YARDS UPON YARDS OF HAIR: EXAMINING THE CHANGING CHARACTERS OF A RETOLD FAIRY TALE

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This text is dedicated to my family, without whom I don’t think I would of survived this. Also to NaToya Faughnder for being amazing support and an even a better editor.
This thesis examines the way in which the characters of the Grimm Brothers’ “Rapunzel” change and shift through different adaptations of the fairy tale. Focused on the contemporary adolescent novels Rapunzel’s Revenge, Golden, and Zel, this thesis looks at the ways in which Rapunzel, the witch, and the prince transform from characters that lack depth in the fairy tale into fully developed characters that represent modern feminist and American conceptions of gender roles.

In each adaptation being examined, the new contexts into which the tales have been written result in significant changes to the representation of the primary characters of the story. Authors of contemporary fairy tale adaptations change, shift, and build on the traditional tales’ ingrained networks of symbols, figures, and archetypes to create stories that can not only span a full-length novel, but can also be adjusted to fit a contemporary audience. The characters shift to fit the new molds made by the shifts in the ideological stances the authors of the texts hold as significant; they are representative of the authors’ imposed context, the context that represents their ideologies (the collection of ideas that make up the author’s conception of the world, whether knowingly or unknowingly), agendas (the ideas that the author is knowingly inserting into the text), and connections to the story of “Rapunzel.” This thesis tracks these changes and identifies the way these shifts work within the text, and within the larger context that the text was written in. In the end, this text demonstrates the method in which fairy tales stay relevant to a society that is very different than the one they were recorded in; it shows how changes made to the fairy tale represent fundamental and traceable changes in the culture the adaptation was written in.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

To begin any discussion that revolves around folktales, it is in part necessary to define what specific traits define a folktale. While it may not be completely possible to provide an exact, singular definition that meets the requirements of the past and present various scholars who work with folktales, a few general assertions can be safely provided. A folktale is traditionally understood as a story that, as the name implies, comes from the common “folk” of the people. That is to say, the people who comprise, or historically have comprised, the masses of society traditionally marked the folk were agrarian workers and tradesmen. More to point, however, as understood today, the folktale is a story that derives from any particular group of people, be that group defined by cultural, economic, linguistic, or educational boundaries, or any of an almost infinite set of other possible limitations. The folktale, then, is any story generally originating anonymously from and told among one of these identified groups—these folk.

The literary folktale, the type of folktale that is pertinent to the discussion in this thesis, is limited more than the typically wide definition that includes “folktale.” A literary folktale is one that has been rendered in written form. Though typically it is derived from oral tradition (from the same process that formed the many types of folktales) that is then written down by individuals (such as Charles Perrault, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Madame d’Aulnoy), some audiences consider stories penned specifically to mimic common folktale motifs, themes, or structures (such as those written by Hans Christian Andersen) to be folktales as well. Literary folktales also have subsets, such as the fairytale (in German,
Marchen or “wonder tale”), the ghost story, the folk ballad, etc. Many of these are the stories that have been told for centuries, each version a little different in each telling but remarkably and identifiably similar. For example, there are a large number of versions of the story of Little Red Riding Hood. The Grimm Brothers recorded an edition, as did Charles Perrault, and many others. There are over four hundred versions of the Cinderella story in Europe alone. Most of these stories will continue to be told—and retold—for centuries to come. These tales have shifted through their many retellings, changing with each storyteller, and with each storytelling. With the increase of literacy and the increased importance of the written word in Western society, many of these literary folktales have been recorded, written down by figures who changed the stories to fit their particular subject positions in a historical, cultural, and social moment. It is in this recorded format that many folktales have come to be widely recognized, widely used.

These stories very often retain key attributes from their oral nature. These elements help audiences remember and connect with them. In their brevity, repetition, and archetypes, these stories contain qualities that continue to be relevant. Instead of staying still, even within the recorded versions of the text, new kinds of storytellers come forward, expanding tales, filling them with modern ideas, and creating stories that are both old and new, recognizable but different, yet always rooted in the folktale. No longer are these stories necessarily brief, but their initial brevity makes room for expansion. No longer do they necessarily employ the technique of repetition, useful so the oral storyteller can maintain the

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1 A term coined by Michael Foucault, a subject position is defined as the position of a person or thing as subject to the multiple discourses around them. A musician of the 1940’s would be in a very different subject position to a musician from the 21st century because of the different discourses of music and culture influencing that artist. A person’s subject position changes based on the roles they occupy. The subject position of a mother, for example, is therefore quite different from the subject position of a businesswoman, though they may both be present in the same individual.
story in his/her head, but repetition can be employed to draw connections from a newer textual version to its former oral rendition. And no longer are the characters, events, and stories necessarily archetypal, but in the retelling, the archetypes have room to explode into developed characters and worlds. Folk and fairy tale retellings, especially in adolescent literature, build upon the original story by expanding plot, character, and description. Adaptations create narrative where there was lack of detail, characterization, reasoning, or description, and in so doing, they recreate the story. To do this and still remain recognizable, these retellings work within a set of parameters that function as identifying markers. Most often in the novelized fairy tale, these markers are the archetypal symbols recognizable from the traditional tales; they build on the elements most recognizable. For Cinderella, the shoe and the prince’s ball. For Snow White, the poisoned apple and the glass coffin. For Rapunzel, yards upon yards of golden hair and a tall tower with no doors. These are the symbols that mark the tales as being of one ilk or another. Specifically, they are the signifiers of the original tale, the collection of symbols and representations that make up the original story, but which can mean different things for different readers.

Authors of contemporary fairy tale adaptations change, shift, and build on the traditional tales’ ingrained networks of symbols, figures, and archetypes to create stories that can not only span a full-length novel, but can also be adjusted to fit a contemporary audience. This thesis examines the expansion and adjustment of the markers in the single tale “Rapunzel,” examining these markers as they function as specific literary symbols, broad

2 “Signifier” here refers to the term introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure and developed further by Roland Barthes. A signifier is something that in some way indicates something else. The word “tree,” for example, is a signifier for the actual object, the tree. “Tree,” the signifier, and “the tree,” the signified, are not the same thing. The word “tree” can refer to any number of trees, or every kind of tree, and it is only through specification that it comes to represent a singular tree at a singular time. By extension, the tree itself can become a signifier as well, signifying everything from life and nature, to age and time, depending on how it is used.
archetypes, and, as these symbols and archetypes become embedded to language, as signifiers. Though several versions of this text exist as recorded by individuals in different cultures and historical periods, this paper uses the tale as recorded by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm as its primary source, both because this is the version with which most American readers are familiar and because it is this version each of the authors being examined in this paper have claimed to use as their primary sources. My research examines the expansion of “Rapunzel” by several contemporary writers of adolescent fiction and analyzes how each version reworks the traditional tale. These retellings move with and around the signifiers inherent to Rapunzel, using the very signals that mark it distinctly as the tale audiences recognize to make significant changes.

Before we can begin to properly examine the particulars of “Rapunzel” that are the keystones of this paper, it is important to first achieve a general understanding of the tale and its origins. “Rapunzel,” as collected and told the Brothers Grimm, is the story of a girl with incredibly long hair who has been named after a vegetable and is trapped in a tower by a powerful female force (the evil witch). More than anything else Rapunzel is known for her extraordinarily long hair. The hair itself is a motif that has been traced by scholar Laura J. Getty. In her article “Maidens and their Guardians: Reinterpreting the ‘Rapunzel’ Tale,” she demonstrates variants of the “hair ladder” motif from “Persia, the Mediterranean region, France, and Germany,” several of which predate and were likely source material for the Grimm Brothers’ version (47). The Grimm Brothers’ version, Getty asserts, is taken and distilled from a translation done by Friedrich Schulz of Mademoiselle Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de la Force’s “Persinette,” with the name changed to “Rapunzel” and the vegetable changed to rampion (which in German translates to Rapunzeln). The Grimm Brothers, in
their distillation, believed they were dealing with “a literary re-telling of an old German folktale; because of this (mistaken) belief Jacob simply eliminated everything that he thought Schulz had added to it, hoping to end up with the ‘core’ of the tale” (42). The Grimm Brothers created a version of the tale that fit their beliefs on what a folktale should be, creating another step in the progression of the tale to the form most recognized in Western society today. Getty’s analysis allows for the realization that the hair ladder motif and the general story of “Rapunzel” are derived from older stories of similar plotlines that use identical, or at the very least similar, symbolic representation in order to create meaning. The tale itself comes from very complex history that speaks of the flexibility inherent in the signifiers that are the core of the tale, even as it moves through multiple cultures.

In the Grimm Brothers’ version, the ending differs from its forebears in some significant ways. Rapunzel, by the end of the tale, has her hair chopped off and is sent away to a distant land where she will care for her two small children. The story in addition involves a prince, a male figure of salvation. This prince in most of the many versions that Getty presents in her article is a fairly decent climber of hair. In the Grimms’ tale, when the prince climbs the tower for a final time, he finds in that tower a witch ready to curse him: but no Rapunzel. He spends years afflicted by the witch with blindness, until he once again stumbles upon Rapunzel, whose tears miraculously cure him so they can live happily ever after. In a French variant mentioned by Getty, the story includes an ogress/fairy figure (in

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3 We make the assumption that these children were sired by the prince based on the context of the story, a fact reinforced by an earlier manuscript of the Grimm Brothers’ in which Rapunzel asks Mother Gothel after the Prince’s visitation, “Mother Gothel why do you think my clothes have become too tight for me and no longer fit” instead of “Mother Gothel, how is it that you’re much heavier than the prince? When I pull him up he’s here in a second” (Brothers Grimm, qtd in Zipes The Brothers Grimm 33-4). In both cases Rapunzel reveals the fact that the prince has visited her in the tower; however, in the earlier version the tale makes reference to Rapunzel’s pregnant state due to those visits.
place of the witch) who, when the prince and Rapunzel leave, affixes a pig’s snout onto the prince and turns the princess into a frog. There the story ends. In another variant “the maiden's face is changed into that of an animal.” Getty asserts that the tale, at times, shifts culturally into a Christian dynamic where the maiden is a sinner and the ogress is a nun whom she needs to ask for redemption in order to continue her life. She points out that “[it] is this face-marking that displays the ultimate control that the fairy/ogress has, since the maiden is ‘branded’ in a way that makes her unacceptabe […] Once the maiden has, quite literally, confessed her sins and begged absolution, the fairy/ogress/’nun’ is able to forgive her and the marriage can take place” (49).

Inherent in many endings of “Rapunzel” is a focus on the power of the witch/sorceress/fairy/ogress figure over the figures of Rapunzel and the prince. The figure of the witch is key to moving the plot forward and determining the ultimate outcome of the tale. This characterization works in contrast to the prince. While considered the rescuer, he often comes to be as much at the mercy of the witch figure, if not more at her mercy, than Rapunzel herself. The witch is the dominant power in the story and the prince is a figure more destined to bring Rapunzel to a realization, than to be a hero himself. As noted in “Rapunzel,” the prince is there so that the princess can realize that “he was young and handsome” that he’ll “certainly love me better than old Mother Gothel” (44). This is not a dashing prince placed into the story for the purpose of rescue. His purpose is far more subtle: he is a method of moving Rapunzel out of childhood and into adulthood. In being such a figure, a signifier of change, he comes to be less of a person and more of a role to be filled in the text, albeit an important one. The inherent conflict, therefore, is between not the witch figure and the prince figure, but the witch figure and Rapunzel.
From the rather sparse framework of the tale that is the Grimm Brothers’ “Rapunzel” and from the more extensive list of variants, we can determine a number of things. Rapunzel is a quintessential damsel in distress, an example of AT 310, “The Maiden in the Tower” tale. The witch’s demand of a first born child for the rapunzel stolen from her garden is excessive and thus unjust. Her treatment of the child, placing her in the tower, is likewise unmerited based on the information the audience is given. Rapunzel, after the age of twelve, is held so secluded in her tower that she has, in the story, “never laid eyes on a man before” (44). This tale tells the reader certain facts; however, there are a lot of things missing from the story as told. The audience isn’t told the witch’s reasons for wanting a first born child in repayment for a stolen vegetable. Neither is the audience told the reasoning behind putting Rapunzel into an isolated tower. The tale refers to Rapunzel’s thoughts only infrequently, more commonly informing the audience of her actions by showing how she passed her time singing. But seldom is mention made of moments of emotional or intellectual relevance. These moments of potential mention include when Rapunzel feels “terribly afraid” upon meeting the prince or when the prince is “beside himself with grief, and in his despair jumped off the tower” (44-45). Each of these moments, however, contributes to the plot rather than to the characterization. Ironically, the gaps build a framework that can be changed, expanded, and explored.

Characterization is severely wanting in “Rapunzel,” both in the titular heroine and in the other main characters who, in the Grimms’ version, are not named. We don’t know

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4 This is a reference to the Aarne-Thompson classification system. It is a system of cataloguing folktales by their basic types. For example, AT 300 through AT 399 all refer to tales that contain supernatural opponents, such as witches and ogres.

5 While in the Grimm Brothers’ version the witch is also referred to as Mother Gothel, this is as much title
much about the nature of the characters except through the symbolic cues the story itself provides. Modern adolescent retellings of “Rapunzel,” in the process of expanding the tale told by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm into a full-length adolescent novel or graphic novel, work with the lack of characterization and the symbolic signifiers within the text in order to expand and rework the tale. Modern retellings examine the images of the witch, the prince, the hair, and the tower and build around them. For these authors and artists, shifting Rapunzel’s hair color, adding a personality to the void that is the witch, changing a prince whose sole purpose is to provide the princess with a happily ever after, all offer opportunities to do exactly what the original tale expects its listeners to do. They fill in the characters. The collection of symbols within the original story becomes a foundation upon which to build an entire plot and set of growing characters. However, in order to remain “Rapunzel,” some of those symbols have to remain intact and certain aspects of the story have to remain recognizable.

In *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*, Max Lüthi dedicates an entire chapter to the concept of depthlessness in folk and fairy tales, a concept that remains a focus throughout the book. Characters in folktales, according to Lüthi, lack “the dimension of depth. Its characters are figures without substance, without inner life, without an environment; they lack any relation to past and future, to time altogether” (11). In essence, the characters in a European folktale are flat. They are deprived of the necessary elements to make them whole, complete people. They lack psychological substance and a relationship with the world around them. In a certain way they are not people; they are, as Lüthi has succinctly pointed out, figures. In a folktale like “Rapunzel,” the lack of fully developed

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as it is name. In German, Mother Gothel is a common term for godmother.
people, and the focus on unindividualized figures, enables a reading that is more symbolic and less character driven. A figure can be symbolic, can be representative. A figure can rather easily be formed into a signifier. This signification is much more difficult to do with a person—a character of inherent complexity. According to Lüthi, “Folktales break down the rich complexity of human beings. Instead of different possible modes of behavior combined in a single person, we see them sharply separated from one another and divided among persons who stand side by side” (15). In “Rapunzel” the characters’ one-dimensionality removes reasoning behind action and only displays behaviors. Rapunzel comes off as sweet because she consistently acts innocently and kindly. She comes to be perceived as of noble blood because of the images associated with her, her long golden hair and the tower she has been placed in. Since there is a stronger concentration on her actions the witch/sorceress is portrayed even less by her feelings. The audience doesn’t know why she imprisoned Rapunzel in the tower at the age of twelve, but her actions contrast sharply with the princes’, who works to save the princess from the tower.

