

The Rebirth of Rapunzel

A Mythic Biography of the Maiden in the Tower

VOLUME II

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Certificate of Authorship/Originality

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VOLUME TWO: EXEGESIS

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Abstract:

The Rebirth of Rapunzel

'The Rebirth of Rapunzel: A Mythic Biography of the Maiden in the Tower' is a creative and theoretical work that investigates and reimagines the fairy tale of 'Rapunzel'. The thesis contains two sections. The first is a novel entitled *Bitter Greens*, an imaginative retelling of 'Rapunzel' that draws on elements of various historical versions of the tale, interwoven with a fictional memoir of the French author Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de La Force (1650-1724). Her 1697 tale 'Persinette' was the first to contain the complete memeplex that is today widely recognised as 'Rapunzel'. The second section is inspired by Stephen Knight's notion of 'mythic biography' and traces the story's genealogy from its mythological roots to contemporary revisiting. Drawing on scholarly approaches to folk tales, especially the work of Jack Zipes and Alan Dundes, the thesis seeks to explore why this particular fairy tale has endured and continues to remain relevant to a contemporary audience. In doing so, it aims to illuminate my own choices in writing the novel and to achieve a deeper understanding of the centrality of this tale within my own reading and writing life.

Introduction:

In Search of Rapunzel

'Rapunzel' is one of the best known stories in the classic Western canon of fairy tales. It tells the story of a young woman - named Rapunzel – who is locked away in a tower by a witch. The heroine is named for a plant which her father stole from the witch's walled garden. The only access to Rapunzel is via her own impossibly long hair. A prince climbs the ladder of hair and falls in love with her, setting in motion a chain of events which results in the expulsion of the maiden from her tower, the blinding and subsequent healing of the prince, and the coming together of maiden and prince in the essential 'happy-ever-after' ending.

Most readers of the Western canon of fairy tales are familiar with 'Rapunzel' thanks to its inclusion by the Grimm brothers in their famous collection of fairy tales, first published in 1812 and then edited, emended, and embellished in later volumes, culminating in the final 1857 imprint. There have been numerous English translations of the Grimm brothers' 1857 version of 'Rapunzel', including one by the writer and translator Lucy Crane in 1882 which was widely republished. It was her version of the tale that I first read as a seven-year-old child, and which began my own personal fascination with Rapunzel.

As a child I used to wonder about the story and imagine myself as the heroine. I first tried to retell it in

story form when I was twelve. As an adult, I drew upon its symbols and structures in my creative work, along with the motifs of other favourite fairy tales. It was always 'Rapunzel' that had the most potent meaning for me, however, for reasons which I explore in the first chapter of this exegesis.

I had long wanted to retell 'Rapunzel' in novel form, but found myself held in stasis, unable to move forward with my narrative (rather like Rapunzel herself, trapped in her tower). I began to wonder who had first told the tale. I imagined some wizened old woman (perhaps Rapunzel herself) telling her story to one of the Grimm brothers. However, my search to find the first teller of the tale led me to realise that it is a story which has existed, with many different faces and names, for thousands of years. There are, indeed, so many versions of 'The Maiden in the Tower' tale that it has its own classification in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther fairy tale motif index: Tale Type 310 (Getty 1997). In Chapter 2 of this exegesis, I explore many of these tales, from their possible roots in pre-literate matriarchal mythology through Ancient Greek, Jewish and Persian legends, to the French troubadour tradition, and thence to medieval Christian accounts of imprisoned virgins such as St Barbara.

In the early 1600s, a Neapolitan courtier named Giambattista Basile (1566-1632) included a tale named 'Petrosinella' (meaning 'Little Parsley') in a collection of bawdy stories aimed at amusing the highly educated crowd in which he moved (Canepa 1999). He was arguably

familiar with many of earlier 'Maiden in the Tower' tales and drew upon them to create a new tale of a girl who escapes from her tower with the help of her princely lover and three magical acorns (I discuss his retelling in Chapter 3).

