Motherhood, Wicked Witches, and Obsession: Uncovering Feminist Meaning in the Rapunzel Narrative

Canonical fairy tales such as those of the Grimm Brothers are generally told in the voice of an omniscient narrator who recalls the story’s plot without giving interpretive attention to characters or their actions. Frequently, this lack of complexity stems from a reliance on character archetypes, especially archetypes emerging from gendered, patriarchal traditions of the societies from which the stories arise. The wicked stepmother, the passively beautiful daughter, and the heroic prince who rescues the latter from the former are some of these archetypes. All are certainly present in the Grimms’ “Rapunzel;” however, this story seems to be more conducive than many to feminist reinterpretations because of its complex themes of longing, isolation, possessiveness, and the nature of motherhood. Donna Jo Napoli uncovers these themes from the traditional tale and forefronts them in her novelization, Zel, by offering multiple character perspectives that dispute omniscient narratives and reject simplistic value judgements on those characters, whether villainous or heroic.

Napoli reinterprets “Rapunzel” not by drastically altering its characters or plot, but by delving into the psychological motivations that may lie behind, but are not revealed by, the model tale. Her novel tells the story of a mother and daughter living on an isolated alm, apparently self-sufficient and happy together until the child’s thirteenth birthday. Upon that occasion, motivated by her daughter’s encounter with a strange noble named Konrad, the
mother proceeds to confine her in a tower as a safeguard against such perceived external threats. In most of its narrative plot points, the novel differs little from its source material, yet it functions as a postmodern reading because of the depth of personality its main characters are allowed. The most significant reinterpretation Napoli demonstrates is her use of multiple narrative perspectives: a third of the novel each is allowed for the daughter Rapunzel, or Zel; her love Konrad; and the Mother figure, and these are routinely switched throughout the novel.

Mother, significantly, is the only character given the privilege of a first-person perspective. Such an emphasis gives her an increased sense of agency and considerably changes the reader’s relationship to a character traditionally conceived of as a villain. The fairy tale is therefore transformed from a straightforward narrative interpreted and reported through the voice of an omniscient narrator to a vehicle for discussion between characters and their readers, where the thoughts of both the character and the reader come together to create meaning.

According to Hilary S. Crew, in Napoli’s tale, in “contradistinction to the Brothers Grimms’ different versions of the tale, readers are potentially positioned to, at least, understand the motives of a woman who makes a bargain with devils to procure the daughter she so needed” (82). The emphasis, then, is not to transform any of the story’s traditional characters, but to allow them a voice and therefore agency. Christy Williams describes this as the creation of “a tension between the prescribed roles of popularized, conventional fairy-tale characters like the wicked stepmother and a postmodern rescripting of those roles” (257). Such a narrative technique “shifts the focalization and the motivations for these actions . . . to allow for meaning that is not possible” (Williams 258). It is therefore not the alteration of the tale but of its telling that, for Napoli, creates and uncovers new meanings.
One of these meanings stems from an examination of what motherhood and childhood mean both to individuals and to the society of which those individuals are part. Our first glimpse inside Mother’s story occurs in town with Zel; Mother’s first words to the reader tell of her “enjoying the unity of Mother and Daughter, weaving through the crowds like a single strand of yarn” (Napoli 13). This surprisingly mystical image instantly reveals Mother’s intense, almost unnatural attachment to her daughter, which attachment becomes both the instigator of the novel’s conflict and its thematic centre. Linnea Hendrickson, in her exploration of Paul Zelinsky’s version of the tale, asserts that “Rapunzel” tells the story of “the successive roles of virgin, mother, and crone” (220). Napoli’s reimagining retains this theme as these roles intertwine in its characters: Zel moves from virginity to motherhood, while Mother embraces all three roles at different points from her desperate, childless past to her abasement and death at the end of the novel. We can additionally note that not only do individual characters move through these linear roles, but that the relationship between characters in these roles changes through the story as well. The roles must be separated from one another. Namely, the virgin must be allowed to separate from the mother in order to mature. For Allan G. Hunter, the “theme [of “Rapunzel”] seems to be that of longing” (60). I would add to this that, in Zel, mere longing is inflated to the point of obsession, and when motherly love is pushed to the boundaries of obsession, such maturation cannot take place.