Aspects of any character, when ensconced in language, can be considered signifiers without definite signifieds delineated by an author. Roland Barthes, in Mythologies, makes the point that “any semiology postulates a relation between two terms, a signifier and a signified. This relation concerns objects which belong to different categories, and this is why it is not one of equality but of equivalence” (112). He goes on to establish the convention that when signifier and signified are brought together, they form what Barthes (and other semiologists before him) call a “sign.” To properly demonstrate this association, Barthes uses the example of a black pebble, of which he states, “I can make it signify in several ways, it is a mere signifier; but if I weigh it with a definite signified (a death sentence, for instance,
in an anonymous vote), it will become a sign” (113). Barthes points out that when a signifier and a signified are not in the relationship of a sign you have a signifier with a number of possible signifieds. His establishment of a context for his black pebble signifier (the anonymous vote) creates a single, decided signified, thus creating a sign. The pairing of a signifier with a particular signified, a sign, encompasses the interconnection between signifier and signified only if they are attached. Without a context the stone remains a signifier without a definite signified.

Folktales frequently move between contexts; the large number of variants for many folktales springs from this fact. The tales take on different roles based on particular locales. As certain versions of folktales have become canonical (such as the Grimm Brothers’), the adjustment of the tale has become less common, despite the consistently new contexts it is being placed into. The “Rapunzel” most Americans read is the “Rapunzel” Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published for children in 1825. The context has changed. The tale has not. The interpretations, the signifieds, multiply and become less stable as “Rapunzel” moves out of the context in which the Grimms recorded it in. Lacking a stable signified, the tale can find context in multiple audiences. These audiences create signifieds based not on the previous context, but on their own context, their own ideas about what things mean.

Bruno Bettelheim, a figure central to if often criticized in fairy tale literary analysis, states in The Uses of Enchantment that fairy tales “convey at the same time overt and covert meaning” and “speak simultaneously to all levels of the human personality, communicating in a manner which reaches the uneducated mind of the child as well as that of the sophisticated adult” (5-6). I believe the very lack of stability that comes from a signifier without a definite context allows what Bettelheim asserts to be one of the most powerful
functions of the folktale. The lack allows readers to create signifieds for the text that create immediate meaning for them.

Maria Tatar, in *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, stresses the way in which “when it comes to fairy tales, nearly everyone has something to say” (39). She notes that variations in understandings of fairy tales are instead based on the large number of approaches people use, each tackling the tales from different angles. The large number of opinions, the large number of approaches, also spring from a lack of definite context, a situation where, as Tatar points out, “rather than a single, stable literary text in which even the finest points of detail may function as bearers of significance, we have an infinite number of corrupt ‘texts,’ spoken and written, each representing one version of a single tale type, and an imperfect version at that” (42). In this environment, the meaning of a fairy tale becomes clouded. Certain meanings are considered to be nearly innate in the story, tools for the forwarding of the basic plot; however, even these plot devices, some of the most prominent symbols in these texts, multiply in meaning as a reader moves beyond the meaning necessary to maintain the plot. The concentration on functionality is evident even in the tales themselves; Tartar points out that “animals may generally function as helpers and thereby underscore the hero’s closeness to nature, but occasionally they take on a predatory role” (81). The underscoring, the symbolic representation of animals in the folk tale, is divergent even in the context of the tales themselves. A different context can turn animal helper into animal foe, or as Tartar also later points out, it can turn a stream that will carry a hero to safety into a stream that will turn him into an animal. The attaching of a singular meaning to animal, river, etc., in the genre of folktale therefore is difficult, if not impossible to achieve; contexts are variant, and the depthless representation allows a mobility more difficult to
create in the complexities of actual people. Many authors, however, seek to create a variant meaning through the creation of definite meanings or signifieds, in the creation of a story out of the story.

The limited number of delineated meanings and of delineated signifieds in folktales allows for the creation of fully novelized texts out of the Grimm Brothers’ short tale “Rapunzel.” In the novels being examined here, Shannon, Dean, and Nathan Hale’s graphic Rapunzel’s Revenge, Cameron Dokey’s Golden, and Donna Jo Napoli’s Zel, this thesis will look at the way in which the signifying figures of the Grimm’s tale, Rapunzel, the witch, and the prince, all evolve from being depthless figures/signifiers with multiple meanings into contexts where signifiers are indeed attached to particular signifieds; multiple signifiers become less possible in the novels filled with depth. Out of the figures characters are created, people with feelings, hopes, and motivations. Changes in their characters precipitate changes in the way they are referred to and the way that the symbols identifying them are portrayed.

Rapunzel, for example, often retains her name (or answers to a variation of it), but the symbol that is her hair shifts and changes per every tale. A complex character is built around that shift in every retelling; a variant meaning is attached to the symbol. Both Rapunzel’s character and her hair become constructions built on the context of the story being told. These contexts shift the stories’ portrayals of femininity, strength, heroism, and beauty. The character shifts to fit the new mold made for her by the shifts in the ideological stances forming these new conceptions, whether these conceptions be feminism or capitalism. The witch shifts subject positions, moving from witch, to sorceress, and to mother based on these new contextual parameters as well. The title she is called by establishes the witch's place in
the context of the story, which usually involves placing her in relation to ideas of power and evil in the text. The prince is always characterized in a way that builds him in relation to the feminine power in the text. Because the characters of “Rapunzel” are so vacuous, because there is a minimum of context within the story,” possible meanings multiply; the possible signifieds multiply. Each character, each figure, each symbol has a meaning that is changed per the context it is placed in, as well as based on the context it has been placed in. Folktales, when placed into the created context of a textual or graphic novel, shift the figures and the symbols of the folktale to create people that are a center of interest, people who are no longer symbols; they are representative of the author/s’ imposed context, the context that represents their ideologies (the collection of ideas that make up the author’s conception of the world, whether knowingly or unknowingly), agendas (the ideas that the author is knowingly inserting into the text), and connections to the story of “Rapunzel.”

Each of the three texts being examined in the following chapters works in a significantly different way with the story of “Rapunzel.” Each one provides a very different representation of the figures of Rapunzel, the witch, and the prince. Each reworks Rapunzel through her hair; hair becomes a focus of every one of these renditions in significant ways. With the witch, there is a significant focus on her motherly qualities (or lack thereof) and on her power and magic. With the prince, there are sharp shifts between everything from heroism, nobility, pompousness, to even criminality. The text questions the relationship of prince to female protagonist, and of prince to feminine power. The masculine in these tales is built not in its own right, but in relationship to textual context. All of these retellings work with the symbols, archetypes, figures, and signifiers of the original tale, adjusting and shifting them. The particular choices made affect the reading of these tales. These
adjustments are often subversive, working to overturn the most basic and socializing meanings their authors have found in the fairy tale they are retelling, while implanting their own ideas. The tales these authors create, whether consciously or unconsciously, are products of a new context, and their creations of new meanings and signs represent a change that has been ongoing for generations. These writers, like the Grimm Brothers before them, are adapting a story to fit what they believe is needed for their respective times.
CHAPTER 2

RAPUNZEL: THAT SURE IS A LOT OF HAIR

Stories, whether written or told, are contained within a specific context established by the time and culture of their production. Once a text moves outside of its context of production the text loses stability, and often meanings and implications that are understood in that original time and culture either lose meaning or are changed. Folk tales in their oral forms have a natural mechanism for dealing with these temporal and cultural shifts in context; they are fluid in ways that the written word recorded in actual texts is not capable of, able to be altered by the teller at the first hint of confusion, discomfort, or boredom. The oral tale, at both the conscious and unconscious inclination of the storyteller, shifts and adjusts based on region, time period, and especially the particular audiences for which it is intended at any given moment, understanding that such a moment can change in an instant. While lacking the monumental stability of form that comes with being words on a page, oral stories have signifieds, meanings that with a dynamic storyteller are situated for whichever audience they encounter.

The written folktale maintains a greater stability in form that removes from it the protean ability to be situated with any particular audience. The storyteller is now represented by the letters on the page, by stationary symbols, encoded meaning requiring multiple levels of interpretation from the literal ability to decipher letters to language to the more complex social, cultural, and historical weight that exists beneath the denotation of a word or phrase at any given moment. With this level of permanence, the storyteller no longer adjusts the story for a mutable audience. Audiences instead are expected to adjust, in part, to the text; not all
audiences will be capable of this. In gaining stability in form folktales lose their ability to stay completely in touch with the audience when they travel into new contexts. The further a tale moves from its intended audience, the more tenuous the hold on context, and the more vacuous some of that meaning may become. Signs in written folktales move to become signifiers as the story shifts from the context it is recorded in to new contexts. In the oral form, occurrences of this were worked through various small adjustments made to the story precipitated by the ever changing storyteller. The written form, in comparison, attained authority. While the movement of these texts into written form removes the connection based on a stable signified situated in a particular context, the text, by being in written form, has a stability that enables it to become “the story” rather than a version of the story. By being confined in form, textual fairy tales acquire new processes with which they add a new selection of meanings that change as they move through multiple contexts. Critics like Jack Zipes realize this and use it in an attempt to achieve an understanding of the tale as written, situated in the culture it was recorded by, as well as discerning new meanings constructed as it moves into other cultural contexts.

In modern retellings of the Rapunzel story, the symbols—the signifiers—are retooled as they are placed into a retelling. They are made to say something particular, moving away from the multiple meanings that have manifested as a static folktale is passed down to readers from Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Modern retellers use specific symbols that have strong culturally signification (most often the pieces of the story that make it most recognizable) and use them as signifiers to be attached to signifieds, solidifying a meaning for the tale in the cultural context of the author. In doing this, each author who works with the earlier material both maintains the story invested with the authority of time, and yet
changes many fundamental meanings. In the case of Rapunzel, the most commonly manipulated signifier is her hair. The representation of Rapunzel’s hair is key to the story. Rapunzel’s hair is her most potent symbol, an icon that represents her entire character to millions of readers (much in the same way that glass slippers will regularly refer audiences back to Cinderella). In these retellings, the ways in which Rapunzel’s hair is represented often indicates the changes the authors are making in the personality of her character.

Rapunzel, for the Hales, Dokey, and Napoli, as well as their audiences, is intricately linked with the depiction of her hair. These authors retool her hair, sometimes, even often, working in contrast to the meanings endowed to it in the Grimm Brothers’ folktale. The authors form a sign out of an element that has become a signifier: they move the text away from multiple meanings and into a particular one, chosen by them, and decided upon based on what they believe to be the makeup of their audience. Examining the changes made to Rapunzel’s hair invites readers to interpret the authors’ ideas and intentions.

In the Brother Grimm’s narrative, Rapunzel’s golden tresses work in two ways. First, they are a plot device, forwarding the story by allowing the handsome prince (and wicked witch) access to the trapped princess. The second is that her hair works as a symbol of Rapunzel’s character by prominently representing her nobility, her youth, and her femininity. Without the hair, the story is not a story of Rapunzel, but rather of a very different type of damsel trapped in a tower. The Grimm Brothers’ description is significant, “Rapunzel’s hair was long and radiant, fine as spun gold” (43). Her hair is brilliantly golden, a symbol that in the context of fairy tales represents standard elements of her character. Max Lüthi explores the symbolic representation of gold in his article “The Fairy-Tale Hero: The Image of Man in the Fairy Tale” where he states:
When Goldmarie, after proving herself in the realm of Mother Hulda, is showered with gold, no one doubts that this is an image—one which reveals the girl’s good soul. And when other fairy-tale heroines comb golden flowers out of their hair, or when a flower shoots out of the ground at their every step, we likewise immediately take it to be symbolic. Not only alchemists, but people generally feel gold to be representative for a higher human and cosmic perfection. (369)

Rapunzel’s hair, “fine as spun gold,” is indicative of a similar perfection. She is supposed to be “the most beautiful child under the sun;” a representation that depicts her not as just beautiful, but as supremely beautiful (Grimm 43). Her hair is a feature of exaggerated femininity and beauty, completely impractical in day-to-day life, and yet possible in the isolated surroundings of the high tower. It remains down, loose, and uncovered, demonstrating both that Rapunzel is of marriageable age and fertile, 6 and that she has never had to toil in the fields. Her hair is literally entirely for show, a symbolic representation of her feminine beauty. Her skin and hands follow suit, demonstrating her to be no peasant by being both unblemished and pale, another sign of her never having been exposed to sun. She is unaccustomed to and ill-prepared for manual labor—or even banal housework (her main way of passing the time, after all, is singing7). Her features separate her from her peasant birth, much as the tower has separated her from the world outside.

The symbolic nature of Rapunzel’s hair, and by extension her appearance, indicate Rapunzel to be more than a peasant’s daughter. She may, for a portion of time, be placed into the position of the peasant, but this is not the place that she is meant for. The gold in her

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6 In many cultures (such as the Tudor period in England) loose hair was indicative of an unmarried girl who was of marriageable age. Her long hair is also demonstrates her good health, and therefore the stronger probability of her being fertile.

7 This is partially a facetious statement. For young women of many time periods, singing is one of the qualities a lady must possess in order to be truly accomplished. Therefore, Rapunzel’s singing is a trait that further reinforces the conception of her as of noble character, and therefore of higher status. It is not just frivolous.
hair is associated with noble bearing, and thus a place in the actual nobility. Her hair’s length works as a testimonial to her feminine beauty, and thus her right to a place at the side of a quintessential example of handsome male masculinity, a prince. Lüthi states that

The fairy tale often depicts how a penniless wretch becomes wealthy, a maid becomes queen, a disheveled man is changed into a youth with golden hair, or a toad, bear, ape, or dog is transformed into a beautiful maiden or handsome youth […] The focal point is not the rise of the servant to his position of master, not the esteem and recognition accorded the former outcast child; these are images for something more fundamental; man’s deliverance from an unauthentic existence and his commencement of a true one. (Once Upon a Time 138)

Rapunzel’s hair, her very beauty, is the natural indication of what her role should be. The transformation from peasant’s daughter to prince’s wife is a move into a true existence. The movement of Rapunzel out of her family’s home is necessary and important to the plot the Grimm Brothers’ tale because it gives her the opportunity to be placed into an existence more true to her bearing. Rapunzel’s hair and her repose in the tower give Rapunzel all of the markers of nobility, thereby making way for the possibility of her becoming actual nobility by the end of the tale. Rapunzel’s hair, her skin, her very looks indicate for the audience that she is meant to be a princess, and, eventually, a queen.

