

From Folktale to Franchise: Rapunzel in the Age of Adaptation

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Abstract: This paper critically examines how the enduring narrative of Rapunzel, a classic fairy tale, is radically transformed when adapted across diverse genres, resulting in different narratives and themes. Moving beyond a simple folklore of passive rescue, modern adaptations present reinterpretation of themes, plot, and characters and mark a shift from traditional to modern outlook of confinement, rescue, freedom, and self-discovery. The story of Rapunzel has been retold through animation, graphic novels, theater, literature, and digital media, each medium reshaping the narrative in its own creative way. To investigate these shifts, this study draws upon Adaptation Theory, particularly Linda Hutcheon's framework, which holds adaptation as both a product and a process of reinterpretation across media and contexts. Adaptation is not seen as secondary or derivative but as a dynamic cultural act that reimagines stories in new forms to sustain relevance and evoke fresh meanings. This theoretical lens enables a deeper understanding of how core motifs are retained or reworked to reflect contemporary sensibilities and ideological shifts. Despite these shifts the core elements of identity, imprisonment and freedom serve as a narrative anchor. By analyzing selected adaptations namely Disney's *Tangled* (animated musical), *Rapunzel's Revenge* (graphic novel), Barbie as *Rapunzel* (animated film) the paper examines how the core story of isolation and self-discovery is re-imagined. These inter-genre analyses reveal that the continuous adaptation of the Rapunzel is not merely a creative reinterpretation but a dynamic cultural process through which the narrative remains relevant despite the timeless boundaries and hence acts as a mouthpiece of human condition.

Keywords: Fairy Tale; Animation; Adaptation Theory; Self-Discovery; Narrative; Reinterpretation

Introduction

The journey of the fairytale from folklore to franchise represents a significant evolution of storytelling, where traditional oral narratives were adapted, redefined, and eventually got expanded into popular multimedia culture. This progression involves a shift from anonymous, community-based storytelling to more structured, author-driven narratives, and finally to commercially driven entertainment empires. Fairytale originally began as oral stories told within communities to entertain, teach lessons or preserve cultural values. Rooted in folklore, these stories often carried moral lessons and reflected the social norms of their times. They were passed down from generation to generation orally, often evolving with each retelling. With the advent of the written collection by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in the 19th century, tales experienced fixity and standardization. The term “fairy tale” was first used by Madame d’Aulnoy in the late 17th century. It is argued that “[f]airy tales are characterized by the presence of magic and wondrous elements” (Storyteller). Mary Hoffman contends, “What makes a story a fairytale is a little bit of magic that stirs the imagination, and it doesn’t matter where it comes from. It can be a pumpkin that is turned into a beautiful coach, a talking animal that can make a wish come true or a spell that turns a handsome prince into a beast.”

Authors like Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm later popularised the literary fairy tale by collecting and publishing traditional folktales. Early fairytales were all about social norms, gender disparity, harsh punishments, where women held a passive role and waited for the prince charming to rescue them from the tower. However, as storytelling moved from oral tradition to global reimagining, the tales too changed, and more emphasis was laid on independence, agency, and self-discovery. Robert H. Hock explains, “telling a folk tale is a natural art, but writing a folk tale down is an act of translation (...) it require(s), therefore, an even greater artist to make this rendering live once more, to make this translation from the living voice into a true tale that you could only hear in your head as you read it but also continue to hear it in your ears” (qtd. in Hoffman). Fairy tales, with their timeless narratives and archetypal characters, have a remarkable ability to endure across generations and cultures. Fairy tales, passed down through generations, have long been a narrative of passive rescue and tower confinement. Far from being static and continually re-imagined, they reflect

the values and complexities of new generations, whether through adventurous and empowered portrayals or symbolic and imaginative imagery.