This obsession is prompted, however, by the characters’ societal context: in a culture where women are defined by their capacity to bear children, Mother clings desperately to the object who allows her to fill that role. Sylvia López comments on the role of motherhood in societies such as that of the Grimms, where the archetypal version of “Rapunzel” originated, stating that “women, according to bourgeois, patriarchal ideology of the nineteenth century,
existed to be mothers. Until they married and had a child they were made to feel invisible” (785). Understanding this conflict makes it easier to understand and sympathize with the desperation childlessness would inspire in a woman such as Mother, if not necessarily to support the actions undertaken to remedy that childlessness.

The subsequent part of Mother’s narrative is told in a flashback, relatively late in the novel, where she temporarily becomes a third-person narrator of her own life. Having been abandoned by her husband for her inability to conceive, the desperate woman is approached by a devil who offers her an avenue to motherhood in exchange for her services. Discovering within herself a lack of emotion and of faith, she decides to make the choice “on the basis of a personal judgement: How much was a daughter worth? . . . ‘Anything and everything.’ The answer was absolute” (125-130). The story that follows this crisis of faith is familiar; the woman, now with powers of witchcraft, tempts her pregnant neighbour to steal from her rapunzel plant and, as retaliation, demands possession of the baby girl when she is born. Throughout this segment of the narrative Mother differentiates between the two women by simply calling herself the “barren woman” and the other the “pregnant woman,” respectively (134). These depersonalizing terms exemplify the way women are, in such a culture, defined by their potential for motherhood.

By telling this particular part of the story, Mother lets the reader know not only how she came to attain her prized daughter, but also how she became infamous as the fairy tale witch. Are we, by the information given here, meant to judge Mother for these actions, or to forgive her completely? It seems neither is possible. Certainly, her actions are not laudable, as the reader can easily discover when comparing her section of the narrative to the sections of Zel and Konrad. When Mother’s unity with Zel is threatened by the affection of a young nobleman, prompting her realization of Zel’s impending sexual maturity, Mother imprisons the girl in the story’s famed
tower (64-70). Until this imprisonment, the girl’s attitude towards her mother has ostensibly been one of genuine affection, but after this climactic event Zel becomes less trusting and increasingly bitter towards her. She lives in squalor – as exemplified by the frank description of the “bucket of feces and urine against the [tower’s] rounded wall” (Napoli 150) – and only bothers to dress herself when Mother comes to see her: “Zel keeps her dress clean for Mother’s sake . . . She is dressed, clean, and well behaved for Mother . . . Mother has never guessed that Zel goes naked. Mother doesn’t know what Mother doesn’t want to know” (151).

That haunting last thought points to a newly obvious divide between the mother and daughter that has been aggravated, ironically, by Mother’s very insistence on protecting their intimate relationship. This situation contrasts strongly with that earlier image of two women “weaving through the crowds like a single strand of yarn” (Napoli 13). In that part of the story Mother had felt a “sharp loss” as she’d left Zel to run an errand, as though she were “sacrificing [their] wholeness . . . The only consolation is that the separation is temporary” (13).

It becomes evident, however, that even this initial sense of wholeness was only illusory; in fact, when we speak of parent-child relationships, it is wholeness that is temporary, not separation.