What then does a red-headed Rapunzel represent? The contemporary Rapunzel conceived by writers Shannon and Dean Hale and artist Nathan Hale in Rapunzel’s Revenge has a new hair color; she is not a blond. Her divergent hair color serves to represent a divergent character, a character who doesn’t need a prince to rescue her, and a character whose hair becomes a weapon and tool in her adventures. In Rapunzel’s Revenge, Rapunzel’s red hair is a fundamentally different signifier than the golden locks in the Grimms’ tale. Redheads, in the symbolic sense, are considered to be more impassioned characters. In George Sumner Weavers’1851 Lectures on Mental Science, According to the
Philosophy of Phrenology redheads are regarded as natural example of the sanguine temperament. They are:

“hot bloods” [...] people in whom this temperament predominates. It is a burning, flaming, flashing temperament. Hence it hangs out its signs of fire in the red, blazing hair and countenance, its florid or sandy skins [...] It gives activity, quickness, suppleness, to all the motions of body and mind; great elasticity and buoyancy of spirit; readiness, and even fondness for change; suddenness and intensity to the feelings; impulsiveness and hastiness of character; great warmth of both anger and love. (78)

The Hales’ red-headed Rapunzel by this definition is incapable of being the passive princess waiting in a tower to be rescued. Her hair indicates a predisposition to activity, not waiting. Her hair becomes a sign, signifier and signified, that influences Rapunzel’s depiction in the entirety of this graphic novel. Rapunzel in Rapunzel’s Revenge is a lasso-toting, justice-seeking adolescent in cowboy (cowgirl?) boots. The Brothers Grimm’s golden-haired Rapunzel has been transformed, largely through a complex redefining of her long golden locks. Rapunzel’s Revenge’s Rapunzel possesses hair that is not only red, but braided into rope lengths that are fundamentally more conducive to this Rapunzel’s more active situations outside of the tower. Braids, as used by this Rapunzel, are inherently a more practical hairdo, designed more for utility; they keep her hair out of the way. For the Hales’ Rapunzel, the hair is an annoyance to be used. According to her inner narrative, she states: “to keep from going batty, I made use of my dratted hair” (30) (see Figure 1). Rapunzel takes the utility of her hair to extreme levels, turning the hair into a literal tool, one which she...

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8 From this point on, I will be regularly referring to Shannon Hale, Dean Hale, and Nathan Hale as the Hales for the sake of brevity. It is important to make clear, however, that of this group, only Shannon and Dean Hale are related. They are a married couple. Nathan Hale is of no familial relation.

9 The science of phrenology is no longer a medical science, but it is a set of ideas that play a part in our day-to-day conceptions of people. It has been so often repeated that is part of our cultural consciousness, and is often used in literature, film, and other media to attribute characteristics to people without an overt statement needing to be made.
trains with and then eventually uses to escape (see Figure 2). The golden locks, based on these same practical concerns, just don’t have the quality to be used as anything more than a tool for climbing, a tool used by other people. In *Rapunzel’s Revenge*, Rapunzel’s hair is her tool, her weapon, her strength. The depiction of her hair as beautiful golden locks in the Grimms’ “Rapunzel” prevents her from the action-oriented antics of the Hales’ Rapunzel.
While the Rapunzel Nathan Hale depicts is pretty, she is not always the stunning beauty that most audiences will expect a Rapunzel character to be. Her clothes, as noted in figures 1 and 2, have quite literally deteriorated into rags, and after the exit that she describes to readers where she states: “I swing gracefully from my prison [...] climb down the tree branches” and “land triumphantly on the forest floor,” Rapunzel is soaked, sodden, and awkwardly positioned in the wet swamp below her tree prison (34-35) (see Figure 2). The image of Rapunzel is not one of demure beauty, but it does represent her as a powerful feminine character and a feminist ideal. Her clothing is not focused on beauty, but rather for
a good portion of the tale moves from one ridiculous outfit to the next, starting with her long, worn-out dress and moving into an ugly green and white outfit (see Figure 3), until finally becoming an outfit that strikes a balance between a form-fitting femininity and a heroic utility (see Figure 4). Her final outfit in the graphic novel is an elaborate dress, the kind usually associated with the beautiful princess depicted in the Disney versions of fairy tales. However, it is significant to note that despite the fact that this outfit suits her (and dumbfounds the male sidekick and love interest, Jack) it remains a disguise designed for its utility, for getting into Mother Gothel’s party. What’s more is it’s an outfit that Rapunzel feels awkward in (see Figure 5). Rapunzel in *Rapunzel’s Revenge* is far more at home in cowboy boots and pants than she is in a dress. The style of her clothes, at most, comes in as a secondary function to the utility they provided. Her most iconic look in this tale, the one that graces the cover of the graphic novel, is the most iconic not because it makes her the most beautiful, but because it makes her the most heroic and it gives her somewhere to hang her most viable weapon at hand—her long hair.

To change things up entirely, other authors work with Rapunzel’s hair in entirely different ways, creating new signification by completely upturning audience expectation. Cameron Dokey’s Rapunzel in *Golden* is, as stated in the text, “bald as any egg” (22). In this change readers can see a very different representation of Rapunzel than the one proffered by *Rapunzel’s Revenge*. Hair remains a focus, but there is a shift in character and identity of the girl revolving around the identity formation involved in her lack of hair. *Golden*, rather than a story about a girl with an incredible amount of hair, completely flips expectations and makes her hairless, and builds a character around this challenge to the Grimms’ text. *Golden* remains connected to its source material in its premise; it is still based around a child named
after her mother’s favorite food, a girl taken away from her parents at a young age. The text beyond this introduction, however, represents a divergence from the Grimm Brothers’ folktale. This Rapunzel obtains all of the major markers, including the name and familial heritage, which signify her to be a representative of the Grimm Brothers’ folktale, all of
them, that is, except for the iconic hair. Instead of the Rapunzel from *Rapunzel’s Revenge*, a character who is as active as the character from the Grimms’ story is passive, Dokey’s Rapunzel doesn’t work as a figure meant to contrast against a passive archetype (though she is still an active character in comparison to the Grimms’ Rapunzel). Instead Dokey notes that *Golden* is a text revolving around a particular aspect of her own authorial context. In the author’s note at the end of *Golden*, Dokey notes that “several of my family suffer from alopecia areata, an autoimmune skin disease which can result in the loss of hair on the scalp and elsewhere on the body. It can occur in both women and men of all races. While not life threatening, it is most certainly life altering!” (Author’s Note). Dokey’s Rapunzel is made
from figure into person by her very separation from the symbol that is so attached to the
name in contemporary culture: her hair. Her lack of hair makes a symbolic statement.
Through the disruptive change of the symbol that constructs Rapunzel, Dokey makes
statements about what is considered beautiful in our culture. She removes the trait that, for
most audiences, represents the beauty of the character. Dokey attempts to make her character
beautiful for readers despite the lack of the defining trait. She states that she believes
“beauty isn’t merely in the eyes of beholder. It’s also in the heart” (Author’s Note). The
ideological standpoint moves away from a representation of beauty that is purely physical
(though her physical beauty still plays a part there is a particular emphasis on Rapunzel’s
beautiful dark eyes in *Golden*). In its place is a story that eschews obvious and iconic
markers of beauty in an attempt to establish a disconnect between physical beauty and the
beauty perceived by those who care. Dokey’s distinctly didactic impulse, indicated in this
author’s note, moves Rapunzel into a figure meant to challenge cultural standards, a
challenge that only works when the audience understands and recognizes both their own
contexts and the tale the story is being derived from.

The figure of Rapunzel has been, over time, rooted into the iconography of our
socializing processes. Like Cinderella’s slipper, Little Red Riding Hood’s red hood, and
Snow White’s apple, Rapunzel’s golden hair has represented for society what a socially
acceptable woman should be: passive and self-sacrificing. Feminist texts, pretty much any
texts that focus on a strong female character, work to subvert this damaging ideal. Rosemary
Jackson in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* states:

--each fantastic text functions differently, depending upon its particular historical
placing, and its different ideological, political and economic determinants, but the
most subversive fantasies are those which attempt to transform the relations of the
imaginary and the symbolic. They try to set up possibilities for radical cultural
transformation by making fluid the relations between these realms, suggesting, or projecting, the dissolution of the symbolic through violent reversal or rejection of the process of the subject’s formation. (91)

Both *Rapunzel’s Revenge* and *Golden* are basically changing the symbols that build a core of the socialization involved in “Rapunzel.” In *Don’t Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Fairy Tales in North American and England*, Jack Zipes states that “children are conditioned to assume and accept arbitrary sex roles. These socially conditioned roles prepare females to become passive, self denying, obedient and self sacrificial (to name some of the negative qualities) as well as nurturing, caring, and responsible in personal situations (the more positive qualities)” (3). The hair that is so iconic in “Rapunzel” is also representative of what Zipes calls a “socially conditioned role.” Rapunzel’s long golden locks are indicative of her separation from the real world, a separation that puts her into a tower. Rapunzel has to be passive because her hair would never let her actually move about like a normal person. She has to wait for a prince, because her hair only lets other people in; it doesn’t let her out. She has to be obedient, because the only one who will bring her news is the witch, the same person who holds her in the tower. Rapunzel’s golden locks are representative of a particular kind of female, a female that is represented as self-denying passive, obedient, and self-sacrificial; this is in part due to her hair, but she has also imparted these meanings onto her hair. In seeming perfectly happy to sit in her tower, singing away the day, she lacks a strength of character that would rebel against the situation. She is both noble and beautiful, and utterly incapable of escaping the tower on her own.

The modern adolescent novel very often contends ideologically with the conception of the female as a passive character. Roberta Seelinger Trites argues that adolescent fiction puts adolescents in contention with socializing institutions in *Disturbing the Universe: Power*
and Repression in Adolescent Literature. She states that “power is a force that operates within the subject and upon the subject in adolescent literature; teenagers are repressed as well as liberated by their own power and by the power of social forces that surround them in these books” (7). Rapunzel, as the Grimm Brothers represent her, is a character repressed by the figure of her mother, separated from the world by that power. Her character lacks the ability to escape and the ability to have a reaction. She is depicted as flat and depthless, and therefore needs an outside figure to come save her.

Retellings of “Rapunzel” often attempt to shift the power back to Rapunzel by redefining her hair; they remove the negative traits associated with both the character and the hair that represents her. The Hales’ Rapunzel is not incapable of escaping the tower. She escapes herself, using the very tool that has been given to her by the female witch. Dokey’s Rapunzel, rather than needing to escape the tower herself, walks into the tower to save another, a character named Rue who has the golden hair that is so iconic in the Grimm Brothers’ “Rapunzel.” Both these Rapunzels are strong representations of the female figure that work against the socializing ideas constructed in “Rapunzel.” While “Rapunzel” offers a very normative type of beauty, both Rapunzel’s Revenge and Golden question that restrictive idea. While the Grimms’ Rapunzel is inactive, Rapunzel’s Revenge and Golden depict Rapunzels that are very active. They are not incapable, but capable in ways which the men in their stories are definitely not.

Not all “Rapunzel” retellings redistribute power into Rapunzel’s hand, however. Donna Jo Napoli’s Zel is perhaps, of these three texts, the most faithful in form to the tale it is retelling, and it is therefore also the tale where Rapunzel, Zel in this case, most lacks power. In this text, most of the significant plot points of “Rapunzel” remain intact.
However, to what Napoli doesn’t change, she adds, and these additions depict what the powerlessness does to the female protagonist. Napoli’s Rapunzel is golden haired, and when she is placed into the tower, her hair grows to a length which is capable of being climbed by both mother and prince alike. Zel is, unlike the Grimms’ Rapunzel, a fully developed character for whom readers are given a complex inner voice. The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales does a brief examination of Napoli’s books, including Zel. In it, Jeana Jorgenson states that “Napoli infuses her characters with complex traits and desires, often privileging previously unheard voices” (660). In “Rapunzel,” the female protagonist’s voice is seldom heard. Zel attempts to answer very basic questions about the story of “Rapunzel.” Napoli fills in the gaps in narration by placing them in a fully developed context, and because of this, the shifts in Napoli’s text are subtle and profound. They question the essential assumptions of the tale. What would a young woman feel if she had hair long enough to stretch down a tower? She would feel the pain of a constant headache, developed by hair that constantly pulls at her temples. What would happen to her if she was left in a tower for two years with only a single visitor, the same visitor who put her into the tower in the first place? She would go slowly insane. Like Rapunzel’s Revenge and Golden, Napoli’s Zel challenges the socializing concerns of a Rapunzel who sits passive in a tower. However, Zel, like Rapunzel from “Rapunzel,” can’t escape the tower on her own. What differs from “Rapunzel” are the consequences of this inability to escape, her lack of power. Zel, locked in a tower for two years, is not a beautiful singing princess, but rather a young girl going mad from isolation and a total lack of ability to do anything.

The retooling of the image of Rapunzel’s hair is specifically working against the acculturation occurring in “Rapunzel.” The writers of Rapunzel’s Revenge wanted to find a
fairy tale heroine they could adapt into a superheroine, a more feminist character who could define herself. Shannon Hale reports on her website *Squeetus: Official Site of Shannon Hale*, that she and her husband explored a whole list of opportunities:

Little Red Riding Hood, empowered with wolf-speech? Sleeping Beauty, able to put others to sleep? We explored many (and may return to some with subsequent books), but I kept coming back to Rapunzel. With those long braids, she could do some serious damage, become proficient in lasso and whip. I remember (I hate to say it, honey) that Dean wasn’t really sure about the Rapunzel idea. We kept brainstorming, but I fell more and more in love with Rapunzel. (http://www.squeetus.com/stage/rap_begin.html)

In retooling Rapunzel, Shannon Hale, Dean Hale, and Nathan Hale are not only creating a Rapunzel who isn’t passive, they are creating one who is super active. In retooling her hair, they create the very tool she needs in order to be that character, while at the same time divorcing her hair, and her figure, from the negatively socializing aspects of the Grimm Brothers’ “Rapunzel.”