The present study investigates three movies and one graphic novel, namely, *Oh, Rapunzel* (1996), *Barbie as Rapunzel* (2002), *Rapunzel's Revenge* (2008), and *Disney's Tangled* (2010). While these works differ radically in form, ranging from experimental art film to children's fantasy, graphic novel and animated blockbuster, they collectively demonstrate how an original story is retold, reframed and reinterpreted across genres. *Oh, Rapunzel* differs significantly in tone and style from later commercial retellings; its presence highlights how even avant-garde art engages with fairy-tale traditions, showcasing that Rapunzel is not only adapted for popular entertainment but also reimagined in more critical and symbolic ways. This paper analyses the theme of "Same Story, Different Narrative: Moving across Genres," and examines how the Rapunzel story generates multiple versions across different genres. To frame this discussion, the present examination draws on the *Theory of Adaptation* (2006) by Linda Hutcheon, which argues that adaptations are not just derivative copies but creative reinterpretations shaped by medium, context, and audience. From this standpoint, the researcher will explore and trace how the same ur-story (Rapunzel) is told differently across genres, media and cultural moments, and why these shifts are important. In its earliest representation, the tale focused on the cautionary narrative, emphasising morality, obedience and consequences of desire. Oral narratives depicted Rapunzel as locked in a tower by Gothel, often punished for her parents' mistake. She sings and waits for the prince to come and rescue her from the tower. In the 19th century, when the same story was collected and published by Grimm Brothers, it reflected the anxieties of the age, especially in the middle-class German society that was influenced by female sexuality. In the Grimms *Rapunzel*, the girl is locked in the tower to preserve her chastity. When she innocently asks why her clothes are tighter (an oblique reference to pregnancy in early versions), it reflects the fear of pre-marital sex and the need to control women's bodies. This echoes the society's obsession with purity, chastity, honor, and the protection of female reputation. The tale stresses the fear of punishment that comes when rules are broken. The parents' theft of rampion

(Rapunzel plant) leads to the loss of their only child, and Rapunzel's disobedience in meeting the Prince results in her suffering. Nineteenth-century Germany considered obedience to parents, church, and state as the cornerstone of social order. Anyone failing to abide by that virtue would face the harsh consequences. Moreover, female agency was considered a threat during that time. Their desires were seen as dangerous and destabilizing that can erode any society to the core. Rapunzel's longing to connect to the outside world, and her secret meetings with the prince, are framed as a major transgression leading to harsh consequences—Imprisonment, exile, and suffering. To protect family honor was always a female responsibility; it was gendered and closely tied to women's chastity; if found guilty of any sexual disobedience, she would be punished. Her punishment serves as a moral lesson to children/ readers (primarily the female audience) for upholding the moral standards of society. Fairy tales were reshaped by Grimm to act as a moral instruction for children (especially girls) warning against any sin, disobedience, and temptation. Rapunzel's suffering and redemption mirror Christian ideas of sin, punishment, and salvation.

The first adaptation considered by the researcher here is an experimental art film *Oh, Rapunzel* by Cecilia Condit and Dick Blau. It is set in a Philadelphia estate and narrates the story of Condit's mother. The film reconstructs the Rapunzel story not as a children's fantasy but as a metaphor for psychological and social trauma that women go through. Condit highlights the psychological weight of isolation and the haunting ambiguities of liberation through the depiction of her mother. The film begins with the haunting question, "Mother, why didn't your mother like you very much?" This reference highlights the emotional state of tension and psychological trauma that follows. Rather than retelling Rapunzel explicitly, Condit recaptures key motifs of the tower, long hair and the notion of rescue as symbolic frameworks. These symbols are infused into real-life documentary scenes, reframing them as metaphors for ageing, confinement, and the complex roles that women inhabit. This is not as linear and structured like other adaptations and retellings, but offers more like a dream narrative where the past, memory and fantasy overlap and reiterate time and again. Furthermore, analyzing this approach of Condit with Julie Sander's concept of revisionary adaptations, which