This is true because peoples’ personalities themselves, especially those of children, are infinitely susceptible to change. The theme of sexual maturation is thus extremely important to Zel. Allan G. Hunter’s book Princes, Frogs & Ugly Sisters has a chapter on the Grimms’ “Rapunzel” in which he addresses this theme and thereby casts light on the way this theme is played up by Napoli. Hunter compares Rapunzel’s imprisonment and subsequent liaison with the prince to the way “the convent-reared child is likely to be very easily led astray by others who are more sexually adventurous” (61). “The king’s son,” he argues, “is certainly sexually adventurous” (61). This certainly remains true in Zel, where Count Konrad searches
obsessively for the young girl he met in town, apparently willing to risk his family’s political future dependant on an arranged marriage and wed this peasant stranger. This is not only a love story but a coming-of-age story where it is natural for the girl to want to separate from her mother, and therefore unnatural for the mother to want to prevent this occurrence. When faced with the thought of this separation, Mother “blanch[es]. Zel will not be wed within the year. No. She must not leave me” (Napoli 18). This becomes an important facet of the theme of longing, when not only does a mother long for a child but a boy longs for a girl. Ultimately, in Zel, the daughter becomes a victim of both of these desires; even her name, taken from the plant which sealed her fate, cements her position as an object of longing: “Everyone wants to possess Rapunzel, a passive flower and a caged bird that longs to be free” (Hendrickson 215).

To Hunter, “Rapunzel” is partly about “the way parents and parentlike figures can change when they’re worried about their daughters’ chastity” (60). Thus, one could argue that Mother herself undergoes an important character journey in Zel, though we might be hard-pressed to call it maturation. While Hunter considers the witch of the Grimms’ tale to represent “the spirit of self-love that the young couple find themselves rebelling against” (62), this is not the case in Zel; Mother’s love for Zel is perhaps irresponsible, but not selfish or narcissistic. The roots of her overprotectiveness of Zel and her disdain for Konrad more likely lie in a profound misunderstanding, possibly a willed ignorance, of the personalities and desires of both those youths. Disturbingly, the years in which Zel had been happiest become the years that Mother most regrets: “Oh, what a terrible twist. I had raised a child in the best way I knew how, and it was that mistake that kept her from me now” (142). Mother regrets raising her child in a way that allowed the child to develop her own natural desires, as though this were an occurrence over which she’d ever had control.
This is why perspective plays such a significant role in Napoli’s tale. On the one hand, reserving one third of the narrative for each character’s separate voice and thoughts allows the reader more understanding of their complexity and, in Mother’s case, allows for “identification with a traditional villain through shifting focalization” (Williams 257). In Crew’s words, “[r]eaders are invited to empathize with the apparently unmediated subjectivity of a character who has not only been objectified and vilified in the traditional tales but whose representation has, more generally, been symbolic of misogynist attitudes toward women” (79). The narrative strategy of having multiple perspectives is democratic in that it allows for equal representation among characters, both heroes and villains, and abandons the connotation that the voice of any one character could be more or less valid than others. On the other hand, while first-person perspective liberates the character in question, it also restricts the overarching narrative. Crew, for instance, has argued that Napoli “foregrounds the limitations of the first-person narrative by drawing attention to her protagonist’s restricted point of view and the limitations of her knowledge” (80).

Multiple perspectives as presented in Zel therefore urge inquiry into the role of villains in fairy tales. In canonical tales, “the witch metaphor is effective, since, from a man’s point of view, ‘liberated’ women are a danger to society” (Donlan 609). To an extent, Mother represents such a liberated woman in that she takes the agency to rebel against her religion, to obtain a daughter against all natural laws, and to keep herself and that daughter isolated against a society that would anticipate their separation: “‘I fear no forces of the Lord,’” Mother says of herself, “‘I take no part in the petty struggles of society’” (Napoli 101). While Mother’s ultimate actions are certainly not laudable, it can easily be seen how they become fodder for destructive myths about wicked women in fairy tales. According to Hunter, “[the witch’s] major role in this tale is to stop
people getting what they desire strongly . . . and she does this for no understandable reason” (62, emphasis mine). When her reason is made understandable, the status of the villain becomes less definite.