*Golden* takes a different tack. Dokey’s Rapunzel deconstructs the image of Rapunzel. With the removal of the iconic hair from iconic name Rapunzel, Dokey pushes readers to analyze ideals of appearance. Rapunzel is no longer associated with the incredible beauty that comes with the long lustrous locks, but rather is associated with a different kind of beauty. Her very depiction away from natural standards of beauty makes this character interesting, and rather than taking away from her character, it adds to it. She still gains a love interest, Harry, and textual cues depict her as beautiful despite her lack of hair. However, this Rapunzel is in control of her relationships, and largely in control of the way she lives her life. The author gives her choices, and it is the identity formed from the power she is given that shapes her character and her beauty for the readers. This doesn’t mean that the ways in which her character is represented are uncomplicated. *Golden* depicts Rapunzel as beautiful
in the text, but at the same time it doesn’t entirely embrace the idea that Rapunzel can be beautiful while still bald. Instead, Dokey gives Rapunzel a replacement for her hair, a kerchief tied around her hair: “No woman or girl went with her head uncovered in those days. It simply wasn’t proper” (14). Dokey, while depicting a challenge to natural aesthetics of beauty, also reinforces those same aesthetics by creating a cultural context that requires kerchiefs. Dokey’s Rapunzel very seldom goes without her kerchief, and in fact, in many cases, it becomes her replacement for hair. Harry, the romantic interest of the story, feeds into this particular viewpoint, as upon his second encounter he brings Rapunzel a gift that he feels is sure to please her:

“I thought you might, you know, on your head,” Harry said. “Even from here I can hardly see the muslin. All you see is the gold, really like—”
“Golden hair,” I said. My chest felt tight and funny. I had never told anyone why I loved these particular flowers so much, not even Melisande. Their petals were the exact color I’d always dreamed my hair might be, assuming my head ever decided to cooperate and actually grow some. (50)

Rapunzel’s lack of hair defines her character; she is shaped around this lack. While this is a positive image that seems to disrupt the standard of beauty inherited from “Rapunzel,” it is one even the text has trouble coming completely to terms with. Rapunzel is given, throughout the text, the semblance of hair, if not hair itself. While the moments where she has the most power, most choice in situations, are usually the ones in which she reveals herself as bald, Rapunzel still hides her most essential quality from the world, and sometimes from herself. Rapunzel’s small bit of sorcery further inflates this problem (she has the capability to see into peoples’ hearts in glimpses). When she looks into the heart of the tinker, a figure she comes to love, she sees an image of a girl: “I could not see her features clearly, but around her face, I caught a glimpse of summer gold. Not me, then, I thought” (53). The figure in this description is Rapunzel (the tinker is her father), but she dismisses
the possibility that the girl could be herself due to what appears to be golden hair around her head. At the end of the tale, when he asks her to look into his heart again, what she sees is a similar image, but subtly changed:

Once more I saw the glint of gold that framed her face, and thought my own heart would crack with grief.
Then she shifted, ever so slightly, and I saw that the gold came from a kerchief with gold-petaled flowers embroidered on it. Flowers with centers as dark as the girl’s eyes. (169)

While admittedly a plot device to add suspense, the conception in the father’s heart is of a Rapunzel with the equivalence of hair, hair represented by the gift Harry had given her. The misconception that is incurred for Rapunzel is due to the symbolic representation of hair around her head, a seemingly glowing halo of hair. Hair that, as Rapunzel mentions, is the “exact color” she’d always dreamed her hair to be. The replacement of her hair with cloth removes some of the power that she has as a “bald” Rapunzel. Therefore, in this text she is most often represented without the thing that gives her power and subjectivity.

The problems of power for Dokey’s Rapunzel become even further complicated as the character Rue enters the story. Rue is the actual daughter of Melisande the sorceress, and she maintains the image of the Grimm Brothers’ Rapunzel. She is a young woman trapped in a tower with very long signifying hair, but the background story and name remain inherited by the main character, the bald Rapunzel. Rue is the beautiful image readers expect when they think of the Grimms Brothers’ Rapunzel. At one point in the tale, Rapunzel describes Rue, stating: “you have skin as fine as any angel cake I ever baked. Your eyes are a color poets dream of writing about, and your hair is as golden and bountiful as a dragon’s hoard” (117).

Two conceptions of beauty are demonstrated in this text with Rapunzel and Rue, both of which the audience is supposed to buy into; these conceptions are linked. Between the
characters of Rue and Rapunzel, as even as Rue notices, “there is a certain symmetry involved” (118). The character Rapunzel, though bald, is never truly divorced from the image or idea of hair in this text; instead, the entire text ends up revolving around it. This plays out in the interactions between Rapunzel and Rue, especially those interactions that revolve around their hair:

“You think this is beautiful?” Rue said. She shot to her own feet now, seizing her long, golden braid with both hands and shaking it as if it were a snake that she would like to choke the life right out of. Mr. Jones leaped from her lap in alarm and disappeared out of sight down the great curved staircase.

“You try living with it for a while. I trip over it when I walk. Get tangled up in it when I sleep. I can’t cut it—the wizard took care of that. My own mother has to climb my hair just to come and visit. If this doesn’t make me a freak I don’t know what does.

“At least you have some,” I said.

“Have what?”

“Hair,” I replied. At this, all the fight seemed to drain right out of her. She rubbed a hand across her brow.

“I don’t understand a word you’re saying,” she said.

I reached up for my kerchief, pulled it off.

“Oh,” Rue said [...] “Oh, my.” (117-8)

The interaction based on the characters promotes the “symmetry” of their positions. They both, from their own point of view, have hair that is negative in connotation in some way. Rapunzel is denied the hair she would love to have. Rue has more than she could ever want. Neither of them is particularly happy with the state of their hair. Yet in both representations, the hair is a focus of their identities. They are unable to separate themselves from the signifier that the Brothers Grimm’s tale has established for them.

Though Golden never truly manages to divorce name from hair, it separates name from character instead:

“I’ve wondered what it might be like to have hair. Shining golden hair. Hair just like yours, though I never imagined quite so much of it. You can give me the next best thing, if you will”
“How? she whispered. “I don’t see how.”
“Don’t leave this place as Rue,” I said. “Leave it as Rapunzel. Rue was never your true name, but only the name of your mother’s regret, and your own sorrow. Is that how you want to begin a new life?”
“No,” Rue said. “No, it’s not. But who will you be, if I am Rapunzel.
“The same person I have always been,” I said. Only now my name can be one that I have chosen. From this day forward, if you are willing, when people speak of the longest most beautiful hair in all the world, the name they speak will be Rapunzel.” (163)

To separate Rapunzel from the image of the hair, the text gives Rapunzel’s name to Rue, thereby attaching the name to the character with the markers readers recognize. In the story, this name transformation is depicted as a plot device needed to get the prince to marry Rue, but it also removes textual constraints on the character who has markers which run opposite to the name10 (for a longer explanation, please see footnote 10). Rapunzel is never separated from her desire for golden hair. It is represented in the kerchief she wears on her head (a substitute for hair), in the way she is conceived of by other characters, and even in the way her name represents something to readers beyond herself. This depiction of the character develops for readers, due in part to her name. The symbolic attachment of the name is to a character with, as Rapunzel puts it, a “dragon’s hoard” of hair. In attaching the name Rapunzel to Rue, symbol and name are reunited, and the bald character, a character soon to be named Susan, is divorced from the symbolic lack in her name. While Golden initially divorces Rapunzel’s hair from Rapunzel, it is never able to fully divorce the two concepts, and therefore it reverts to a normal conception of Rapunzel rather than continuing the radical

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10 This merits a brief explanation. The prince of Dokey’s Golden begins in the narrative by having a conversation with Rapunzel. At this time, both Rapunzel and Rue are in the tower (Rue is hiding deeper in the tower when he arrives). In order to free Rue from the tower, the curse essentially states that someone needs to get Rue to open up her heart up to love. So, while Rapunzel tells the prince her name, she later comes up with a plot to see if she can get the prince and Rue to fall in love with each other. This plan succeeds, with one small caveat; the prince doesn’t realize there is more than one girl in the tower and ends up thinking the two girls are one and the same (he never sees Rapunzel). Rapunzel, in order to complete her plan, ends up giving her name to Rue, thus associating her name with the longest, most beautiful hair in the world.
viewpoint it took in the beginning. *Golden*, while making Rapunzel bald, is very interested in the representation of her hair. She is bald, but not truly hairless. In the minds of the other characters, in her own mind, and in the mind of the readers, she has a golden halo around her head. It is in this depiction that she is both subversive and subservient to the Grimm Brothers’ text. Unable to break away from representing the hair, just as both Rapunzel’s Revenge and Zel are unable to break away from representing it, *Golden* transforms the hair into a dual symbol, and thus undermines its singular effectiveness as a social construction. *Golden* enables the signifying hair, the inherited symbol from “Rapunzel” to be challenged as the proper conception of beauty. In putting in an opposite figure, an opposite fully developed character with the name of Rapunzel, the story breaks up the iconic image and shows that it is not an absolute, but rather a single conception. This attachment and detachment from iconic Rapunzel imagery enables the creation of a dual standard of beauty. The dual image both undercuts the beauty of the Rapunzel figure by demonstrating the annoyance that amount of hair would cause, and it upholds a very different kind of beauty, one without hair. The story thereby verifies not one conception, but allows for multiple conceptions of beauty. In the end, Rapunzel is only able to gain freedom from the conception of hair by tying her primary signifier, her name, to it. She has to become Susan, divorced from the signifier, and therefore properly divorced from the hair (though she is still wearing her kerchief).

The retooling of Rapunzel in Napoli’s *Zel* also challenges dominant conceptions portrayed by “Rapunzel.” It is less focused on the visual standpoint and based more on the psychological one. The image of Zel is largely the one represented in the Grimm Brothers’ text. She is beautiful, young, and feminine, and she ends up with long, golden (albeit braided) hair. With Zel, the hair becomes the link to a world she cannot reach otherwise. In
her book *The Mother: Archetypal Image in Fairy Tales*, Sibylle Birkhäuser-Oeri uses Jungian ideas to discuss “Rapunzel” and the imagery within it. She states:

> When she is twelve (the beginning of puberty) Rapunzel is shut up in a tower by the witch [...] Though Rapunzel may enjoy a superior view from her tower, she has no more contact with the earth, the reality of life. She is like a woman standing outside the events of life who does not know herself adequately, perhaps because she is too idealistic in her attitude. (87)

While in this thesis I am not using an extensive psychoanalytical approach to folk and fairy tales, certain aspects of Birkhäuser-Oeri’s approach are particularly salient to examine Napoli’s *Zel*. This is because Napoli is interested in her characters’ psychology and the power and lacks of power that are represented there. *Zel*’s sojourn in the tower separates her from the world. In the text, she is desperate to make any connection with her surroundings. She talks to animals, not because she has an ability to communicate meaningfully with them (though she very much desires that ability), but rather because she needs to communicate with something in order to avert complete insanity. Similarly, she cultivates a colony of lice: “She fed them daily, a drop of blood from her tongue, which she would bite. She invited them onto her head: if they would only have taken up residence in her hair, she could have persuaded mother to shave her head” (153). She guides ants and pigeons into her tower, seeking any kind of connection to the outside world. Yet none of these “friends” responds. She ends up killing the lice and wounding the pigeon, the first because they wouldn’t help her, the second because he had the freedom she desperately longed for. Yet all of these actions, both the talking to the creatures and the damaging of them, can be seen as her attempting to exercise power in a world where she has been completely divorced from any ability to do so.
The tower for Rapunzel is a separation from the world, one that strains her grip on reality; Zel’s hair is a symbolic umbilical cord to the world outside. It brings pain, such pain that she has begged “Mother to cut her braids,” because when the witch climbs her hair, “Zel’s temples ache horribly. And, oh, after Mother leaves, Zel’s head pounds” (157).

However, it also brings hope. Zel both needs her hair and is desperate to get rid of it. It is her only connection with the world, a connection that brings Mother up every day, yet that connection to the world, as seen in her every interaction with it, is painful. She, however, doesn’t even have the power to cut herself off from the hair that torments her, “she tried to gnaw through her braids, but her jaw wouldn’t do as she told it. It snapped dryly at air” (157). Her hair is both a symbol of her mother’s power over her and the one small possibility of freedom. Her wounding of Pigeon Pigeon is as representative of her need for power as it is of her envy for his freedom:

Pigeon Pigeon warbles. The bird walks up and down the window ledge. She stops. She stretches a wing. A wing!

Zel throws the braid as hard as she can. It slaps Pigeon Pigeon from the window—squak—it hits the tree, catches briefly, then falls away loose, yanking hard at Zel’s temple, radiating pain through her head and neck. (157)

Zel’s reaction to Pigeon Pigeon’s wing and the subsequent use of her hair to hurt him (so much so that she believes she kills him) indicates the dichotomy being performed here. Zel’s hair, her animal friends, everything about her is a reminder of her lack of freedom. The hair represents to this character not beauty, but pain. In this situation, Rapunzel seeks power in any form she can access it, even if that power is in the rage spent on Pigeon Pigeon.

Rapunzel’s hair represents the pain, and her lack that comes from longing for a world her

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11 When Rapunzel is first put into the tower, Mother uses a nearby tree to enter the tower (she makes it grow and shrink at will). As time moves on and Rapunzel’s hair grows Mother begins using her hair instead of the tree. The reasoning for this is never explained, though Rapunzel asks Mother on more than one occasion.
hair can reach, but she cannot. It is pain because it is the tool used to hurt her friend, Pigeon Pigeon. It is pain even in Mother’s refusal to cut it, therefore blocking Rapunzel from some amount of control or separation from her torment. This Rapunzel, while not focused on the visual aspect of her hair, is focused on all of the psychological representations it means to her. Her character, locked up in the tower, focuses on two things, her hair, and the few “friends” she can garner. Both represent a connection that she builds her character around, but that character is fragmented, unable to be whole because, while her hair can touch the bottom of the tower, it has no nerve endings, no feeling to it. And while her animal companions can come to her, they are no replacement for human companionship.

In Rapunzel’s Revenge, Golden, and even in Zel there is a consistent subversion of the image provided of femininity in “Rapunzel.” In creating fully developed characters, they replace the figure of Rapunzel with new signs, ones that enable the questioning of the Grimms’ text. By characterizing from the symbol of Rapunzel’s hair, the graphic novel Rapunzel’s Revenge moves Rapunzel from a red-headed figure, a feisty red-headed figure, but still a figure, into a well fleshed-out character. Her hair becomes, while still her symbol, also her power and a building point for her character. In Golden, Dokey focuses on the hair, either the possession or lack thereof, and creates a pair of characters that display a symmetry that in many ways defines the plot of the narrative. The women built on this splitting of “Rapunzel” are characterized by the very hair that defines their separation. The amount of power they have is associated with their connection or disconnection with the signifiers that represent the Grimm’s character, Rapunzel. The character with the hair, Rue, is linked more definitively to the powerless Rapunzel from the Grimms’ tale, and thus is lacking power in Golden. For Zel, the characterization occurs from an examination of her thoughts and, more
importantly, the pain that is developed in relation to the gaps left in the Grimm Brothers’ narractive. Her character is defined by the world that she cannot reach and the power she does not have. Her deprivation drives her to the brink of insanity. Freedom, represented by animals she can’t communicate with and by her hair that can reach the bottom of the tower, even while she cannot, becomes an obsession pushing her deeper into a state of desperation, one defining her character and how she reacts with the prince, Mother, and the world.