argues that adaptations not only translate a story into a new medium but also transfigure the source material too by infusing it with new thematic, cultural or aesthetic dimensions. *Oh, Rapunzel* can be seen as a revisionary adaptation; while it retains the core elements of Rapunzel's narrative, it reaffirms it through symbolic storytelling and imaginative recreation of the traditional theme. The movie moves back and forth between Condit's mother's life history and the symbolic framework of the Rapunzel tale. The masked or surreal figures that are encapsulated by the director in the frame embody fear, repression, and hidden aspects of identity. This surreal/dreamlike approach links *Oh, Rapunzel* to the broader Rapunzel's tradition by challenging the older order and showing the same motifs of captivity, longing and the hope of release. Moreover, the movie exemplifies and reflects the social, cultural and artistic currents of the 1990s, when experimental art often turned to fairytale as a major framework for exploring identity, confinement and trauma. The "tower" becomes the symbol of both domestic and social confinement and a depiction of the mother questions traditional roles of women. As Marina Warner observes in her essay "After 'Rapunzel'," the tower is not simply a setting but a place of restriction and ignorance. This echoes the theme of confinement just as Rapunzel is locked in a tower; her mother is locked in the role of caregiver, stripped of her identity and individuality beyond domestic duty. It is worth noting here that unlike *Barbie as Rapunzel*, *Disney's Tangled* and *Rapunzel's Revenge* which all rely to some degree on the conventional objectification of women (slim, long blonde hair, tall, fair) that serves as visual pleasure for the audience Condit here takes a radically different approach and hence equating it to Laura Mulvey's notion of male gaze, which argues that mainstream cinema often reduces women to objects of beauty and desire, Condit's film rejects such objectification and beautification. Rapunzel in this work is not a glamorous figure with long blonde hair and slim body, but a fragmented character caught in a cycle of silence and isolation. By refusing to beautify her female characters, Condit explores and focuses her narration on the psychological aspects of her actresses/ characters that underpin the whole story. This stark difference is something worth celebrating and deserves attention alongside commercial adaptations. Her version refuses to objectify women, thereby opening space for a feminist re-reading of the tale.

After the unsettling, dreamlike reinterpretation of *Oh, Rapunzel*, the tale moved in a radically different direction with the release of *Barbie as Rapunzel* (2002), which transforms the Grimm's moral heavy tale into a children's fantasy tied closely to consumer culture. Unlike Condit's experimental art film, which reframed the fairy tale as a metaphor of psychological and social confinement, *Barbie as Rapunzel* acts not just as a popular film but as a significant part of Mattel's (the company that owns Barbie) strategy to expand Barbie into multimedia. The film reworked the fairytale to fit Barbie as a brand name symbolizing creativity, independence, fashion, female bonding, and female agency. The film was designed for global expansion as a part of a moral entertainment and marketing strategy. In the film, Rapunzel is no longer depicted as a passive figure awaiting rescue but as a creative and imaginative person. The villain is more stylized, and emphasis on punishment is removed. The focus lies on Rapunzel's courage, independence, and sense of self-discovery. By the late 20th century, there was growing concern over the traditional fairytales and their idea of being too aggressive, violent, and morally rigid for the readers of a young age. Adaptations like *Barbie as Rapunzel* and *Disney's Tangled* softened these elements, replacing punishment and fear with imagination and empowerment. At the same time, films like *Barbie as Rapunzel* and *Disney's Tangled* mirror the era's increasing emphasis on female agency, independence, and skills. The narrative shows the late 20th-century trend of optimism and family-oriented storytelling, offering a happy ending, moral lessons about courage and kindness, instead of a strict warning of disobedience.

Another shift in the progression of the theme discussed above can be seen in the movie *Disney's Tangled* (2010). *Tangled* is a Walt Disney's animated studios reimagining of the classic Grimm Brothers fairy tale Rapunzel. The story follows Rapunzel, a young princess with magical golden hair that has healing and restorative powers. Kidnapped and locked by Mother Gothel (a vain woman who uses Rapunzel's hair to preserve her youth) in a secluded tower, she longs to see the outside world. Her life changes when she encounters Flynn Rider, a charming thief on the run who stumbles upon her tower. Rapunzel leaves the tower for the first time, embarking on a journey of adventure, self-discovery, and love. This story combines the themes of love, humour, courage, and

action with the themes of freedom and personal growth. The tale represents the postmodern era and its influence on the character of Rapunzel. Rapunzel in this movie is adventurous, witty and curious, longing to explore the world rather than remaining a passive victim. The 21st-century theme of personal growth and self is given importance. By choosing to escape the tower and assert her right to live beyond the command of Mother Gothel's control, she embarks on the journey of self-liberation and self-reclamation. This version exemplifies the principle of transmedia storytelling, as described by Henry Jenkins, which says a single narrative exists across multiple media and platforms, reaching diverse audiences while retaining recognisable core elements. By transforming the traditional Grimm's tale into an animated film that emphasises agency and adventure, *Tangled* not only appeals to children but also becomes a key aspect in gender roles and empowerment.