Sixty-three years later, in 1697, a French noblewoman called Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de La Force (1650-1724) created a new collection of fairy tales that included the story 'Persinette' (also meaning 'Little Parsley', and examined in Chapter 4). Although she was clearly influenced by Basile, La Force's version is the first to contain the interlocking chain of causes and consequences, motifs and metaphors, which is widely recognised today as the memplex of 'Rapunzel'¹ – the theft of forbidden food; the surrender of the child named for the plant; the woman of mysterious magical powers; the maiden locked in the tower; the ladder of golden hair; the seducing prince; the maiden's impregnation; her exile to the wilderness; the blinding of the prince; Rapunzel's healing tears; and the final redemption of the witch.

La Force's tale was retold, first by the German writer Friedrich Schulz in 1790, who re-named it 'Rapunzel'; and then by the Grimm brothers in the mid-

¹ A meme is a unit of cultural information such as a story, a song, or a superstition, which replicates itself across cultures or over generations in a similar fashion to a gene. The word was coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, and popularised in fairy tales studies by Jack Zipes (2006, 2012). A memplex is, according to psychologist Susan Blackmore, a group of memes that are replicated together (1996, p19). I explore the concept more fully in Chapter 1.

1800s (explored in Chapter 5). It has continued to be retold right through to contemporary times. In Chapter 6, I appraise key revisionings of the tale by writers such as William Morris, Anne Sexton, Nicholas Stuart Gray, and Donna Jo Napoli, culminating in Disney's 2010 musical fantasy *Tangled*. There are many hundreds of other creative reimaginings of 'Rapunzel' that I wish I had room to explore in this exegesis – paintings, poems, operas, short stories, art installations and advertisements. However, central to this exegesis is my own personal journey towards understanding the 'Rapunzel' fairy tale and its hold on my imagination, and so I have chosen to focus on those reimaginings that most influenced my novel *Bitter Greens*.

In each section of this exegesis, I interrogate the many different retellings of 'The Maiden in the Tower' in an attempt to understand why this tale-type has continued to be told and retold over so many centuries. Why has it survived, when so many other stories have been lost and forgotten?

The folklorist Alan Dundes believed that fairy tales, fables and other such narratives spoke in symbolic codes, and that such codes could be deciphered. In order to do so, he recommended the comparison of the motifs of a large number of different versions of a tale type², in order to

² In my study of 'Rapunzel', I have drawn upon the structural theories of folklorist Alan Dundes in which he foregrounds the importance of examining any folk tale through a comparison of motifemes (an abstract unit of action within a tale), motifs (the manifestation of a motifeme in an individual tale) and allomotifs (the manifestation of a motifemes in an array of similar tales) (Hasse (ed.) 2008, p645).

come towards an understanding of their meaning (1980, pp. 187-197).

Guided primarily by Dundes's theories, I have therefore, in this exegesis, brought together for the first time a complete history of the tale, from the mythic fragments that may be proof of its existence in ancient gynocentric oral traditions right through to key contemporary reimaginings. Other scholars have examined these tales in seclusion, or grouped a few of them together, but I believe I am the first to trace the cultural evolution of 'Rapunzel' from ancient tales of three-faced goddesses right through to Disney's *Tangled*.

I was inspired in this task by Stephen Knight's work on Robin Hood and his notion of a 'mythic biography' that 'deals with both the human and the superhuman manifestations and meanings of the figure ... who has over centuries and in many places and many genres had a varying but powerful identity' (2003, p. xiii). I have not only used Stephen Knight's term 'mythic biography' in the title of my exegesis but also borrowed his methodology in evaluating the tale through its chronological development, thus creating, in his words, 'a biography of (the myth)' (p. xiii), which is shaped by the socio-historical forces at work in changing human cultures.

In this task, I am particularly indebted to the work of Terri Windling and Laura J. Getty, both of whom have examined the ancestry of Rapunzel in essay form. Other scholars whose work has been of significant help to me include Cristina Bacchilega, Ruth B. Bottigheimer, Jane

Caputi, Heide Göttner-Abendroth (and her theories of fairy tales as camouflaged matriarchal myths), Donald Haase, Elizabeth Wanning Harries (her work on the 17th century French female fairy tale tellers was invaluable to me), Heide Heiner (with thanks to her work on 'Rapunzel' type tales around the world), James McGlathery, Maria Tatar, Marina Warner and Jack Zipes, whose work in memetic theory was of particular use for me in helping me understand the reason why such tales continue to be retold and retold (2006 pp. 3-16; 2012 pp. 17-20).

