting. As demonstrated, from a moral interpretation, "Rapunzel" may serve as a double-warning against premature or premarital sex and parental over-protectiveness. Moreover, all the characters make mistakes, which is why they suffer various losses. Although she displays some cruelty, Gothel is a complex villain, neither totally good nor truly evil. But due to changed societal norms and beliefs, adaptations of "Rapunzel" tend to demonize Gothel and victimize Rapunzel. Today, more than ever, an honest assessment of the tale's many possible interpretations and its multi-faceted characters is needed to better understand "Rapunzel" from an unstereotyped perspective—otherwise, we risk being just as blind as the prince before he finds Rapunzel.

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"Rapuzeltopia" is the forty-fourth episode of Tangled: The Series. It premiered on April 7, 2019, and is the twenty-first episode in the second season. Rapunzel wakes up and finds herself in Corona with short brown hair and seemingly perfect life as if all the events of the black rocks and Varian never happened. She was confused by this at first, but chooses to accept it.