In contrast to Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, who describe Rapunzel only in ways that are necessary to the plot, Rapunzel’s Revenge, Golden, and Zel all move beyond simple description. Zipes states: “in fairy tales for younger readers the most notable change in the narratives concerns the heroine who actively seeks to define herself, and her self-definition determines the plot” (Prince 14). All three of these tales show this active definition of the heroines. The Hales’ Rapunzel is not merely described as impassioned; she is depicted as acting and thinking in a fiery/impassioned way. The authors’ consistent use of an entertaining interior monologue reinforces this as they develop the character from the girl who is trapped in the tower to the conquering hero, especially as the visual action works in correlation with the textual monologues. For the Hales’ Rapunzel, the hair is a symbol, a physical representation of the ways in which she can develop and of the feminine power she has at her fingertips. It is a retooled signifier that is developed from a simple symbol into a person. That person, in turn, redefines the hair. Rapunzel has no control over her hair color but she takes control of her hair in other ways. When her hair gets in the way Rapunzel braids it, and thus creates its utility. When she needs to get out of the tower, she turns it into a lasso, and when she needs to defeat the bad guys, it works rather well as a

12 Excluding the unlikely event that she would dye it.
whip. In *Golden*, female power manifests in a pair of characters who act in spite of their hair. Rue feels her excessive amount of hair constrains her, makes her into a “freak,” but she pushes beyond that block in order to meet her handsome prince. Rapunzel, or Susan, realizes early on that her lack of hair is not constraining, and yet the tale focuses on the representation of this very lack. While both these women (Rue and Rapunzel) represent the cliché of the happily ever after ending that comes with finding a handsome suitor, the characters wind up happy due to the interactions that define them. They create their happiness by saving one another; it is the interaction between women, not between man and woman, which defines this tale. Finally, in *Zel*, readers are never told *Zel* is crazy, but rather, they consistently see it. She procures lice, talks to squirrels and pigeons, and tries to chew her own hair out.

Rapunzel is defined by her hair, and the retellings of her figure examine the definition and attempt to move it out of its constraining tendencies. In retellings Rapunzel doesn’t necessarily have to be noble, conventionally beautiful, or even sane. She does need, however, to be defined by a connection to the concept of hair. However each of these authors represents Rapunzel, the very concept of hair remains a focus for her character. This is the nature of retelling the story. However, it is in the changes made that these writers reveal their focus, their identity in the story. In *Rapunzel’s Revenge*, the authors seek to create a character who confronts the passive archetype of the Grimm Brothers’ princess in the tower. In *Golden*, the idea of the conventional beauty is challenged, split into two representations neither of which is particular fond of her hair (and thus they challenge its very significance). In *Zel* the very hair that is her connection to the outside world betrays her through that very connection, constantly forcing her to focus on it and thus be desperate to use it to connect to the outside world. The hair and the figure that is attached to it, in each of
these stories go through significant but basic changes. Yet through this change, entirely new characters, new ideas, and new ideals are formed. In this they represent a brand of femininity that doesn’t force a break from the old stories, but rather adapts them, changing the signified in order to create woman who are fully developed human beings, rather than just figures.
CHAPTER 3

PARENTAL FIGURES: MOTHERS AND WITCHES

It has already been noted here that retellings of “Rapunzel” attempt to confront the process of socializing women into set gender stereotypes—a socialization that is represented in many ways in the Grimm Brothers’ “Rapunzel.” In the field of children’s literature Trites notes that authors and artists are often unable to remove themselves from their adult ideologies when writing for children. She points out that even when authors make conscious efforts to extract what they conceive of as adult concerns from texts aimed at children, unconsciously adult concerns and ideals are still incorporated by the simple reasoning that the texts are constructed by adults. As adults, both developmentally and socially, the social concerns of the adult identity are inescapable and inseparable from these adult authors of children’s literature. Trites, in Disturbing the Universe, states that “most adolescent literature bears some sort of didactic impulse. In a literature often about growth, it is the rare author who can resist the impulse to moralize about how people grow. Adolescent literature is, therefore, rife with didactic explicit ideologies, however obliquely they may be worded” (73). The adolescent retellings of “Rapunzel” being examined here are rife with this didactic tendency. The ideas, qualities, and information they are trying to impart are involved in every part of their story: the plot, the setting, and most identifiably, the characters.

In choosing to draw upon already established stories, authors who adapt and retell fairy tales are instigating an ideology in the very changes they make to the tales they work with. Sometimes this is overt. For example, the instance in the previous chapter where the creation of Rapunzel into a superhero character in Rapunzel’s Revenge is the obvious
empowering of the female protagonist. Others are more subtle, and therefore more difficult to notice and draw attention to. The power structures involved in the adaptation of authority figures and the questions that the changes make are mixed manipulations of the characters; they represent the didactic impulse Trites establishes as a mainstay in adolescent literature. In the parental figures, and most specifically the mother figures of these retellings, there are multiple challenges to the construction of feminine identity and the socializing process that delineate a limited number of roles for young women to grow into. These texts question standard ideas of parental identity, ideas of good and evil, and the justification of actions; they demonstrate a didactic impulse that attempts to represent models of behavior outside stereotypical ideas about gender roles and morality not only for adolescents and children, but for adults. This, in part, can be explored through the complex work done in these retellings with the shifts in the character of the witch, a figure who is both mother and antagonist for the Grimm’s Rapunzel. The manipulation of both the name and title of the witch, and the changes that stem from the manipulation, identify in the retellings of “Rapunzel” the way in which the authors of these tales are dealing with the archetypes of the mother and the witch. It shows how the authors of these tales deal with the figure who has authority over Rapunzel, for either good or ill.

In the Grimm Brothers’ telling of “Rapunzel,” there are three parental figures who have an effect on Rapunzel’s life: her mother, her father, and the witch. In a very similar manner to Rapunzel herself, in Grimms’ version none of these three characters has a name, or a personality. There is also very little in the way of significant exposition about their impact on Rapunzel’s maturation (outside of the witch’s placing her into the tower). For the father and mother this makes sense in the context of the story. They have been removed
from Rapunzel’s life at the earliest of stages, a requirement for the plot to move forward.
The witch, however, spends twelve years with Rapunzel before she places her into the infamous tower. Additionally, there is the indication that she makes frequent journeys up into Rapunzel’s tower prison. Of this woman, readers have no real name (Mother Gothel being, according to Maria Tatar in The Annotated Brothers Grimm, a way in Germany to refer to a godmother), and no reasoning behind her actions. Like most of the characters in “Rapunzel,” she is an example of what Lüthi describes as “flat figures and figured events;” she is a character that lacks name, identity, and most importantly, personhood (European 23). Yet the witch is the primary figure of female motherhood within the text. She stands in stark contrast to the male and female protagonists of “Rapunzel” in a very basic way; where they are considered good, she is considered evil. Her title, witch, has inherently negative connotations that titles such as mother, fairy, sorceress, and especially a name, do not. In “Rapunzel,” this figure is referred to either by witch or Mother Gothel, both of which are titles and not names. She is both the witch, a title that identifies her as evil, and Mother Gothel, a title of imparted familial connection. In fairy tales the character’s title represents that character’s role in the text. As often as not, retellings of “Rapunzel” comment through their texts on the polarization in “Rapunzel” of Rapunzel; they comment on the way the fairy tale only offers the extremes of a strong positive female character and a strong negative female character with nothing in between. Instead, contemporary versions offer different points of view on how the villain of “Rapunzel” should be represented. In these retellings the figure of the witch is more than just a witch and therefore more than just a negative archetype for young females to worry about becoming as they grow up.
Retellings refer to the witch figure as mother, sorceress, witch, Gothel, and, in the particular case of *Golden*, Melisande. The use of a particular name instead of a signifying title in a text defines the way in which the character comes to be represented. Shifts in the figure’s identity correspond and work with changes to the signifier, either by moving away from it into a name or by using the signifier in a new way. In these retellings, the ideas of motherhood, witchcraft, sorcery, and personhood all vie for control in this figure who, even in the Grimm Brothers’ tale, receives more than one signifier and therefore more than one identity. These texts work with the archetype formed in the Grimms’ “Rapunzel,” creating figures who either draw from the negative connotations of the term witch or that work with the more positive connotations drawn from the terms Mother Gothel, or godmother. Working with the dual archetypes in a single character complicates the representation derived from that character; it complicates the idea of the witch that is signified with the title, and it thereby also questions conceptions of morality linked with that character. The way the witch figure is represented is derived from how the authors of their texts refer to the witch and how the authors interpret the dual archetype represented in the Grimms’ “Rapunzel.”

*Rapunzel’s Revenge* separates readers from its particular witch, Mother Gothel, by creating her as a supervillain (complete with a near total control over plant life), a character more interested in power than in people. While alienating her within the text, she is also, for a small portion of Rapunzel’s life in this retelling, believed to be her biological mother (wrongly so). It is significant that Rapunzel’s title for her during this period in *Rapunzel’s Revenge* is not mother; it is Mother. Rather than being a motherly figure, Mother Gothel is a mother in title only, and this is emphasized through the capitalization of Mother. Mother Gothel is not a maternal figure—Rapunzel is cared for and protected by Mother Gothel’s
house guards. For the most part Mother Gothel ignores Rapunzel. Her sole interest in Rapunzel is in training an heir, not in loving a daughter.

The nurturing aspect of mother remains absent from Mother Gothel; her name is also her title. It refers to the position she believes she holds over the land. She is never properly situated in a family, but rather uses her title as a referent to her position above the entirety of Gothel’s Reach (a name that in itself refers to the over-encompassing reach of Mother Gothel’s nature magic). The appellation Mother Gothel remains in Rapunzel Revenge what it was in the Grimm Brothers’ “Rapunzel;” it is a statement of position. For Rapunzel’s Revenge it marks her power over others, her power over the land around her. She is a dark incarnation of mother-nature that rules over the people, requiring tribute for the protection of crops from her withering influence. For those not willing to pay, the very land works against them. Their crops fail and the land becomes even more desolate than it already is. The authors of Rapunzel’s Revenge’s use the more positive of the Grimms’ titles for the witch figure, Mother Gothel, but create with it a figure more tyrannical, more evil, than the witch in “Rapunzel” ever was.

In shifting the way the witch figure is referred to away from negative terms like witch and even depersonalizing titles like Mother Gothel, Golden creates an opportunity for a positive character in the place of a negative one. The word witch is completely removed from the text. Instead, readers are given a sorceress with a name, Melisande. This identifying move humanizes the witch from “Rapunzel” and makes her, though still mystical, a primarily positive character. In possessing a name, in being Melisande, the witch is a human being and not a flat figure to be opposed. In identifying Melisande as more than Mother or witch, Dokey makes a move that the authors Rapunzel’s Revenge and Zel do not.
Her name and her title of sorceress remove her from the most negative aspects of “Rapunzel.” The only real connection Melisande has to the source material’s character is her role in taking Rapunzel away from her initial family, and even this is mitigated by the return of her father in the fourth chapter. The plot distances Melisande from the role of villain and even from the actions she takes that could be seen as villain-esque. She doesn’t place Rapunzel into the tower; instead Rapunzel volunteers. She never blinds the prince and she never exiles Rapunzel to a distant land. The villainy is removed the same as the term witch has been removed. In representing the witch as Melisande, Dokey makes a fundamental change to the core story of “Rapunzel,” one that goes beyond simple character change. The entire tale has to be rewritten due to the new choice in name for the former villain. This is a shift in the dynamics of the plot that requires conflict to come from a new source in the text. Golden, therefore, creates a connection to the Grimms’ “Rapunzel” by using significant elements of the plot, all the while changing the inherent conflict away from the witch/Rapunzel dynamic and attributing it to outside forces.

Unlike Rapunzel’s Revenge and Golden, Napoli’s Zel attempts to keep the majority of the facts about the witch figure from “Rapunzel” intact. Mother, the witch figure in Zel, does all of the perceivably negative things from “Rapunzel” that Melisande doesn’t. However, she, like Melisande, is distanced from the term. Witch only appears twice in the entire book. Both occurrences happen after Mother has died and after the other characters in the novel have made their final (negative) judgments about her. For most of the novel she is called Mother. This lack of name would appear to, like with the referent Mother Gothel in Rapunzel’s Revenge, create a sense of alienation from the character of Mother. Mother, after all, is still a title; it is still a position. Yet while this character is not the primary focus of the
Grimms’ “Rapunzel,” in _Zel_ she can be considered the most prominent character. The text depicts three points of view: that of Zel (Rapunzel), that of Konrad (the prince), and that of Mother (the witch). While Zel and Konrad’s view points are depicted through an omniscient third person narrator, Mother is the only character depicted in the first person; however, she is also the only main character completely lacking a proper name. She lacks a name, something both Zel and Konrad are given, but she is given the deepest characterization. The result is a stronger connection between the audience and Mother than between the audience and the other two main characters. This characterization is developed in such a way that readers are expected to feel empathy for her. Readers feel like they are inside the head of Mother, and thus they feel they almost share part of her psyche. This contrasts to the reader’s third person perspective of Zel and Konrad. Mother remains the villain in this, she remains the witch, but despite her villainous status Napoli’s _Zel_ focuses on bringing the reader into Mother’s thoughts, into the thoughts of the woman who can, and does, justify her actions, at least to herself—and therefore to the reader. The audience’s connection to Mother establishes the character as something more than good or evil; it establishes her as a dynamic figure who represents both. Napoli’s Mother is not a positive character, but she is one whose personality, whose psychology, is fully formed for the reader.

According to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in _The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination_, male society gives women two choices as to the kinds of females they can be, especially as represented in literary folktales. They are represented dichotomously, presented in “the extreme images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’” (17). The polarities are obvious within the Grimm Brothers’ “Rapunzel,” with the Rapunzel figure established as the angel-woman and the witch established as the
Some retellings, like Zel, confront this dichotomy. Others, like Rapunzel’s Revenge and Golden, work to qualify it. In Zel the challenge to the dichotomy is clear: the mother figure can’t be defined as either angel or monster; she is a little of both. Her character is both selfish and giving, both loving and hating. Rapunzel’s Revenge and Golden, unlike Zel, have more difficulty challenging this often upheld dichotomy. Rapunzel’s Revenge’s Mother Gothel is almost unequivocally the monster-woman, a woman capable of any cruelty to uphold and increase her power. Melisande of Golden is an angel-woman, saving Rapunzel from a mother who refuses to love her; she becomes the loving maternal figure Rapunzel needs, even though unwilling to accept the title of mother. Rapunzel’s Revenge and Golden, texts that seem to rely on a single image of the mother figure (whether positive or negative), build upon other aspects of the “Rapunzel” in order to offer readers, at the very least, more choice than the young angelic heroine versus the evil monstrous witch.

The Grimm Brothers’ witch is both Mother Gothel and the witch—she occupies each of the two archetypes at different times in the text. Tatar establishes that “biological mothers [...] seldom command a central role in the fairy tales compiled by the Grimms, in part because Wilhelm Grimm could rarely resist the temptation to act as censor by turning the monstrously unnatural cannibals and enchantresses of these tales into stepmothers, cooks, witches, or mothers-in-law” (142). She also mentions that these surrogate mothers often “take ferocious possessiveness to an extreme. ‘Now the children are in my body’ one mother–in-law triumphantly declares” (140). The Grimms’ Brothers’ witch/mother figure is an extremely possessive character, locking away Rapunzel from the world, and most importantly from men, when she is moving into puberty. She is the overprotective mother, a negative figure which, in the Grimm’s folktales, can’t be associated with the biological
mother. Yet she is still referred to as a mother, Mother Gothel to be precise. In being both witch and mother, she occupies a dual significance in the tale, one which retellings can, and do, build upon.