Donlan argues that in “Rapunzel,” both the witch’s theft of the baby girl and her later imprisonment of her are acts of mere sadism. (608-609). While the extent to which we are able to sympathize with Mother in Napoli’s version is arguable, it is surely impossible to understand any of her actions as stemming from mere sadism. She experiences no joy in the unhappiness of those around her; her acts are acts of desperation, not of cruelty. Donlan feels that witch characters “seem determined to destroy innocence and beauty” (609), and while this may apply to some other of the tales his article discusses, it does not necessarily apply to the Rapunzel narrative, neither in the Grimms’ interpretation nor in Napoli’s. Crew notes how this shift is foregrounded in Zel where, “[i]n contradistinction to the Brothers Grimms’ versions . . . in which the love and relationship between mothers and daughters are absented and devalued, the relationship between mothers and daughters is made central to Napoli’s stories” (90). Both Mother in Napoli’s novel and perhaps even the Enchantress from the Grimms are more like guardians of innocence and beauty who have taken this guardianship too far: near the beginning of Zel, Mother says, “I am filled with elation at the thought of Zel’s beauty in this dress and dread at the thought that anyone other than me should appreciate that beauty” (18).

The extent to which we forgive Mother may lie in the extent to which we understand Zel’s feelings about her, as well. Donlan has accused the Grimms’ Rapunzel of being a passive character, “[submitting] to being Mother Gothel’s tower prisoner, obediently lowering her braids on command” (607), but, while these factual events remain the same in Zel, the use of perspective once again makes readers forgive a character for the actions that may originally have
placed her, superficially, within the limits of a fairy tale trope. Zel is, at least at the beginning, destructively obedient to Mother, but she is also a thirteen-year-old girl who knows next to nothing of the world outside her relationship to that woman; she cannot be expected to abandon that relationship easily. Napoli illustrates the couple’s relationship not as an impersonal relationship between a captor and a prisoner, but a close union between a girl and the woman who has for years acted as her loving parent. Even this emphasis is not really a grand step away from the Grimms’ narrative, for, though its readers are not given insight into the nature of their affection for one another, one could hypothetically imagine that a relationship wherein the witch regularly climbs the tower to groom her captive is not necessarily an antagonistic relationship.

López remarks that “in many fairy tales, the death of the wicked witch restore[s] the normal order” (788). To some extent, this remains true both in “Rapunzel” and Zel. When Zel is finally able to separate from Mother and move to a new town to raise her children, Mother dies and becomes part of the landscape, “watch[ing] the world” (Napoli 220); this seems like a completion of the cycle of virgin, mother, and crone. Zel, now matured and initiated into parenthood herself, is able to reflect on the impressions Mother left on her life:

She looks into these faces and she believes there isn’t a one of them who wouldn’t sell his soul for the right price. She has to believe this. She loved Mother. When she murmurs tender words in her daughters’ ears, when she caresses them and combs their hair . . . Her heart opens. Even to the woman who traded away her child, the unknown woman . . . [Zel] owes her life to the unknown woman. She owes her soul to the witch woman. (219-220)
She simultaneously acknowledges Mother’s role in her suffering and understands why that suffering had to happen.

Though criticisms such as Donlan’s highlight many of the flaws in these patriarchal narratives, they fail to acknowledge that narrative techniques can be at least as much to blame as the characters themselves. Napoli sees “Rapunzel” as a story rooted in a truth which has been violently misrepresented by popular narratives. Hendrickson calls “Rapunzel” “a story about family, motherhood, love, longing, about holding on and letting go” (212), and these terms can evidently be applied both to the canonical tale and the present rewrite of it. It is a story both of the way longing can itself be destructive, but also of how a relationship can be destroyed by attempts to restrict longing, as in the longing of the two young lovers. Moreover, Zel turns “Rapunzel” into a story about the understanding and empathy essential to these relationships; when Zel is asked by her mother what kind of magical powers she would like to possess, the girl replies, “The gift of understanding and being understood, now that would be a real gift” (Napoli 141). That simple line well summarizes the primary theme of Napoli’s revision. It seeks not to change traditional fairy tale characters and exert control over them, but to understand and respect the actions they originally performed.
Works Cited