I began my search for Rapunzel for deeper insight into the tale, to inform my own understanding of its meaning and purpose, and to inspire my own creative retelling. However, in the process of researching and writing this exegesis my interest was quickened by the question of why it is 'Rapunzel' which has so haunted my imagination and those of so many other creative artists. Why has this tale of a girl locked away in a tower continued to be told and retold over so many hundreds of years?

My exegesis will argue that this story – like most other fairy tales – carries camouflaged within it ancient mythic structures and symbols. These work at an unconscious level to give the tale a deep psychological resonance. It is my contention that it is the symbolic power of these motifs that gave the story its lasting appeal, so that the story continues to be of relevance to each new audience. 'Rapunzel' is a story about escape from imprisonment. It tells the transformative journey from stasis and shadows to liberation and light. This makes it a

story that reverberates very strongly with any individual – male or female, child or adult – who has found themselves trapped by their circumstances, whether this is caused by the will of another, or their own inability to change and grow.

Fairy tales always work on two levels, Maurice Sendak believed: 'First as stories; secondly, as the unravelling of deep psychological dramas' (in Wintle & Fisher, p. 28). On that deeper psychological level, 'Rapunzel' is a story about a young woman who breaks out of her prison; she rescues herself. This is, I believe, a large part of the secret of the fairy tale's enduring fascination, for myself and for others.

Chapter 1

The Golden Braid: Rapunzel and I

I have been haunted by Rapunzel ever since I was a child.

I can remember the very day my obsession began. I was seven years old and my mother gave me a copy of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, beautifully bound in red leather with romantic old-fashioned drawings by Walter Crane. The book was a gift to comfort me, for I was – once again – to be left alone in hospital.

I began to read the book the moment my mother left me with many kisses and promises that she would see me in the morning. I was sick, in pain, and half-blind. Fever dizzied me. I lay there in the darkness, a small light burning on the page. With one eye covered with a patch, I read my way through the tales in that book. The stories were full of wonder and peril and beauty and strangeness. Some made me smile. Others made me yearn to travel far, far away to lands of shadowy forests and towers hidden behind thorns. One or two made me shiver and huddle deeper into my white hospital blanket. All would come to capture my imagination. I read that book so many times the spine eventually broke, pages falling out like white feathers. Yet of all the tales, it was 'Rapunzel' that enthralled me the most.

The story I read that day was written by Lucy Crane in 1886, from her own translation of the Grimm

Brothers' 1857 edition of *Kinder-und-Hausmärchen*. The story began: 'There once lived a man and his wife, who had long wished for a child, but in vain.' Their house overlooked a lush garden overflowing with herbs and flowers and fruit, but no-one dared to venture within its high walls for the garden belonged to a witch of great might. Looking into the garden, the woman was overcome by an insatiable desire to eat some of the rampion she saw growing there: 'it looked so fresh and green that she began to wish for some; and at length she longed for it greatly' (Crane 1973, p. 32).

The woman told her husband that she would die if she did not eat some of the witch's rampion, and so he climbed the wall and stole a handful for her. She ate it greedily, and then asked for more. So her husband climbed the wall again, but this time was caught by the witch. With angry eyes, she threatened him then exacted a promise: he must give up his unborn child to her.

In time, a daughter was born and the witch appeared. 'Giving the child the name of Rapunzel (which is the same as rampion), she took it away with her' (p. 34). At the age of twelve, Rapunzel was locked up in a tower in the midst of a wood, with neither steps nor door but only a small window at the top. When the witch wanted to be let into the tower, she called, 'Rapunzel, Rapunzel! Let down your hair' (p. 34), and the girl lowered her impossibly long hair for the witch to climb. One day the King's son rode through the forest and heard Rapunzel singing. Enchanted by her beautiful voice, he

followed the sound and discovered the hidden tower. He heard the witch call and watched her clamber up the golden ladder of hair. Once the witch had come down again and gone away, he too called out the words.

Rapunzel let down her hair and the King's son climbed up into the tower. At first she was terrified, but he spoke kindly to her and asked her to take him for her husband. Rapunzel agreed, and told him to bring a silken rope with him each time he came so that she could make a ladder and so escape. The King's son then visited her every evening, until Rapunzel betrayed herself to the witch by unwittingly asking: 'Mother Gothel, how is it that you climb up here so slowly, and the King's son is with me in a moment?' (p. 35).