*Rapunzel’s Revenge* and *Golden* manipulate the witch’s dual structure by reinserting the biological mother into the story as a more prominent figure. Through this, they create a contrast that works to emphasize the character traits from the source material that they wish to draw attention to. At the same time, the dual mother dynamic deemphasizes the suggestion of character traits that derive from the possible opposite viewpoint. *Rapunzel’s Revenge*, rather than maintaining one mother figure, has two. While the second mother figure, Rapunzel’s actual biological mother, is largely devoid of characterization, she most definitely is not a representation similar to that of Mother Gothel. In her characterization she emphasizes all the motherly traits that Mother Gothel can’t have within the context of this story. She desires to be with her daughter, not to be separated from her, she is referred to as “momma” when she is revealed in the text, and while Rapunzel has had no contact with her since early youth, she feels an immediate emotional bond. Tears flow out of Rapunzel’s eyes on their first meeting depicted in the text, and when the guards take momma away, momma reinforces her desire for her child by begging “Please don’t take her away again! Please!” (17). It is the singular force of Rapunzel’s need to save her mother that drives most of the text. She feels the need to take her mother out of Mother Gothel’s hands. She wants her out of the place where she is essentially a slave in the labor camps run by Mother Gothel.

In *Golden* the mother figure works similarly to the mother figure of *Rapunzel’s Revenge*, but with the ideological roles reversed. In *Golden*, the sorceress Melisande makes a deal with Rapunzel’s mother, stating that
“I will make you the following bargain. Until your child is born, you may have as much rapunzel as you like from my garden. But on the day your child arrives, if it is a girl, and I very much think it will be, you must swear to love her just as she is, for that will mean you will love whatever she becomes. If you cannot, then I will claim her in payment for the Rapunzel.” (8)

This mother agrees to Melisande’s bargain and upon first seeing her baby girl rejects her:

“She is hideous! Take her away! I can never love this child!” (9). Rapunzel’s mother is unable to conceive of herself loving a bald child, a daughter with “no hair at all. Absolutely none, not even the faintest suggestion of hair” (10). In her mind a child who lacks hair, preferably hair that is beautiful in a way similar to her own, is incapable of being beautiful and thus incapable of being loved. The character’s vanity, a vanity embedded deeply in her own hair (hair which she brushes one hundred times every day), pushes her to reject her daughter. *Golden* depicts the biological mother figure as an almost wholly negative (working thus in opposition to Melisande). She is vain, uncaring, and selfish. Dokey, in creating this negative mother, allows the witch figure, now Melisande, to be able to take on a more positive incarnation. Taking the daughter becomes an act of mercy, not an act of treachery, and therefore the focus shifts to the motherly traits that aren’t developed in “Rapunzel,” but which are demonstrated in *Golden*.

*Rapunzel’s Revenge* and *Golden* feel the need to qualify their female authority figures. To have them situated wholly in one character would be to represent the female authority figure as either monolithically good or monolithically bad, and therefore to reinforce a singular stereotype. The figure of the mother, split into two characters, while still offering a dichotomy, offers a separate dichotomy from the one common in fairy tales that depicts the young female heroine as angel and the old evil witch as monster. Gilbert and
Gubar’s prime example for the angel and monster stereotype is the dichotomy of Snow White and the Queen. They note that

“Snow White and the Seven Dwarves,” should really be called Snow White and Her Wicked Stepmother, for the central action of the tale—indeed, its only real action—arises from the relationship between these two women: the one fair, young, pale, the other just as fair, but older, fiercer; the one a daughter, the other a mother; the one sweet, ignorant, passive, the other both artful and active; the one a sort of angel, the other an undeniable witch. (36)

Gilbert and Gubar assert that the dichotomy between Snow White as young, ignorant, and passive and the Queen as older, artful, and active, establishes that as women age they are influenced to move from the figure of Snow White into the figure of the Queen. The introduction of two mothers in Rapunzel’s Revenge and Zel confronts this idea about the movement from positive figure into negative by offering more than one figure for the young adolescent heroine (a figure who has already been transformed away from the passive archetype as shown in the previous chapter) to transform into. These texts thereby break up the problematic structure involved in a singular progression by offering multiple figures to age into. Rather than being forced to move into the figure of Mother Gothel, the Rapunzel from Rapunzel’s Revenge chooses specifically not to be Mother Gothel’s heir on multiple occasions. It is a choice made explicit in the text, where, in reply to Mother Gothel’s demand to “Choose now. Be my daughter and claim the birthright I made for you, or stay in this tower and rot,” Rapunzel “told her to go to…someplace less nice” (32-3). Rapunzel’s ability to choose is made possible by the introduction of her mother into the text. Before this realization Rapunzel’s impression is that she is the biological daughter of Mother Gothel, and the only course in her life is to gradually be formed into the heir of this mother figure. At seeing her mother a slave to Mother Gothel, Rapunzel chooses to reject her former seemingly
happy life. The Rapunzel who has two mother figures, one a slave and the other an evil tyrant, can essentially tell Mother Gothel, the evil tyrant, to go to hell.

_Golden_, similarly, seems to have trouble breaking away from the ideal of the angel while still feeling the need to establish a worthwhile female monster figure. What is important though is the way the novel represents these archetypes differently than the stereotypical fashion. Here, again, the witch figure, Melisande, is working as one side of the dichotomy; however, she is not the evil Queen for Rapunzel to fear transforming into. Instead, Rapunzel’s mother by blood is the monster, a woman who rejects her daughter for what she considers to be a deformity. _Golden_ changes the dynamics of the story by creating a female mother figure who can be seen as a positive role model, one who is continually active within the text. This female does not exclusively hold traits of either the passive princess or the active queen, but is instead comprised of both of them. In many ways this text reverses the dichotomy seen with Snow White and the Queen. Rapunzel’s mother, the monster, is depicted as inactive/passive and ignorant. She remains confined to a bed and has her husband obtain the rapunzel she so desperately craves, all the while doing her best to maintain the only feature she sees as worthwhile: her hair. In contrast, Melisande is an active and artful woman. She seeks to restore her daughter Rue from the tower and to save Rapunzel from the unloving hands of her biological mother. This character, though a figure that plots to achieve her ends (she plans a way to get Rapunzel, as well as to get Rue, out of the tower), doesn’t do so in a way that defines her as evil. In fact her semblance of scheming just defines her as a sorceress, a figure of positive action that is in direct contrast with the figure of the witch, a figure of negative action.
In the article “Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship,” Donald Haase points out that in a lot of feminist theory on folktales, folktales are mirrors and he quotes Cristina Bacchilega’s statement that

As with all mirrors,...refraction and the shaping presence of a frame mediate the fairy tale’s reflection. As it images our potential for transformation the fairy tale refracts what we wish or fear to become. Human—and thus changeable—ideas, desires, and practices frame the tale’s images. Further, if we see more of the mirror rather than its images, questions rather than answers emerge. Who is holding the mirror and whose desires does it represent and contain? (24)

In the Grimm Brothers’ tale a separation is made between good and evil, the angel and the monster, thereby causing women to have to choose between two distinct reflected images. The mirror identity is a representation of being forced to acknowledge singular, working images for women from the limited number of choices available. Retellings of fairy tales work to expand the possible images reflected, moving to offer more choices from the story of Rapunzel than were originally there. In both Golden and Rapunzel’s Revenge, the choice between female roles still reveals itself in the constraints of the images of angel and monster. They are unable to completely break away, even as they depict new images of the angel motif in the figure of Rapunzel.

While there are also two mothers mentioned in Zel, Zel’s biological mother, like in the Grimm Brothers’ text, for the most part doesn’t play a prominent role in the story; this enables a stronger focus on the figure of Mother and her inherent challenge to the dichotomy of witch versus angel. Zel’s biological mother is not depicted as inherently good or evil, but rather just as a person forced into an undesirable situation; therefore the contrast found in both Rapunzel’s Revenge and Golden doesn’t apply in the same way in Zel. The figure of Mother, Napoli’s witch figure, is problematic when attempting to fit her into either the category of angel or of monster. She has made a deal with the devil, thus turning her blood
to water for her entire existence, but she is also an incredibly loving mother who wants what she believes in the best for her daughter. The conflict in the text arises from the fact that what she believes is best for her daughter is her own life, her own damnation. Mother takes her daughter to the tower to hide her away from other influences. She considers herself to be “preparing my daughter for the choice. There is no other way” (115). Mother wants Zel to shun men and to choose to live with her forever. She honestly believes this to be the better choice for her daughter, the better life to live. In giving readers the internal view of Mother, readers see her desperation. They see her need for a daughter who will love her forever, who will not shun her for men. This woman, who could not bear children, needs a daughter who will not leave her. When she realizes this is not the choice Zel will likely make, that she had, as she puts it, “raised a child who could love easily and whom anyone could love back,” she shuts Rapunzel in the tower to try and help her make the choice that she sees as the better one; the choice one that comes with power, but that spurns the love of men (142). Mother is a sympathetic character, one who builds on the dual signifiers of Mother Gothel and witch that occupy the Grimm Brothers’ text. While readers don’t understand either Mother Gothel or the witch in “Rapunzel,” they come to an intimate understanding of Mother, the person who is built from these signifiers.

Napoli’s Mother is neither angel nor monster. For this reason alone she is differentiated from every other rendition of the witch/mother figure. The fact that she is capable of both good and evil means that she is very much a human being (even if she does have water in her veins). Rather than splitting the character into two figures to try to cover the dichotomy of good and evil, Napoli does something more in her text. She moves away from the standard view of good vs. evil and enables an understanding of the darkness that
plagues some characters. In *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*, Zipes establishes that:

the texts by Steig, Pullman, Block, and Napoli that I have discussed do not induce the readers into believing that evil can be conquered according to some conventional script or that evil can be easily mastered. They do not write moral prescriptions as antidotes to evil. Rather they reveal connections social processes that generate evil, and they radically question “normal” behavior and traditional standards of morality. (230)

Mother’s actions, while not good, question the very idea of evil. Morally, she could easily be considered unambiguously evil. She steals a child, traps her in a tower, and lets her be driven slowly insane by deprivation. However, she does this not because she is evil, but because as a person she has strong desires. She needs a daughter, the daughter who she could never have, the daughter she gave up her soul for. She places her daughter in the tower for the same reason. Her title is her name; her title is Mother. The reason that it is Mother is because it is the focus of her entire being. She literally is unable to be anything else. She has to be Mother in order to survive. Mother, for her, is not a position; motherhood is the focus of her entire life, the core of her identity. Therefore, when her daughter is moving away from her, when she perceives herself to be losing that position she gave everything, including her soul, up for, she acts rashly, even evilly. She breaks the archetype of the mother because she is so thoroughly entrenched in what the signifier means to her.

For Mother being a mother is the ultimate signifier, one that represents everything she is. When she perceives herself to have lost that connection, when Zel is leaving her, Mother sacrifices herself to save her daughter’s love:

Finally he looks at me once more. And now I see his face well. His eyes. His mouth. He holds more misery than I realized a man could feel. And instantly I know what I never wanted to know, what I hate knowing: He is my soulmate—he loves my Zel. No! What have I done? The world is wrong [...]

The braids whip Konrad from the window. Gone like the bird. Gone like Rapunzel.

No! I close my eyes and squeeze my hands together and use the final reserve of my strength.

Konrad is caught and pierced by the brambles that have sprung up around the base of the tower.

He lives.

I die. (207-8)

Mother is redeemed for the audience in this scene as a mother who is willing to sacrifice herself for someone else. Yet this is only in the eyes of the readers. To Zel and to Konrad she has become the witch. The prince is blinded and Zel is sent far away to a land where she has to raise two children alone (at least until the prince miraculously finds her years later).

She is no longer Mother, the titular figure, but rather a figure of evil, or perhaps sadness, to the other characters of the story. They are unable to know her reasoning beyond her actions; the reader, however, is given a different perspective. The witch, for them, is still Mother. She is now the Mother who is willing to sacrifice herself, her life, for her daughter and her daughter’s love. She is, in part, an embodiment of both the positive and negative traits, and many of the traits in-between. She is the monster in her possessiveness, but the angel in her ability to sacrifice herself. She is the monster in the theft of a child, but an angel in the way in which she raises that child to be good and loving. She is over-protective, but neither wholly in a good or a bad way, but in a way that is very human. Napoli does something with the signifiers from “Rapunzel” that Rapunzel’s Revenge and Golden aren’t capable of. She creates a woman who moves beyond the “moral prescriptions,” beyond the “traditional standards of morality.”

In writing retellings of fairy tales, the morality of the character’s actions is generally indicative of challenges to the representations that have become stereotypical over time. The retellings being examined here are didactic in the way that attempts to move women away
from the inherent problems in these representations. In *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, Zipes states that:

The symbolic act of writing a fairy tale or producing a fairy tale as play or film is problematized by the asking of questions that link the fairy tale to society and our political unconscious. How and why did certain authors try to influence children or adult images of children through the fairy tale? How did these authors react to the prescribed fairy-tale discourse and intervene to alter it according to their needs and social tendencies? (10).

The question for Zipes isn’t whether retellings attempt to influence our images of children and adults, but rather, how and why they do so. Authors of Rapunzel retellings rework the prominent figures away from the stereotypes represented in the Grimm Brothers’ tale. These writers are didactic in the very changes that they make, but they are didactic in a way that attempts offers choice rather than conscription. They represent characters as different to fit “their needs and social tendencies.” The drastic changes in the figure of the mother, the representation of dual mothers, and the reattribution of negative trait as positive ones, all demonstrate an attack on the very idea of the “monster” figure that Gilbert and Gubar assert is inherent in fairy tales and socialization in general. These texts assert that as a woman grows, she can be more than a monster, better than a monster, but also, perhaps, better than an angel as well. These texts assert that the young woman, facing these decisions, has the power to be a person. They all assert this concept in different ways. In *Rapunzel’s Revenge* it is represented by the choice that she makes, from the very beginning, to be different than Mother Gothel. In *Golden*, it is inherent in the way the traits that have commonly been seen as negative are reattributed to the positive character, and in *Zel* it is in the very way the character is not purely good or evil, but rather someone who possesses both qualities, and is human even despite the water running through her veins. The changes to the character of the witch represent a subtle subversion, a challenge to the socialization process, and a
representation of choices outside of the standards of socialization. These retellings, while in no way perfect manage in small and separate ways to do either some or all of these things. They attempt to teach the adolescent that growing up isn’t about becoming the evil witch, but about choosing what kind of female authority figure you are going to be; they are about the fact that there isn’t a single proscribed way to be female, but rather a multifaceted set of female identity that you now choose in what ways you want to fit and what ways you don’t.
CHAPTER 4

THE AMERICANIZED PRINCE: KNIGHTS IN SHINING ARMOR NEED NOT APPLY

In the “Rapunzel” adaptations examined in this paper, the prince is a male figure in a largely feminist selection of texts. In fairy tales the prince is supposed to ride in (preferably on some great, noble steed), scale the tower, and save the day. Except this never really happens in fairy tales, nor is it a construction of fairy tale males that current renditions seem to accept. The hero on the noble steed is a romantic motif that has been retroactively placed onto fairy tales. This romantic motif is a savior construction that is a contradiction to the typical princes found in actual fairy tales. In the Grimms’ “Rapunzel,” the prince shows up, tricks his way into the tower, sleeps with the girl, and then attempts to come up with a plan to get her out of the tower. He is as conniving as he is romantic; he is as self-serving as he is a savior. Though the prince’s plan to rescue Rapunzel ultimately fails, he proves himself willing to lie, cheat, and even steal to achieve his goal.