The next significant reworking can be traced in *Rapunzel's Revenge* a graphic novel written by Shannon and Dean Hale and illustrated by Nathan Hale. It takes its inspiration from the Rapunzel fairy tale in the act of its renewed recreation. Instead of a helpless maiden trapped in a tower, Rapunzel is portrayed as a bold, adventurous heroine who takes control of her destiny. The theme of long hair, traditionally a symbol of passivity and imprisonment, is reconstructed. The hair becomes her greatest weapon, which she uses as lassos, whips, and ropes to fight villains and navigate landscapes. Her hair is no longer a symbol of beauty, but becomes a literal weapon that help her fight villains. Unlike *Barbie as Rapunzel*, where her creativity and imagination become freedom, here Rapunzel's long hair becomes a symbol of her strength and brings alive her fighting spirit. *Rapunzel's Revenge* centres on justice, liberation, and reclaiming power. It is less about romance and more about defeating tyranny and restoring balance to her world. Her partnership with Jack is based on teamwork and equality, rather than serving as an orthodox story of a prince rescuing her. The theme of female agency and reclamation is mirrored in that age of that time. By the early 21st century, literature and media emphasized more on the aspect of women as strong and independent beings. They are more focused on higher goals, rather than physical beauty and the embellishment of appearances. As Jack Zipes argues, fairy tales are never static but constantly adapted to reflect the political, social and cultural

anxieties of their time, often becoming sites of resistance against dominant ideologies. Graphic novels became more accepted in schools and libraries as legitimate literature. *Rapunzel's Revenge* demonstrates how the fairy tale as a genre is flexible and adaptable in nature.

The theme of 'Same Story, Different Narratives' becomes more fluid with the depiction of Rapunzel in different genres. The oral and Grimm versions present a tale of punishment and fear, the films reshape the story into one of creativity, independence, and empowerment aimed at children. By making it a part of commercial and globalised culture, these adaptations fit perfectly in the theme of the same story but different genres. Cecilia Condit's experimental short film further enriches the narrative landscape by bringing forth the theme of imaginative imagery, surreal symbolism and psychological complexity. Film not only engages adult audiences but simultaneously challenges conventional storytelling. Even in its experimental form, *Oh, Rapunzel* echoes recurring themes seen in *Barbie as Rapunzel*, *Rapunzel's Revenge* and *Tangled*: confinement, struggle of autonomy and dynamics of maternal authority. Together, these adaptations exhibit how a single Ur-story (original story) can be reshaped not only into children's fantasy or animated musicals, but also into graphic novels that mix fairy tale tradition with entirely new cultural settings and storytelling modes. *Oh, Rapunzel* complements and contrasts with the mainstream storyline and graphic adaptations, revealing how the same story can inspire empowerment, embarks adventure, and stimulates introspective reflection. Meanwhile, The Grimm's version reflects the 19th century German anxieties about punishment, obedience, sexuality, and family honour. *Barbie as Rapunzel* transforms the story into a consumer-friendly children's fantasy emphasising creativity and empowerment. Here, the agency comes from her artistic talent rather than violent rebellion. *Disney's Tangled* modernises the tale into Disney's blockbuster full of psychological complexities, humour, and romance. *Rapunzel's Revenge*, meanwhile, explodes the tale into an action-packed, thrill-based American Western adventure. The same basic structure of a girl trapped, isolated, and ultimately finding freedom exists in all these genres, but the narrative emphasis, cultural values and audience expectation shift radically with the adaptations and with the sense of contemporaneity.

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