Enraged, the witch cut off Rapunzel's long braid of hair and cast her out into the wilderness. The witch then lowered the braid to the prince who climbed up the tower, only to be confronted by the furious witch. She mocked him and told him Rapunzel was lost to him. In an agony of grief, the King's son sprang from the tower. Although he survived the fall, the thorns on which he fell put out his eyes, and he was blinded. 'He wandered several years in misery until at last he came to the desert place where Rapunzel lived with her two twin-children that she had borne, a boy and a girl.' The King's son recognised Rapunzel's voice, and the two were reunited. Rapunzel wept, and her tears fell upon his eyes and healed his blindness. 'Then he took her to his kingdom ... and there they lived long and happily' (p. 36).

This fairy tale seemed – to me - full of some kind of potent meaning. As a child, I only dimly grasped why it sang to me. I knew I loved the ardent romance, the vivid images of the tower guarded by thorns and the singing girl with the oriflamme of hair, the miraculous healing of the prince's blinded eyes. But I did not truly understand why it shook and excited me so much. I only knew that 'Rapunzel' was stuck in my imagination like a burr. Perhaps it was because I – like Rapunzel – was trapped in a prison. Hers was a tower with neither door nor stair. Mine was a hospital ward, and I was imprisoned by the pain and loneliness of chronic illness.

I was only a child when I faced death for the first time.

Aged just two years and four months old, I was savaged by my father's Doberman Pinscher in the back garden of our home in the Artarmon veterinary hospital. As I was tossed like a rag doll, the dog's fangs penetrated straight through the thin bone of my skull and into the brain. My left eye was missed by a fraction of a millimetre. My ear was torn away.

Somehow my mother managed to wrest me from the dog's jaws. She wrapped me in towels and ran for help, my four year old sister Belinda running sobbing beside her. A young man driving down the Pacific Highway stopped and picked her up. At North Shore Hospital, when the nurses unwound the bloody towels from around my head, he fainted.

My mother was told to prepare herself. I was unlikely to live.

Somehow they patched me together again. My ear was sewn back on, albeit a little crookedly. More than two hundred stitches covered my head and face. I must have looked like a tiny Frankenstein's monster.

I did not wake up. My temperature climbed higher and higher, and still I lay unwaking, like a cursed princess. No amount of kisses could rouse me.

Ten days after the accident, red and floppy as a skinned rabbit, I was gripped by relentless fever. Still no-one could wake me. The doctors told my mother I had bacterial meningitis. I think of it as another savage dog, a crazed wolf, pinning me down with its heavy paw. No drugs could release me from its jaws. Prepare yourself, my mother was told. Few children survive meningitis.

I lay in ice like a glass coffin. I was white and red and black. I had gone away from this world, gone somewhere no-one could reach me. Days passed and still my fever climbed. My small body convulsed.

It's worse than meningitis, the doctors said. It's meningoencephalitis. A wild whirling word, full of holes and spikes. Other words came. Seizures. Toxic. Fatal. I heard none of them. The doctors wanted to drill a hole through my skull to help drain away the infection sinking its claws into my brain. In 1968, this was a procedure that was nearly always fatal. My mother would not let them. Come back, she said to me. Please come back.

The fever broke. Twenty days after the dog attack, I opened one eye (the other was lost inside a bruised mess of swelling and stitches.) I swallowed some milk. I spoke. A week later I was allowed to go home.

It was not the last time that I would outface death.

The doctors would soon discover that the dog's fang had destroyed my tear duct. My eye wept all the time. I was like a miniature painting of the Mater Dolorosa, or Picasso's Weeping Woman, tears constantly trickling down my face. I developed chronic dacryocystitis (a recurring infection of the tear-duct), resulting in dangerously high fevers, severe swelling, and blindness. As we all know, the eye is deeply embedded in the cranium. Abscesses of the tear duct are life-threatening once the infection and inflammation begin to affect the delicate tissues of the brain. From the age of three years to the age of eleven, I was constantly in and out of hospital.

I could hear the fever coming, a rattling roaring locomotion rushing upon me. I could feel it in my skin. Whitecaps of flame and frost. My body undulating, shrinking, stretching. Fingers like tentacles. Whirling embers in my eyes. Demonic faces mocking me.