To reiterate a bit on material touched upon earlier in this work, let us look at the Prince’s last trip up the tower. Upon climbing the rope that is Rapunzel’s hair, he finds not the maiden to whom the hair belongs, but the witch—and she is waiting for him. The prince is then pushed out the tower window and is blinded by the witch, after which he wanders in desolation until he fatefully stumbles upon Rapunzel, whose miraculous tears cure his blindness. The prince in “Rapunzel” has his power taken away from him by the feminine figures of the text; his ability to act is removed along with his ability to see. His only real purposes within the tale include reintroducing Rapunzel to the outside world and raising her
social status through marriage. While perhaps a more active character than Rapunzel (he
does, after all, manage to cozen his way into the tower), his relevance to the story begins and
ends with the female protagonist. The reshaping of this character in the three texts being
examined is not only the reshaping of the character, but the reshaping of the masculinity that
is portrayed in “Rapunzel.” What’s more, I argue that it is the reshaping of the definition of a
prince to fit both feminist concerns and a modern American audience.

Masculinity in Rapunzel’s Revenge, Golden, and Zel revolves around competing
ideologies. These ideologies work to challenge and influence readers’ conceptions about
sexual identity in relation to long standing beliefs about what masculinity is, but they also
reflect common values of what it means to be a princely character written at the end of the	
twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first. Peter Hollindale, in his essay
“Ideology and the Children’s Book,” asserts that “ideology is not something which is
transferred to children as if they were empty receptacles. It is something which they already
possess, having drawn it from a mass of experiences far more powerful than literature” (35).
According to Hollindale, children begin the socialization process before they can even talk.
They are not the empty vessels much of modern Western society believes them to be; instead,
starting at a very young age these children are introduced to a large number of ideas about
what is culturally and socially acceptable. This includes how men and women are expected
to behave and what roles society expects them to play. Men can be breadwinners and fathers,
saviors and gentlemen. Women can be housewives and mothers, damsels in distress and
princesses. This socialized representation (a representation that varies per culture) can be
problematic for both males and females. The writers of Rapunzel’s Revenge, Golden, and
Zel attempt to reveal this problematic representation through revealing these socializing
models, these socializing ideologies, in their fairy tale texts. They attempt to offer an alternative that reflects values of masculinity and femininity developed in modern society. For *Rapunzel’s Revenge*, *Golden*, and *Zel*, masculinity is constructed using a confluence of American and feminist values—these texts include princes that break away from the archetype they are built around: the noble prince of fairy tales.

Each of the retellings being examined in this thesis creates a feminist, matriarchal power structure that operates with male characters in secondary roles. The male characters work in response to the empowered female characters. In *Rapunzel’s Revenge*, *Golden*, and *Zel*, the prince figure is very often not an actual prince. The patriarchal norm of the privileged male character is uprooted and, if not replaced, changed with the new matriarchal focus evident in these retellings. These tales regularly subvert the patriarchal norm through the portrayal of obvious stereotypes. The princes in these texts rework the concepts of masculinity by reworking the male figure in the context of modern ideas of princedom. It is important to note that the prince, even in the Grimms’ “Rapunzel,” is not the classic hero character, but rather a side-character to the real tale going on between Rapunzel and the witch. His main roles, imparting status and prestige, reflect the values associated with traditional princedom. Many fairy tales end with the female protagonist marrying a prince; these protagonists thereby either confirm their nobility (if they were already royalty of a sort) or, for protagonists like Rapunzel (of peasant birth), they obtain it. The princes portrayed in *Rapunzel’s Revenge*, *Golden*, and *Zel* disassociate the prince from these values because a prince as proscribed through American cultural ideals is not necessarily attached to ideas of royalty and birth. In the retellings being examined here, the true princes—the romantic interests of the female leads—are not normally royalty. For tales that portray actual noble
figures, however, the males are associated with modern values of what a positive masculine character should be, not just a positive nobleman.

The undeveloped figure of the prince is drawn between the conceptions of masculinity and the reaction of feminist critique to create a selection of male characters that comment on, and develop from, both stereotypes. *Rapunzel’s Revenge, Golden,* and *Zel* each feature prince characters who do not fit, and cannot fit, into standard conceptions of masculinity, at least not without becoming the subject of ridicule. Zipes points out that norms of masculinity socialize men to be “competitive, authoritarian, and power hungry as well as rational, abstract, and principled” (3). Each of the texts being examined here challenges this standard conception of manhood, both by examining the traits Zipes identifies through the male characters represented in the text and by placing these characters in relation to strong female characters. The liberal feminist movement, according to Kenneth Clatterbaugh in *Contemporary Perspective on Masculinity: Men, Women, and Politics in Modern Society:*

has been more open to men. In the first place, liberal feminism does not identify men as the problem; rather, both women and men are seen as subjected to a mystique (born of social stereotypes and ideals) that prevents the realization of their full humanity. The feminine mystique channels women into the submissive role, and the masculine mystique channels men into the dominant role. (42)

The feminist movement created the opportunity for strong female characters to be developed through text and other mediums. Intentionally or not, the movement also influenced the creation of modern masculine identity. Male characters benefit from the feminist movement; it allows them to break the socialized mold the world has created for them (just as it allows females to do the same) to reach what liberal feminism has labeled full humanity.
There is a distinctly American quality to the removal of noble blood from the figures of noble character in these retellings. The result is a stronger connection between the audience and Mother than between the audience and the other two main characters. In a private correspondence with his daughter, Sarah Bache, Benjamin Franklin discusses the creation of a society of knights in Cincinnati:

I only wonder that, when the united Wisdom of our nation had, in the Articles of Confederation, manifested their Dislike of establishing Ranks of Nobility, by Authority either of Congress or of any particular State, a Number of private Persons should think proper to distinguish themselves and their Posterity, from their fellow-citizens, and form an Order of hereditary Knights, in direct Opposition to the solemnly declared Sense of their country! (161)

Franklin’s account here not only shows that he deemed the system of nobility and aristocracy to be ill-suited for America, but it reveals a philosophical stance that has been become ingrained within the foundations of what it means to be an American. This philosophical stance stems from the American Revolutionary era and is identifiable in many of America’s early documents; it is seen in the Declaration of Independence, one of the most important political documents the American mythos, in that it mandates that “all men are created equal” (US 1776). America has further mythologized the past based on values attributed to the Founding Fathers, idealizing the values that weren’t necessarily held by the men themselves, but which they installed in the documents upon which America has founded its government and national character. Franklin believed in and promoted these values, that honor isn’t something bestowed by rank or class. Instead “honor, worthily obtain’d […] is in its Nature a personal Thing, and incommunicable to any but those who had some Share in obtaining it” (162). Franklin doesn’t see honor in the flash of medals or the pomp of nobility, but in the minds of those who have earned it. This philosophical view has mythologized into what it means to be an American, to be a noble American, and has become an integral part of today’s
American culture and character. Significantly, this attitude reveals itself in each of the male character leads in the adaptations examined in this paper. The products of American authors, these texts present princely leads who are characteristically American, who possess nobility and honor achieved through their actions and not by birth.

“Rapunzel” adaptations represent the archetype of the prince variously as a pompous adventuring hero, a trickster in a dress, a count’s son obsessed with a girl he met a grand total of once, a tinkerer’s assistant, and a prince trying to get out of an arranged marriage. The diverse representations separate the figure of the prince from the title prince in almost every case (there only being one actual king’s son in the three retellings), and they often disassociate him from the noble class. In many cases in these stories the prince figure is made into multiple characters rather than a single one. *Rapunzel’s Revenge* and *Golden* double the male character (these texts each containing two characters that could accurately approximate the role of “prince” and thereby express the differentiation between positive and negative male models. The princely figure, the character who attempts to represent the male authoritarian role, is developed less as a romanticized ideal and more as a problematic character. High-born figures are secondary characters in *Rapunzel’s Revenge* and *Golden*. They are foils to the primary and decidedly less aristocratic male figures of the text. The protagonists’ love interests in *Rapunzel’s Revenge* and *Golden’s* therefore are not princes, but commoners.

For Americans, a prince figure isn’t a man of royal birth, but of noble action and character; they are men who demonstrate these positive values no matter what their birth. The values of the protagonists for these retellings revolve around an ability to be one’s own man, a man who has not had prestige bestowed upon him from his father but has drawn it
from his own actions and words. While *Rapunzel’s Revenge* and *Golden* display their primary male characters as non-royals, *Zel* represents its male figure as just that, a singular nobleman (there is no character split here). Napoli’s text confronts the problems of a royal character head on, establishing her prince figure in a noble family despite the possible advantages of making him a more American idealization. He is a problematic, but also very positive character. While Napoli’s text retains the plot from Grimms’ “Rapunzel,” she manages to break the character from the negative stereotypes associated with the prince. The marked connection to the plot defines his character, but doesn’t prevent his characterization from being remarkably deep. Napoli creates a companion for Zel that is as obsessed her as she is with him. She does so in such a way, however, that develops Konrad, the prince, into a character that has been divorced from much of his royal heritage. He breaks away from his family, his servants, essentially his entire life, all to be with Zel.

In these American dominated texts, the signifiers the population associates with the aristocratic princely figure are challenged, and what’s more, made humorous through a split between a positive and negative model of manhood. In *Rapunzel’s Revenge*, the aristocratic male figure, the “adventuring hero,” is an extremely handsome example of masculinity; he is tan, blond haired, and blue-eyed (see Figure 6). He is also pompous, dim-witted, lazy, and landholding: “I was getting so *bored* watching the workers farm my fields all day” (Hale 40). The representation of this figure is not of the *noble* adventuring hero, but rather an approximation of nobility in the Wild West. Yet this character is distinctly attached to the figure of the prince in the Grimms’ “Rapunzel.” This character lacks a name, and is, when Rapunzel meets him, going off to meet the fair princess in the tower. He is the physical representation of the noble figure of the Grimms’ tale, but the adventuring hero is in fact
depicted as anything but noble (at least in character); he instead draws attention to negative archetypes modern audiences associate with prince figures. He goes adventuring not out of some desire to do right, but rather to flee the boredom of having other people do work for him, and the purpose of his visit to Rapunzel’s tower is not to rescue her, but to give the appearance of rescuing her. He states: “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 naive to know the difference and it’ll be such fun in the meantime” (41). In many ways, the adventuring hero is a laundry list of negative male traits,
specifically male traits that put him in authoritarian positions over others. He, as mentioned, has others work the land for him, and he almost entirely ignores what Rapunzel says (often times speaking over her). He is a character more interested in the rewards of the rescue than the actual rescue. With each prominent display of negative values, the princely/hero figure is put into question. He displays values of the gentry with a decidedly negative twist, making him seem arrogant and over-pampered instead of heroic and adventurous. He is decidedly un-American in the Franklin definition, unwilling to get his hands actually dirty in work or to do the right thing despite the consequences. What’s more is that the figure is made ironically humorous, especially as Rapunzel sends him to her former tower telling him that the girl in the tower (the tower she recently escaped) is quite deaf, so he will need to do a lot of yelling. The adventuring hero, more than anything else, looks the part of the prince, but it is all surface. There is no depth to the character. He portrays the negative stereotypes precisely because he has no real personality beyond those stereotypes. He is not capable of being an actual hero in the retold Rapunzel tale because he doesn’t have the ability to acknowledge the women around him as strong and powerful in and of themselves.

The adventuring hero is a pretty blunt and obvious critique of a supposed male ideal, but other retellings of “Rapunzel” create different and subtler critiques of masculinity through their texts. Golden’s aristocratic prince, while not a laundry list of negative characteristics, is a handsome bumbler who has a way with words. The critique of Golden’s prince Alexander relies more on the fact that he is, in fact, of noble blood, and therefore not suited for the actual female protagonist of the text, Rapunzel. Dokey’s Alexander is willing to choose a woman he has not seen because it would be his choice and not his parents: “What makes you think I’d be any easier to live with than the neighbor king’s daughter?” I inquired.
“Just one important thing,” Alexander answered. “I can choose you for myself” (139). Alexander’s marriage is meant to protect his kingdom from invasion by their neighbors, but Alexander seizes on the opportunity to run away and try and find himself a princess. In a certain way, the princely ideal of saving maidens here turns out to be a way to escape responsibility. The only reason Alexander’s flight from responsibility doesn’t doom his kingdom is that in the text marrying an enchanted girl would scare off the neighboring land-grabbing king (a man deathly afraid of magic). The prince from Zel, Konrad, similarly attempts to escape the responsibility of marrying for his kingdom in order to attempt to marry a girl he met once when she helped a blacksmith care for his horse. He obsesses over her for years because just shortly after his meeting with her, Zel’s Mother placed her in the tower where he could no longer find her. The powerful emphasis on choice for these characters makes them different than standard conceptions of nobility. American audiences usually aren’t fans of the idea of arranged marriages, and through their conceptions these characters gain not only control of their love lives, but a much stronger control of their lives in general. These characters are a different brand of male because they can choose not to fit this role that they would be socialized into.

The male ideal in the feminist world is not a character of power or authority, but a character who is able to place himself as either equal to or subversive to the powerful female characters. Jack, from Rapunzel’s Revenge, could be considered the most ideal male in these feminist retellings because of this. Whereas the obviously negative character of the adventuring hero shows up dressed in the fanciest clothing, Jack shows up in a dress, make-up, and a stuffed, lopsided bra (see Figure 7). While Jack doesn’t make a very appealing
woman, he is depicted as a much more positive male character. The representation of Jack initially as female differentiates him from the patriarchal norm. His female accoutrements are acquired specifically to inquire about a job. He is in a society that is essentially matriarchal (it has a female ruler who is attempting to obtain a female heir in Rapunzel); this forms a correlation in his dress-wearing to the concept of a female who dresses as male to achieve a measure of freedom in a patriarchal society. The depiction, while humorous and slightly ridiculous, also confronts directly the depiction of masculinity through the adventuring hero motif and character as well as focusing on the advantage/power of being a female in this particular text.
The major figure of masculinity in *Rapunzel’s Revenge* is brought to playful and positive laughter with Jack’s humorous and very bad representation as a female character. It is important to note, though, that while Jack makes a very ugly woman, he is believed to be female by the other characters in the text, even if only briefly. He is an ugly woman, but a believable one. In being represented as a female character Jack doesn’t distance himself from female values, but rather aligns himself with feminine traits in order to gain attention in this text largely concentrated on female power (the conflict between the witch and Rapunzel in this tale has been thoroughly expanded). Throughout the novel he builds on this strength by being willing to take a secondary role to Rapunzel, her being the hero and Jack playing the clever sidekick. He is not depicted as powerful, authoritarian, or even principled, but rather as conniving, lawless, and perfectly willing to play second fiddle. He is also kind, loyal, and cares deeply for Rapunzel. His list of character traits defines him more as a helpful and redeemable trickster rather than as a coldhearted criminal.

