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English 495

14 December 2015

Hair, Voice, and Agency: Transformation, Growing Up, and Love in Fairy Tales

Fairy tales are fraught with magical transformations and shape shifting. Frogs change into royalty, old hags into beautiful women, and dead corpses into living, breathing princesses. Maria Tatar states that “Metamorphosis is central to the fairy tale, which shows us figures endlessly shifting their shapes, crossing borders, and undergoing change” (55). Marina Warner also says that “Shape-shifting is one of fairy tale’s dominant and characteristic wonders . . . metamorphosis defines the fairy tale” (XIX–XX). However, these physical transformations are superficial. These magical shifts only transform the character’s physical appearance, leaving the transformation of deep and lasting personal growth of character up to the character’s actions.

Among all these physical changes, the most important transformation is not a magical one. Characters experience a true transformation of self when they use their agency to make decisions and act, making the shift from childhood to adulthood. The deepest transformations occur when the characters determine their own destiny. Fairy tales captivate their audience. The maturation process that characters undergo is part of what captivates readers, who connect with the process of growing up. The fact that growing up is not a magical transformation helps readers connect with fairy tales in a real world sort of way. Among all the magical and supernatural occurrences in fairy tales, the most important change is a universal one that every being on earth must undergo—the process of growing up and becoming an active participant in one’s own life. Additionally, these actions must include the ability to form and maintain relationships with

others. Growing up requires making decisions, but functional relationships require equality and respect of the other person's agency.

The tales of "Rapunzel" (Grimm's 1812) and "Little Mermaid" (Hans Christian Andersen, 1837) include characters who transform both physically but also emotionally. The emotional transformation occurs in these tales through actions of the characters. They make choices to decide their own destiny, which is a staple of adulthood. Their emotional transformations are ones of empowerment, and they are empowered by their choices.

Though magical and physical transformations are not the ones that permanently change the characters, Christine A. Jones explains that "one of the narrative techniques [of fairy tales] . . . is the emotional life of the character: the phenomenon . . . of the body becoming a canvas for inner emotional and psychological experience" (19). In other words, fairy tales generally do not include monologues full of interiority. The characters' interiority is sometimes expressed by their physical exterior. For Rapunzel and the Little Mermaid, their agency and transformation of character is manifest through their voices and their hair in the tales.

### **Hair and Voice**

Hair is representation of appearance and the physical part of the body. Voice is a representation of the inner, the self. Using the emotional (voice) to take action over the physical (hair) allows the inner transformation to occur. The physical beauty of hair is not as lasting as the emotional beauty of the voice and the inner self. However, both hair and voice (outer and inner) can be used to empower their owners in making choices and transitioning into activity from passivity.

It may seem fairly obvious that the key features of a female protagonist are hair and a beautiful voice. Rapunzel has long, beautiful hair and she often sits by the window, singing with

her beautiful voice. The little mermaid also has long beautiful hair and a lovely voice, which she gives up to be with her prince. Both characters can use their hair to attract others, but their voices—in both spoken words and in songs are what truly attract others. Female fairy-tale characters can use both aspects—hair and voice—to empower themselves and exercise their agency, rather than allowing their femininity (shown in hair and voice) to stereotype or weaken them. Female fairy-tale characters can use their femininity in a positive way. We can see the use of these features in an empowering way in the source texts and even in modern film adaptations of these tales.

Within the realm of voice, there are divisions. There is the sound of the voice and the content of the voice. Generally, female characters in fairy tales tend to have sweet voices. However, with the idea that fairy-tale characters' interiority is expressed by outer, the sweet and lovely voices of fairy-tale heroines are not just representations of their beauty, but also of their goodness. The content of the speech is represented by the sound of the voice—which is lovely, good, and sweet.

However, there is more to the voice than just its beautiful sound and its representation of purity and goodness. At its core, the voice is part of the character's true identity and inner self. In Marina Warner's analysis of Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, she argues that "it is voice, in the last analysis, that is more powerful than beauty—or even goodness. Only when the shell shatters and the Little Mermaid's voice is spirited back into her throat does she prevail and win—in this version—human shape and the love of the prince" (404). More important than the apparent and obvious feminine beauty and goodness of these female protagonists is the ability to be one's self, which is what the voice represents. As Warner states, the mermaid wins when her capability to be her true self has returned. Her sweet voice, while representative of her good character, is more

important than just her goodness and purity. It also represents her self, her soul, and her ability to express that self through their speech (voice).