I lay in the narrow hospital bed with a patch over my bad eye, gazing out the window. All I could see was a green hill crested with an immense tree and what looked like a castle. I used to imagine galloping up that green hill on the back of a white horse that would fling out its great wings, leap into the air, and take me away.

Stories were my only consolation. I would read all day and as late into the night as the nurses would let me. I dreaded the light being turned off, I dreaded the empty hours of the night. Once my book was taken away from me, all I could do was lie there in pain, trying to imagine myself back in its pages.

By the time my mother gave me 'Rapunzel' to read, I had spent the better part of my childhood in hospital. I felt a great affinity with that other young girl, locked away alone in a tower as I was confined alone in my hospital ward. I loved the way her tears had healed the prince's blindness and wished that my own tears, weeping constantly from my damaged tear duct, would heal mine. I told myself: One day I too shall escape. One day I too shall be healed.

In time, of course, I was. At the age of eleven, I became the first Australian to have a successful implantation of an artificial tear duct. A small glass tube, called a Jones tube, was inserted beside my eye, draining fluids down the back of my throat.

So I escaped my tower, my tears healed.

I had already begun to write my own stories. By the age of ten, I had written two novels, longhand in old exercise books. The first was called 'Runaway'. The second was called 'Far, Far Away'. Unsurprisingly, both deal with themes of escape.

When I was twelve, I read *The Stone Cage*, a 1963 retelling of 'Rapunzel' by the British children's author,

Nicholas Stuart Gray, told from the point of the view of the witch's cat. I began to imagine writing my own retelling of Rapunzel before I had even finished reading the book. I loved *The Stone Cage*, yet I felt the story should have been told from Rapunzel's point of view. It should have given some sense of the terrible loneliness, fear and despair she must have endured.

When I was fourteen, I read *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold*, by C.S. Lewis. Dark and strong and full of anger, it showed how well-known tales – in this case, the story of Cupid and Psyche – could be turned utterly inside-out when told from the point of view of the supposed villain of the tale.

As I grew into adulthood, I kept on reading fairy tale retellings and wrote novels in which appear – again and again - themes of imprisonment and escape, blindness and healing, roses and thorns, flight and falling. Towers were a common motif, as was hair as a symbol of life and renewal. Some of my novels were written for adults and some for children, but all of them drew upon fairy tale motifs and themes.

Then, the children's writer Garth Nix gave me an old, hard-back edition of *The Stone Cage* for my fortieth birthday. I read the novel again, and was vividly reminded of my own childhood fascination with 'Rapunzel' and how I had first tried to rewrite the story when I was twelve. I began to wonder about the story again. Why did the witch lock Rapunzel in a tower? Why didn't the prince bring Rapunzel a rope? How did her

hair grow so long? Did she ever find her true parents again? What happened to the witch afterwards? I was troubled by the lacunae in the story, the gaps and holes and tatters. I began to cobble these holes together in my mind, weaving a new cloth of fancy.

At last I knew I had to write my own retelling of 'Rapunzel'. Not as a children's book, I thought. 'Rapunzel' is a story about sexual desire and obsession and cruelty. It had to be a novel for adults. I also did not want to write it as an otherworldly fantasy. I wanted to capture the charge of terror and despair that young girl must have felt. I wanted to remind readers that women have been locked up for centuries against their wills in this world.

Our world.

So I decided to set *Bitter Greens*, my Rapunzel retelling, in a real place at a real time. This decision meant I could not use magic to explain all the mysteries in the story – the tower without a door or a stair, the golden fathoms of her hair, the tears that heal the prince's eyes ... my imagination caught fire.

But where and when would I set my story? I began to look at the historical roots of the tale, to find earlier versions of the story that might help me. I discovered that one of the earliest versions of 'Rapunzel' was written in the early 1600s by Giambattista Basile, a courtier employed as a soldier by the Venetian Republic. I was at once inspired by the possibilities of setting my 'Rapunzel'

retelling in Venice, that city of towers and walled gardens and narrow canals.

Yet Basile's tale had a different ending. His heroine escapes with the prince and throws three magical acorns over her shoulder that transform into savage animals that first impede and then devour the witch. It was the ending with the healing tears that spoke so powerfully to me. I wanted to know who first told that tale. I had to dig deeper.