As mentioned, the positive male character is a character who isn’t of noble birth, but of noble character. Jack, while a thief and a huckster, is a noble young man who is more likely to help people than hurt them. Jack’s contrasts with “adventuring hero” only clarify the nobility of his traits. Rather than ignoring Rapunzel, Jack sees her almost immediately as a source of strength in the text. The adventuring hero only sees himself as strong, clever, or important. It is his ability to see others as stronger than him, but to still have strength himself, that lets Jack be the prince of *Rapunzel’s Revenge*. It is more important for the prince in an American retelling to be self-reliant, hardworking, and brave, than it is for him to be able to raise the status of the females at the conclusion of the tale. The stories don’t
require an acquisition of a status derived from males in order for the females to be complete—they are complete on their own.

The male characters from *Golden* and *Zel*, while not managing to be as unique as Jack, do offer a different kind of reality to the Grimms’ prince figure. The representation in *Golden* of Alexander, the aristocratic male figure, is more positive than the one seen in *Rapunzel’s Revenge* in the thrill-seeking landowner’s son, but like the landowner’s son, he is not Rapunzel’s love interest. Instead, Alex is the love interest of Rue, the girl stuck in the tower that *Golden*’s protagonist, the bald Rapunzel, needs to find a way to rescue. In *Golden*, Alexander is as interested as Rapunzel and Rue in getting out of a bad situation. The two female leads need to find a way to help Rue escape the tower and Alexander needs to find a way to escape the marriage arranged for him by his parents. He is, in a very clear way, attempting to escape the requirements a noble birth has placed upon him. While in certain ways foolish (he manages to hurt himself stumbling through the woods, and therefore has to woo his supposed love with a rather nasty black eye), this character seeks to find a woman whom he can choose, and one who will choose him. The desire for choice, the need to find a woman who wants him, rejects aristocratic ideas of love for the good of a kingdom and embraces American ideals of freedom and choice. While still a fairy tale love, it is a fairy tale love at the expressed expense of an aristocratic way of finding a mate for the good of the country.

Dokey’s retelling is unwilling to fit the princely Alexander into the role of the romantic lead for the texts’ main protagonist; Dokey attempts to avoid glorifying noble or aristocratic romances. Instead, she constructs a romance that speaks to the contemporary Western audience, especially the American audience, by creating characters who demonstrate
the American ideal of nobility. She places the romance of two commoners in the prominent position and rather than removing the aristocratic element she mildly diminishes its importance. Alexander becomes a figure to be compared against. His love is not held as greater due to his noble status. Alexander is not held up as better because he is a prince, but rather is shown to be a regular person despite the fact that he is of noble birth. The split in *Golden* is therefore not between positive and negative male figures, but between patriarchal nobleman and common man.

Harry, *Golden*’s male lead and Rapunzel’s love interest, is an orphan adopted by a tinker. Like Rapunzel in this novel Harry doesn’t fit the standard conception of the prince drawn from the Grimms’ “Rapunzel.” In fact, he has very little connection to that story beyond his love for the character whose name is drawn from it. Harry is the ideal American prince precisely because he is *not* a prince. His role as tinker’s adopted son makes him an object of ridicule. He wants to run away. He states: “‘I do not want to be a tinker’s boy! [...] I want a home,’ he whispered. ‘And they make fun of me in the towns. The other boys laugh and call me names. If I stay with the tinker, I’ll never have any friends. I’d be better off on my own’” (43). Harry’s reluctance to be a tinker comes from a desire to connect to other people, to be able to make friends. He strives not for adventure or power, but for family and friends. He wants a home. It is not surprising therefore that Melisande and Rapunzel, in part, become a home that the Tinker and Harry return to regularly. It is even less surprising that Rapunzel’s conception of Harry as their relationship turns romantic refers to him as her home:

“You kissed me. Why did you kiss me?” I asked.
“Not even you can be that stupid,” he said. “Why do you think?”
And then he did it again [...] *Home*, it said. *Home.*
Not very romantic, some of you may be thinking. To which I can only reply that you are the ones who haven’t been paying attention. (176)

The image of the ideal male in *Golden* is a man that one can build a home with. It is not the action-adventure hero or the patriarchal ruler, but rather a character who stands on more equal grounds with his female counterpart—both Rapunzel and Harry are orphans growing up with adoptive parents. At the heart of their identities, these characters are very much the same. They both lose their biological parents at a very young age, they both care deeply for their adoptive parents, and they both put a great emphasis on the idea of home. It is significant, also, that Alexander emphasizes the idea of home in his love as well, forming a connection between the book’s two major love stories of the book.

The modern American readers doesn’t understand or desire the traditional prince who imparts status, but have created a set of traits that they have derived from princedom that they hold up as positive. Both of *Golden’s* male characters emphasize ideas of home over save-the-day heroics. Neither of these characters ever saves the day, but instead woos their love interests through offering them homes, both physical and metaphorical. At one point in *Golden* Alexander tells a story about his great-grandparents who fell in love despite an arranged marriage. In this story, the newly made queen makes one request of her husband:

‘I wish you to build me a room,’ his wife said. ‘One single room where I will be warm in the winter, and cool in summer. A room that will ring with my laughter, but where I will not be afraid to rage and cry’. A room so well made I can trust that it will shelter me when all others fail, in which our children may be conceived and born. You must do this with your own two hands, for it is not a task which may be entrusted to any other. Will you grant me this wish?’ (Dokey 155-6)

The king responds that, though he is not certain that he knows how to fulfill her wish, he promises to try, and as they walk to their home he picks up a single stone that he will hold onto for a lifetime as he attempts to build such a room. This stone, for the king, serves as a
reminder those days when he “could do no work on the room at all,” letting him “wrap his fingers tightly around the stone he had picked up on the day his wife made her wish, as if, simply by touching this small piece of rock, he could make the room she had wished for grow” (157). Though the king never finishes the actual stone room for his wife, she points out in their last days that he has created just such a room in his heart. Alexander promises to create just such a room for Rue, and at the very end of the novel Harry picks up two stones and offers them up to Rapunzel, asking her to “pick one” (179). Despite their widely different backgrounds, the sentiment that both Harry and Alexander offer is very similar. But while Alexander promises to build a room for Rue in his heart, Harry offers something greater. When Rapunzel chooses one, Harry keeps the other. He breaks down a patriarchal barrier with a dual promise. This isn’t the dominant male building a space for the female, but the mutual creation of space for each other in their hearts. The egalitarian response of Harry creates him as the stronger male, even as the use of the symbolism from Alexander’s story connects the two characters and their representations of love together. Harry isn’t the better man, but the more modern, and the more feminist.

There is contrast between the male characters developed for Rapunzel’s Revenge and Golden and the male character developed for Zel. Konrad, as the sole prince in this Rapunzel retelling, is a figure of nobility that would seemingly not fit into the American prince motif that has been represented in the other texts here. Additionally, there is no alternative commoner character to fill that role in Zel. Yet Napoli, in defining her masculine figure, creates in the count’s son a character defined by his perseverance and his desire for a girl he knows to be a commoner. In his first meeting with Zel, there is no magic and no tower to climb, only a girl in a blacksmith shop. Zel helps the blacksmith care for Konrad’s horse,
keeping her calm while the blacksmith pulls a tick from the horse’s ear. When the prince asks her what she wants in return for her help, she asks for the only thing she can think of that she wants, a fertilized goose egg for a goose that only has rocks to care for, no eggs. She dumbfounds him, enrages him, and captivates him. So much so, he searches for her for years, frustrating his parents to no end:

How can he explain to Father that the thought of a girl who asks not for money but for a goose egg pushes all thoughts of other girls from his mind? Father would laugh. And with good reason. A chance encounter with a peasant girl. It is laughable.
But Konrad cannot laugh.
Like the speck of life in the fertilized goose egg, Zel entered Konrad’s world and left a mark that changed him. (72)

Konrad’s young life is spent focused on the change a single peasant girl has made in him. He cannot forget her, and he cannot give up his search for her. He is obsessed with her difference from everyone around him. Konrad, in his meeting with Zel, finds in her a character who has a nobility outside of the pretension that the noble society he lives in provides. She doesn’t deliver perfunctory culture or rely on the learned manners that Konrad has been raised with. Instead she has a nobility of character as demonstrated by her compassion for other people and other creatures and her natural inclination towards helping with difficult or problematic work. These characteristics represent an American cultural ideal that places a nobility of character above the nobility of blood. Konrad falling sway to his desire for such a person demonstrates him to be either resentful or negligent of his class concerns.

Konrad isn’t a worthy male character because he has saved the girl or because he has defeated the witch; he hasn’t managed either of these things. Konrad is worthy because he is willing to persevere despite the world going dark on him. At the end of Zel Konrad has
followed the plotline of the “Rapunzel.” He has been thrust out of the tower by Mother into a bed of thorns. Blinded by these thorns he wanders, searching for the girl who is once more lost to him, taken away by the magic of Mother. It is important to note that during this time in the text Konrad is for the first time referred to as “the man.” The transformation from youth, from the young Konrad, to man is almost as sudden as his drop into the thorns at the bottom of the tower. Yet it is evident in everything he does. In the first year of his blindness he attempts to search for Zel with five soldiers, but he fails to find her. The next year he attempts to find her with a cadre of holy men. This also fails. It is only when he searches with only the company of his horse Meta and the bird Pigeon Pigeon that he is capable of finding the girl. This time he perseveres even though “no one, no one, was willing to go forth with the man, who had proved himself reckless” (225). The pioneer spirit, the willingness to go further and farther than anyone else, is imbued into Konrad as a man. At this point, he no longer travels with the help that his rank bestows on him; in fact, he has been rejected by the very people who are supposedly under his rule and therefore subject to his requests.

It is in this state as the powerful pioneer, but also humble noble stripped of attendants, that Konrad comes as both supplicant and equal before Zel. However, in this scene, the point of view narrated in the text isn’t that of either Konrad or Zel:

she is kissing him and he is kissing her and the tears she has held back for five years, the tears that I knew could transform the moment, the tears that had to be saved for the right moment to transform, now come streaming down and drop on the face of the man whose head is cradled in the woman’s arms. Zel’s tears fall in Konrad’s eyes, hot and salty and full of life. He blinks them in, absorbs them; they are now his own tears, and, yes, he can see.

And they can see each other and, yes, oh yes, we are happy. (227)
The voice that watches the two lovers is the voice of Mother. Konrad has to have done more than gained Zel’s love at the end of the text; he has to have earned Mother’s respect as well. It is important that Napoli has the Mother consciously save Konrad. She sees in him an extension of her own love for Zel. She see him as someone who is, as she states, her “soulmate—he loves my Zel” (207). In Napoli’s text the male character who can come to be Zel’s love has to also be accepted by the real female power of the novel. Mother is not evil, but rather misguided. She sees all men as negative until she sees in Konrad’s eyes the same pain at losing Zel that she feels. The redemption of man is in the pain he is capable of feeling, and in his ability to actually prove that pain to the most powerful female in the text: Mother. It is not in his strength, his skill, or his refinement and education, but in his princely actions—his ability to express real feeling.

In these retellings, the lead male character is always derived from the prince of the Grimms’ “Rapunzel,” but it is not the title or the bloodline that define these characters as princes. These stories have changed the stereotypes; they have moved beyond the idea of noble blood defining nobility. Zipes states that:

> In particular, the criticism which deals with fairy tales has stressed the positive notion of change. That is, the criticism underscores our deep desire to change the present male-female arrangements and endeavors to demonstrate that we can raise our awareness of how fairy tales function to maintain the present arrangements, how they might be rearranged or reutilized to counter the destructive tendencies of male-dominant values” (Prince 4)

Fairy tale retellings demonstrate a negotiation that happens between the values being demonstrated in the fairy tales that are a deep set part of modern culture and the feminist and contemporary American values that the writers bring to bear on their works. Masculinity is, in reaction to these new values, removed from its place of aristocratic power/authority. These retellings move away from the princely ideal by creating a princely figure who can
interact within a new realm of feminist power, and who can still be a strong character even when placed in a secondary role. Retellings let princes be created that don’t need to fit the strict requirements of traditional princedom, both in the text and out of them. The positive male figure, the prince, is more than a signifier for noble heritage, but is a signifier instead for the man who can uphold a set of American cultural values that, for this cultural audience, represents nobility.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Fairy tales are not a static genre of literature. These stories are still being told and retold in modern society; they demonstrate with each new rendition the amount of flux that is inherent to their form. By recreating these stories, modern storytellers integrate both old and new ideas into key pieces of the story. Figures like Rapunzel, the prince, and the witch thereby evolve. These archetypes change to fit the culture that they are being introduced in. In the way archetypes change significant values of the culture that the texts are being written in are revealed. By tracking and recording the way in which archetypes or signifiers are demonstrated in fairy tale retellings it is possible to examine the values that a particular culture most maintains as important. With the retellings of “Rapunzel” examined in this thesis, the values demonstrated reflect current American and feminist values that are prominent in the culture that the texts were created in. Yet these changes in archetypes happen in all kinds of fairy tales, and in all different kinds of cultures. Reflected in the shifts in signifiers are the evolutions not only of the figures themselves, but of societies’ needs and desires.

Fairy tales have survived for generations because of the power that they contain. Jack Zipes states that “the fairy tales we have come to revere as classical are not ageless, universal, and beautiful in and of themselves [...] They are historical prescriptions, internalized, potent, explosive, and we acknowledge the power they hold over our lives by mystifying them” (Subversion 11). Retellings of fairy tales maintain the potent strength of their forebears through the very archetypes and signifiers they recreate, but their force also
develops through the way in which they reflect and create cultural values. Readers don’t just recognize the glass slipper from Cinderella; they recognize a symbol for all the culturally relevant ideas integrated in the rags to riches story that is extremely well loved. *Rapunzel’s Revenge, Golden,* and *Zel* each reflect something important to society from the time they were written. The more popular texts, texts like *Rapunzel’s Revenge* and *Zel,* both of which became best sellers, touch on something essential to society during the time of their writing. *Rapunzel’s Revenge* is not just a cool adventure story; it is a text that demonstrates the way audiences desire active female protagonists over passive ones. *Zel* demonstrates a resistance to the labeling of female witch figures as evil. The fairy tale retellings that succeed do so because they are doing more than just telling the same story again. Rather, they are making the figures, symbols, archetypes, and signifiers relevant again. And this process continues. The adaptations being created are not necessarily folkloric, but they expand and rework the images and characters in ways that are recognizable. Disney, for example, their own retelling of the story of Rapunzel to be released in November 2010 entitled *Tangled.* Rapunzel’s tale is still popular, still being retold, and still being recreated. Yet it always retains something; it always in some way retains something that will keep audiences referring to the fairy tale that precedes it.
WORKS CITED