Singing is a special use of voice that is often present in fairy tales. For fairy-tale characters, singing is just as empowering as speaking. Voice and song have long been associated with mythological sirens, who would sing to catch their prey—human men. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, the men have to deal with these singing sirens. Marina Warner explains that though Odysseus’s wish to listen to the sirens was viewed as sexual by European readers, the sirens’ songs truly portrayed wisdom—“the content of the song is knowledge . . . Cicero stressed this, introducing the sirens into his argument that the human mind naturally thirsts after knowledge” (399). Their songs contained knowledge at the core—Warner also calls the sirens “mouthpieces for others’ stories,” meaning the sirens were also storytellers, which has great power (401). Also, though it may be a negative connotation, the sirens’ singing empowered them to catch their prey. Voices lifted in song have great power, and that power has been showcased in fairy tale and mythology alike. Warner also mentions how the sirens “ceaselessly seek connection, turning their faces and their voices outwards, to bring others to them” (399). The power of the voice, whether singing or speaking, comes in its ability to make connection with others. It is the voice that empowers characters to form relationships, as is revealed in both “Rapunzel” and “Little Mermaid.”

### **“Rapunzel” (1812)**

Rapunzel’s hair and voice empower her to make choices, which leads to her maturation and happily ever after. Jack Zipes has said of Rapunzel tales that in some variants, “the young girl who is given to a fairy, witch, or old woman, is very active and enters into a conflict during puberty with her ‘keeper/guardian’” and that “the prince . . . is a means towards liberation at a time when she has come of age to determine her own destiny” (51).

In the Grimm's 1812 *Rapunzel*, Rapunzel begins as a character who does not have much control over her life, and she is fairly passive. She is locked in a tower where she does not have many opportunities to be active. The fairy comes to visit her and when she hears the fairy call to her, she drops her hair and "the fairy would climb up on it" (52). The initiation of Rapunzel's interior transformation occurs after she encounters the prince. He calls up to her tower, and it is then that she makes her first major choice—she can either ignore him or let him come up. She drops her braids to him, and then he "tied them around him, and she pulled him up" (53). The subtle difference in these two scenarios (the witch vs. the prince) reveals Rapunzel acting and using her agency. When the fairy visits, Rapunzel is passive. The fairy does the active work of climbing up her hair. Rapunzel is forced to see her. However, Rapunzel chooses to see her prince—she takes action to see him by pulling him up. She makes the decision to form a relationship with him.

Rapunzel undergoes two physical transformations: when she becomes pregnant and when her hair is cut off by the fairy. Rapunzel reveals her first physical transformation through her voice—"The fairy didn't become aware of this [her pregnancy] until, one day, Rapunzel began talking . . ." and she accidentally reveals her secret (53). Rapunzel's first physical transformation occurred as a cause of her agency and her choice to pull the prince into her tower. This transformation is revealed by the words she speaks, which also is an aspect of Rapunzel using her agency—she uses her voice to choose to speak.

Rapunzel's second physical transformation accompanies a change in physical identity. Hair is a form of physical identification for all people, including our society now, and fairy tales are reflective of this societal aspect. Marina Warner says that "In the quest for identity, both personal and in relation to society, hair can help. The body reveals to us through hair the passage

of time and the fluctuating claims of gender” (371). The witch cuts off Rapunzel’s hair and then banishes her to a land where “she had to live in great misery” (53). The words “had to” imply a lack of agency and choice. This physical change was not a choice on Rapunzel’s part.

Rapunzel’s change in hairstyle signals a change in identity, however this change is a change in physical identity and not emotional identity.