I kept on reading and researching, and one day stumbled upon an essay by Terri Windling called 'Rapunzel, Rapunzel, Let Down your Hair' (2007). It examined the ancestry of the tale from Basile onwards, and included a brief summary of the life of the next writer to retell the story. She was the 17th century French writer Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de La Force, whose tale 'Persinette' is the first to contain the ending with the motif of the healing tears that was to become crystallised as the tale we know as 'Rapunzel'. La Force's collection of fairy tales *Les Contes des Contes* was published in Paris by Simon Benard on 23 December 1697, six months after Charles Perrault's collection. It included eight other tales including 'L'Enchanteur', 'Tourbillon', and 'La Bonne Femme' (Raynard (ed.) 2012, p. 91).

La Force was an active participant in the Parisian salons where it was the fashion to create a 'fairy tale' to be told to an audience of well-educated and sophisticated noblemen and noblewomen. The term 'conte de fees' was coined by another of these storytellers, Marie-Catherine

Le Jumel de Barneville, the Baroness d'Aulnoy, and such tellers of tales were called *conteuses* if they were women and *conteurs* if they were male. Perrault was one such teller, and so was his niece, Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier de Villandon. Another well-known *conteuse* of the day was La Force's cousin Henriette-Julie de Murat.

In France, in the late 17th century, noblewomen such as La Force had very little control over their lives. They were largely forbidden to own property and marriages were arranged on their behalf to strengthen the financial and political position of their families. 'Sex was a husband's legal right,' Windling wrote (2007, p. 1) 'and there was no possibility of divorce. Young girls could find themselves married off to men many years their senior or of vile temper and habits; disobedient daughters could be shut away in convents or locked up in mad-houses. Little wonder, then, that French fairy tales are filled with girls handed over to various wicked creatures by cruel or feckless parents, or locked up in enchanted towers where only true love can save them.'

La Force was one of those disobedient women shut away in a convent, though it was her second cousin Louis XIV who decreed her banishment. She had outraged the King with a series of flagrant love affairs and by the publication of erotic novels and blasphemous songs. In one scandalous episode, La Force dressed up as a dancing bear to gain access to her younger lover. It was while she was locked away from the world in the

nunnery that La Force wrote her collection of fairy tales, one of the first in the French tradition.

I was at once struck by the symbolic parallels between the fictional story of 'Persinette' and the true life story of its teller: both were imprisoned against their will; both had caused outrage because of a forbidden love affair; and both longed for escape. I at once began to see how I could frame my own reimagining of the 'Rapunzel' fairy tale with a fictionalised account of La Force's life.

I also felt a strong connection to La Force herself. Like me, she was a writer and an oral storyteller with a love of history and fairy tales. She was a proto-feminist who fought against the narrow societal strictures of her time, wanting to live her own life, and write and love as she pleased. Known for her numerous lovers, and her bold wit and wicked charm, she scandalised the royal court with her beliefs and behaviour. That rebellious free spirit is woven through all her remarkable tales. From the moment I first read about La Force, I knew I wanted to write about her.

Yet she turned out to be little more than a footnote in fairy tale studies. It took me a long time to find out more than the few paragraphs that were included in Windling's essay. Eventually, I managed to track down a biography of her life, *Mademoiselle de La Force : un auteur méconnu du XVII^e siècle*, by the French academic Michel Souloumiac. I enlisted the help of a French translator, Sylvie Poupard-Gould, who not only rendered into English the whole of Souloumiac's work but also

translated an autobiographical sketch written by La Force, plus a number of her fairy tales which had never before been adapted into English³. I also scoured the letters and diaries of courtiers of the time⁴, and searched for her between the lines of non-fiction books written about the court of the Sun King⁵. The more I found about her, the more interesting her story became. La Force was, I thought, one of the most fascinating women ever forgotten by history.

I began to envision a novel in which she was one of my three primary narrative threads, along with the maiden-in-the-tower and the witch. I saw the three narrative strands being woven together like a braid, symbolically representing the impossibly long plait of golden hair, which is the most visually arresting image in the tale.

My novel *Bitter Greens* begins with Charlotte-Rose's story. (To differentiate between the real and the imagined woman, I shall call my fictional character by her first name, Charlotte-Rose, as I do in the novel, and the real woman by her last name, La Force). It is January 1697,

³ My translator Sylvie Poupard-Gould worked from the original 17th century text *Les Fées Contes des Contes, par Mademoiselle de X*, published in 1967 and printed as a photocopy by Lightning Source UK Ltd, on my request, in 2010.