Even after her physical transformation in identity, Rapunzel’s inner identity remains the same. The prince is still able to recognize her, despite two physical transformations—motherhood and her haircut—because her most important identity—her voice and her inner self are still the same. At the end of the tale, despite Rapunzel’s changes in physical identity and despite the prince’s blindness, he is still able to recognize her voice: “When he heard her voice, it sounded familiar to him and then he immediately recognized it” (54). Through use of her voice, she and the prince are able to be together and be happy again. Despite all the things that physically identified Rapunzel, her voice is the most important identifier of who she really is. The aspect of Rapunzel that allows her to have a deep and lasting relationship with the prince is her voice and her inner self.

Rapunzel’s voice and inner self is what makes the prince fall in love with her originally. Their relationship is built on the prince’s appreciation of Rapunzel’s inner self, rather than lust or appreciation of her outer beauty. Bonnie Porter points out:

The other thing that amazes me is that the prince is *not* attracted to Rapunzel’s hair. . . . It is Rapunzel’s voice that brings him to her. It is the beauty of her soul that makes him want to ascend the tower. The prince is attracted to what he cannot see, what he cannot touch. He is not attracted to the beauty of Rapunzel’s hair. It is not an end; it is merely a means, a way of climbing into her life. (279)

In the tale, it reads “He looked up and saw beautiful Rapunzel at the window. When he heard her singing with such a sweet voice, he fell completely in love with her” (53). Her voice is what the prince falls in love with. This appreciation of the inner is what empowers their relationship.

Rapunzel’s voice empowers her and allows her to make decisions. Her hair serves as a vehicle to aid her in her first important choice, but hair turns out to be less vital than voice—both what she says and how she sings/says it. Both aspects of voice, sound and content, are representative of her inner self. Rapunzel’s hair is cut, but she still has her voice and still wins her happily ever after. This empowering use of inner self over beauty reminds readers of the importance of using voice to express inner self, rather than letting outer beauty express surface-level feelings.

### **Little Mermaid**

The little mermaid begins as a passive, quiet character who doesn’t use her voice (though she has one) or act. The little mermaid is first described as “quiet and thoughtful” (Andersen). Quiet implies that she doesn’t often use her voice. When she heads to the surface on her birthday, her grandmother makes her wear oysters on her tail, though she does not want to. However, the little mermaid finds that “she could not help herself.” She has a lack of agency and she does not use her voice often, though she has the capacity to act and to use her voice at this point. The mermaids have “more beautiful voices than any human being could have.” At this point in the story, the focus is on the musicality of her voice and the beauty of her singing, which is representative of her goodness, but less representative of her inner self and what she has to say. She does not yet have much to say because she is not yet an active character.

The little mermaid learns to use agency in an occasion where her agency is limited—and this theme of making choices despite limitations carries throughout the entire tale for her. Her

first action comes when she saves the prince. She “was obliged to be careful to avoid the beams and planks of the wreck which lay scattered on the water,” but regardless she saves the prince because she knows “he would have died had not the little mermaid come to his assistance.” The word “obliged” implies a lack of agency there—she had to be careful, but despite the dangers lurking, she chooses to save him. In her lack of agency, she still finds a way to make a choice.

The little mermaid gives up her “loveliest voice,” but in doing so, she destroys her ability to create a deep and lasting relationship. After saving the prince, the little mermaid is almost voiceless already. It is as if just by helping him, she has lost her voice. She isn’t able to tell the prince she saved him—“he knew not that she had saved him.” Then when she went home to her sisters, “she would tell them nothing.” However, when she visits the witch, she tells her that “yes, I will,” and “I will do it,” giving her consent by making a choice and using her agency. The situation is slightly ironic, because she uses her voice to give up her voice—in other words, she uses her agency to give up herself. Also, using her voice empowers her because it allows her to make choices, but the choice she makes disempower her from making as many future choices because she gives her voice away.

True love is created by an appreciation of the inner (voice) and not just the outer (hair). This is the case with the little mermaid, just as it was with Rapunzel. The sea witch tells the little mermaid “You believe that you will be able to charm the prince with it [your voice] also, but this voice you must give to me; the best thing that you possess I will have for the price of my draught.” The little mermaid then asks, “what will be left for me?” Without her voice to “charm” or explain and express herself to the prince, lasting love will be impossible to create. The little mermaid only has left her “beautiful form,” her “graceful walk,” and her “expressive eyes.” Expressive eyes are something because they start to allow expression of inner self, but that

expression cannot be complete without a voice. These appearances of physical beauty are not enough to create love. When the prince encounters her, “she had as pretty a pair of white legs and tiny feet as any little maiden could have; but she had no clothes, so she wrapped herself in her long, thick hair. The prince asked her who she was . . . but she could not speak.”

The little mermaid’s beauty is not enough to win the prince’s heart. The little mermaid is described as beautiful in her human form—she has long, thick hair, which is a staple of feminine beauty. She is also dainty and small. However, the prince wishes to be able to speak to her. He wants to come to know her. He asks her questions, but despite her beauty, she cannot speak, and her beauty alone is not enough. The questions he asks are part of forming a relationship (“the prince asked her who she was, and where she came from”) and he wants to form a relationship with the little mermaid, but because she cannot speak, he cannot come to know her and he cannot fall in love with her. She comes to know him and fall in love with him because he is able to speak to her and express himself, but he cannot do the same for her.

The little mermaid is able to express some of her inner self with her eyes, but she isn’t capable of expressing all of herself without her voice. In the tale, the little mermaid’s eyes act as her voice: “‘Do you not love me the best of them all?’ the eyes of the little mermaid seemed to say.” The word “seemed” is vital here. Her eyes “seem” to speak, but the prince cannot know what she really would say if her voice could speak.

The prince does grow fond of the little mermaid, but he is not able to truly come to love her enough to not be swayed by another’s voice. When the prince kisses the little mermaid in the tale, he “kissed her rosy mouth, played with her long waving hair, and laid his head on her heart.” Soon after this, he finds another woman to be his bride. His love for the little mermaid was only surface level, which is represented by him playing with her hair. Hair represents

surface level beauty and physicality, which is always trumped by inner self and voice. He loves the little mermaid, but it is more of a surface level enchantment—“everyone was enchanted by her [the mermaid], especially the prince.” The word “enchantment” itself seems to suggest impermanence—an enchantment is a temporary spell that can be broken. The little mermaid’s enchantment over the prince is broken by his connection with another woman’s inner self and voice.

The little mermaid learns the true value of her voice once she has lost it. The saddest part of the story is that “she had given up her beautiful voice . . . for him . . . while he knew nothing of it.” Without her voice, the little mermaid is less empowered to be herself. She has no way for the prince to get to know her. Rosellen Brown says that:

Worse, she [the little mermaid] must lose her tongue, and having yielded it up, of course, will not be able to present herself to the prince as she really is . . . She is deprived of her voice, of her personality, her *self*, left only with her looks, which are captivating but (to the prince’s eternal credit) insufficient compared to the pleasure of a complete speaking woman. (57)

However, this lack of empowerment of the little mermaid is a consequence of her actions, so she has still transformed into a more active character. She continues to act in a mature way, despite the limitations she has placed upon herself by her actions, rather than taking the easy way out of them. This shows a transformation of inner self. At the beginning of the tale, we find a little mermaid who does not speak or exercise her agency, though she can. At the end, we find a little mermaid who cannot speak, but has learned to be self-determining and she makes choices the best she can, despite limitations. Her decisions reflect maturity, accountability, and love.

The little mermaid undergoes two physical transformations: the transformation from mermaid to human and the transformation from human to a daughter of air. Love is the motivation for the little mermaid's actions. She thinks she is in love, so she makes a somewhat rash decision: she gives up her voice (herself) to get a chance to win love in return. The little mermaid could be judged as foolish for these actions. However, her love continues in the story.

At the end of the tale, love for the little mermaid is shown to her from her sisters. They tell her that they “have given our hair to the witch . . . that you may not die to-night” (Andersen). Their love has overcome physical beauty and their desire for that—they long to have their sister return to them more because of their love for her.

However, the little mermaid has now truly come to love the prince. Where she thought that she loved him before, she now has spent time with him and she has come to know him, which allows for real love. She looks upon the prince, “who whispered the name of his bride in his dreams . . . The knife trembled in the hand of the little mermaid: then she flung it far away from her.” When given the choice to undo her first action (to become a human) and return to living as a mermaid, her love and her respect for the prince's love is too strong for her to make any other decision. This choice to act on selfless love is what transforms the little mermaid from childhood to adulthood, which is shown with the second transformation—to a daughter of air.