⁴ The letters of Elisabeth Charlotte, the Duchesse d'Orléans (trans. Forster, 1984) were most useful to me, though I also read the letters of Madame de Sevigné (edited by Mrs Hale in 1869) and the memoir and letters of Ninon de Lenclos (collected & translated by A Lady in 1761).

⁵ My primary sources were biographies and non-fiction books about the reign of Louis XIV by Antonia Fraser, Lisa Hilton, W.H. Lewis, and Anne Somerset. Please see bibliography for more details.

and the King has ordered Charlotte-Rose to a nunnery. The poverty-stricken convent of Gercy-en-Brie is far away from Paris and all that she holds dear. Charlotte-Rose is stripped of her luxurious court dress of golden silk, and made to give up all of her material possessions, which include her precious writing tools. Her quills are broken, her ink emptied out, her parchment torn to pieces. Charlotte-Rose's hair is also shorn, which was normal practise for novitiates in French convents during the Counter-Reformation. She finds it most difficult to submit her bold and independent spirit to the strict laws of *clausura*, just as I imagine the historical figure of La Force would. One of the nuns, Sœur Seraphina, is the convent apothecary and looks after the nunnery's garden. She takes Charlotte-Rose into the garden and there tells her the story of a girl whose parents had sold her to a sorceress for a handful of bitter greens.

The narrative then moves to the point of view of Margherita, my maiden-figure, who is the daughter of a mask-maker in Venice in the 1590s. Her mother had asked the help of the sorceress to cast a love spell on her father, and later was smitten by the lush greenness of the plants in the sorceress's garden. The sorceress takes the child at the age of seven to the Ospedale della Pietà, a hospital for abandoned children, where she is taught to sing. At the age of twelve, Margherita is taken by the sorceress and locked in a tower on Lake Garda. Long hanks of red-gold hair are sewn into her own, creating tresses so long they can be used as a rope ladder for the

sorceress to climb in and out of the tower. Once she is left alone, Margherita tries to escape and finds entombed in the cellar of the tower the skeletons of eight other girls. She realises that the sorceress has sewn the dead girls' hair into her own.

The narrative then returns briefly to Charlotte-Rose's point of view as she wonders what could possibly drive a woman to lock away a little girl in a tower. Sœur Seraphina tells her the sorceress was afraid of time.

The next section is told from the point of view of the sorceress, who calls herself Selena Leonelli. She is the illegitimate daughter of a Venetian courtesan in the early 1500s. When her mother drinks poison and dies, after being cruelly gang-raped, Selena is left alone. She seeks out a well-known local witch named Sibillia to help her cast a curse on the man who ordered her mother's rape. The witch takes her on as an apprentice, and Selena learns her dark arts and exacts her revenge.

One night, during Carnevale, she meets a young painter named Tiziano who admires her vivid red-gold hair and wishes to paint her (Tiziano is better known by the English rendering of his name, Titian). Then the witch Sibillia dies of the plague and Selena determines that she shall never grow old and die. She becomes a courtesan and Tiziano's mistress and muse, and begins to bathe in the blood of young virgins in order to stay young and beautiful. With the Grand Inquisitor of Venice suspicious of her, Selena finds an old tower on the shores of Lake Garda to keep her red-haired virgins, who – one by one –

die, leaving her bereft. In time, her lover Tiziano also dies – at the remarkable age of eighty-eight, unusually old for the times. Selena, however, still looks like she did when he first met her so many years earlier. It is then that Selena meets Margherita’s red-haired mother and begins to plot how to trap her into giving up her as-yet-unborn daughter.

The narrative then returns to Charlotte-Rose’s point of view. She remembers her own first love affairs at the royal courts of Paris and Versailles and her longing to write. Without money of her own, she must work as a maid-of-honour and cannot afford the time nor the cost of writing. So – in order to try and convince a man to marry her – Charlotte-Rose purchases a love spell from a witch in Paris. This action results in a humiliating scandal that she finds hard to bear. To distract herself from the memory, she asks Sœur Seraphina to continue with her tale of the girl locked in the tower.