The little mermaid tale shows empowerment to make decisions even when a mistake has been made (giving her voice to the sea witch) or when circumstances do not allow much agency. It also shows the importance of voice in empowerment. Without her voice, the little mermaid is less empowered, but she acts the best she can.

**Hair, Voice, and Empowerment: Hollywood Style**

In the last twenty-five years, filmmakers have used the aspects of hair and voice in an empowering way for women in their retellings of these tales. Hair and voice are parts of female identity, and there are certain stereotypes that exist in our culture. “Hair plays such a large part in how we view ourselves and are viewed by others” (Weitz 220). Hair and voice are often part of what is used to discern genders. Women are often identified by their hair, and voice range and pitch helps to discern women from men. The female traits of hair and voice can be used by storytellers to identify characters, but if used correctly, they can also help to empower.

In Disney’s *the Little Mermaid* (1989), the connection with voice is fairly obvious—she is voiceless for a lot of the movie and only when she regains her voice is she able to make connections with others. However, hair is also a feature of this protagonist, though you may not think it at first. When you google “little mermaid hair,” the whole screen pops up with bright red hair because it is a defining trait of Ariel’s. The dinglehopper which Ariel uses to comb her hair several times during the movie also draws attention to her hair. Ariel’s hair is somewhat sexualized in the movie—think of her classic hair flip when she is emerging from the water. However, despite Ariel’s beautiful hair, Prince Eric doesn’t fall in love with her until he hears her voice again at the end of the movie and can make an emotional connection with her. The part of her that is most attractive to Prince Eric is not her hair and her physical beauty, but her voice and her soul. Her sexuality is not what captivates the prince—it’s her voice. When her voice was gone, she tried to express herself to the prince in other ways. In learning to live without her voice, she has grown to appreciate her voice and her inner self, which she is not afraid to be once her voice returns.

More recently, Disney’s *Tangled* also features hair and voice. Rapunzel uses her hair to her advantage—she uses it to tie up an intruder to her castle, and she even uses it to escape her

tower. This escape is her first show of agency. The use of Rapunzel's hair is an empowering use of female identity—it shows a female doing independent and strong things, while still retaining her femininity. In today's world, many women are expected to be like men in order to succeed, so the fact that Rapunzel is shown as both feminine and strong is important.

Rapunzel also has a magical voice that can heal people, when combined with the magic of her hair. However at the end of the movie, Rapunzel's voice and emotional maturity have more power than her hair and her physical appearance. Even after her hair is cut off and she isn't able to use its length or magical powers, she is still able to use her voice—which, combined with a tear—saves Flynn Rider's life.

Both of these films show an empowerment of women. The inner self (voice) remains more important than the outer beauty (hair). Ariel cannot win her prince without her voice, despite her beautiful hair, and Rapunzel's voice still has power after the power of her hair has gone away.

### **Happy Endings vs Not So Happy Endings (“Rapunzel” 1812 and “Little Mermaid” (1837)**

The aspects of hair, voice, agency, transformation, and love all appear in both the tale of “Rapunzel” (1812) and “Little Mermaid” (1837). However, hair and voice are used differently in both the tales and while the ending of “Rapunzel” is happy, the ending of “Little Mermaid” is more bittersweet.

Hair in “Little Mermaid” is used more blatantly as a sexual/physical object. In “Rapunzel,” hair is used more as manifestation of agency. With voice, Rapunzel's voice becomes more prominent throughout the tale as she becomes more and more transformed in an empowered and active way. For the little mermaid, her voice becomes less and less in the tale, and it is more difficult for her to be active and empowered without it.

The use of voice empowers characters to form deep relationships—or likewise, the lack of voice makes it impossible for characters to form deep relationships. As mentioned above, Rapunzel’s voice and empowerment both become more prominent in the tale. She uses her voice and her empowered agency to form a meaningful relationship with her prince. In opposition, as the little mermaid’s voice becomes less in the tale, she is less empowered to speak and act as herself and for herself, thus making it impossible to form a mutually loving relationship with her prince. The little mermaid can come to know and love her prince because he can speak. Because the little mermaid cannot speak, the prince cannot come to know and love her in return.

The different uses of voice and empowerment in these two tales are what makes the endings different. The little mermaid is empowered to make choices, with or without her voice, but without her voice, she cannot foster a deep relationship, which is a vital part of growing up. Without her inner strength of self (her voice), she cannot be empowered to form a relationship. As seen in “Rapunzel,” voice and true expression of inner self is empowering in building relationships. The ability to act and speak as one’s inner self allows love to grow in a relationship. When one party in a relationship cannot speak and express their inner self (like the little mermaid), an equal relationship is impossible.

### **Summit**

Female fairy-tale protagonists use hair and voice to present their agency and showcase their growing up transformation. The proper use of voice shows empowerment and the ability to choose and speak up for oneself. Additionally, it allows the characters to take one step further and to form loving relationships, which is part of growing up. The use of voice to act and make choices empowers characters and helps them transform into adulthood. The transformation from active to passive is what helps a character to grow up.

As backed up by Christine A. Jones, fairy-tale characters display emotions through their bodies. Maria Tartar argues that “fairy tales also have transformative effects on us . . . the transformative magic in fairy tales—their spells, curses, and charms—lead to metamorphoses that enact the consequences of magical thinking” (57) and that “fairy tales help children move from that disempowered state to a condition that may not be emancipation but that marks the beginnings of some form of agency” (63). Fairy-tale genre is something difficult to define, but one important trait of the genre is how these tales display characters growing up—this transformation occurs when the character chooses activity over passivity. This agency is manifest through physical objects and actions.

It’s important for writers and storytellers of today to explore these ideas of creating character growth and transformation. It’s vital to a story arc to have characters that grow and develops into something bigger and more powerful than what they are at the beginning. Characters must learn to interact with the world around them. Part of this maturation process is learning to form relationships, rather than to be on one’s own. After these relationships are formed, the characters must also be able to maintain those relationships—using their voice and inner strengths to build deeper and more powerful relationships. This maturation process of becoming one’s own self enough to come to love another and build a relationship using inner and outer strengths is something that readers need to see in characters. Growing up means empowerment and self-determination, but also connection with others from one inner self to another.

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## Grading--Denya

**You will need to write an introduction that prepares the reader to encounter your literary claim and a thesis area that maps out for the reader the analytical territory that you'll be exploring in the essay;**

This title and lead sentence establish detail and interest in the specific contribution of this analysis. The wording and sentences lead astutely to the thesis area. The distinctions between hair and voice as related to identity are clearly established, as well as the capacity for transformations involving hair and voice to not only affect maturity but to invite forming relationships with others.

**a series of body paragraphs, anchored by strong topic sentences, that logically develop your analysis and that include strong literary analyses (rather than plot summary, description, or speculation);**

The topic sentences do conceptual work, and the body paragraphs include apt textual references as well as your commentary with scholarly sources included fittingly as well. The ideas mostly work from more obvious to more complex ideas, but the section on contemporary versions seems possibly misplaced coming a bit too soon. Some paragraphing could be adjusted to keep ideas together or develop them more fully.

**clean, elegant style and sentence structure (no awkward phrasing, redundancies, or mechanics);**

“However, these physical transformations are superficial. These magical shifts only transform the character’s physical appearance, leaving the transformation of deep and lasting personal growth of character up to the character’s actions.”

Fine example of the stylistic traits of clarity with conceptual development. There are several places where the syntax and diction manifest craft and sound thinking.

There are a few noticeable glitches that suggest one more rereading would have been helpful.

**and a summit (not a summary) that helps the reader fully understand the significance of your literary claim and that invites the reader to continue thinking about the implications of that claim.**

There is a bit of sheer reiteration in the summit section, but also the key point about self-identity through transformation and maturity links with sociality and relationships. Perhaps a tad more about choice and agency in the process would add more coherence and depth. The analysis is persuasive throughout the essay.