Margherita is a child no longer, but a young woman who has adapted to her life in the tower as best she can. One day a young man named Lucio climbs up the ladder of her hair into the tower. They fall in love and into bed. Lucio begs Margherita to run away with him, but she finds that she cannot leave. The sorceress has bound her to the tower. Eventually she finds a way to break the spell, but as she prepares to escape the sorceress returns. Margherita unwittingly betrays herself and Lucio, revealing that she is with child. The sorceress cuts off

Margherita's great length of golden-red hair and raises her knife to strike her.

At that point, the narrative returns to Charlotte-Rose and Sœur Seraphina in the nunnery. The smell of rue on her hands jolts a vivid memory for Charlotte-Rose of the time when she was arrested for her involvement in the bloody Affair of the Poisons, a scandal which rocked Paris in the late 1670s and early 1680s. The Parisian witch La Voisin who had sold Charlotte-Rose the love spell proves to have also been selling poisons and arranging abortions, and anyone who is connected to her – including Charlotte-Rose – ends up in prison. Although La Voisin and many others are burnt to death, Charlotte-Rose is freed. She then falls in love with a much younger man and, when his family locks him away in a castle, dresses up a dancing bear to rescue him. They marry, but his father has the marriage annulled and Charlotte-Rose is charged with interfering with a minor (her husband Charles was twenty-four). He is sent away to fight in the king's wars and she never sees him again.

It may be worth noting here that each of these dramatic events in Charlotte-Rose's life was inspired by true events in La Force's. She was implicated in the Affair of the Poisons, she did disguise herself in a bearskin to see her young lover, and she was put on trial and found guilty of seducing a minor.

In the final section of Margherita's narrative, she outwits the sorceress Selena and traps her in the tower. Margherita then escapes into the wild, desolate

mountains where, all alone, she gives birth to twin children. Meanwhile, Lucio has climbed the tower but finds the sorceress there instead of his lover. He falls from the tower height and is blinded. Margherita searches for him and, when she has found him, weeps. Her tears fall on his eyes and wash away the crusted blood so that he can see again. Margherita then forgives the witch and frees her from the tower, and then returns to Venice to find her lost parents. Finally, Margherita and Lucio go to Florence where she sings the role of Proserpina in Jacopo Peri's *Euridice*, the first opera ever staged.

In the final section of the novel, Charlotte-Rose discovers the secret identity of Sœur Seraphina and begins to write 'Persinette', the story which will make her name and enable her to buy her way free from the convent. The final line is: 'It was by telling stories that I would save myself.'

By the time I had finished writing *Bitter Greens*, my fascination with the 'Rapunzel' fairy tale had developed into a full-blown obsession. I had read everything I could find on the subject⁶. I discovered that - although the story as it is best known was written with quill and ink by a 17th century noblewoman - the taproot of the tale ran far back into the mythic past, into primeval stories of death

⁶ Please refer to Appendix I on p. 137 & Bibliography on p. 144)

and rebirth, sacrifice and redemption, of which only fragments remain in Neolithic art and sculpture.

I found that taproot had sprouted many other story saplings, found in ancient Western myths and legends, and in Christian, Jewish and Islamic narrative traditions. I collected and read these tales, and compared their motifs and thematic structures, and wondered about their evolution through oral storytelling traditions to the recorded literary tales of Basile, La Force, and the Grimms. I also hunted down and read many hundreds of 'Rapunzel' retellings.

I became particularly interested in the possible meaning of the tale's motifs, those images and incidents which make the story so memorable and yet so mysterious. Like all retellers of a tale, I had to decide how to interpret and employ these motifs. I also began to wonder why it was that the 'Rapunzel' fairy tale held such power for me, and for the other many retellers of the tale. In thinking about these questions, I grew interested in mimetic theory as a way of recognising and understanding the cultural transmission of fairy tales, thanks to my reading of fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes's work on this matter.

To explain 'Why Fairy Tales Stick' (2006), Zipes drew upon the work of evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*, which compares a 'meme' (an infectious unit of cultural information such as a nursery rhyme, a recipe, or a way of building an arch which is transmitted by repetition

and replication) to the biological transmission of genes. According to Zipes, a fairy tale can be described as a 'memeplex' - an interconnected string of scenes and symbols that together assist in the survival of the story. It is passed from mind to mind, over generations and/or over geographies, as infectiously as any virus. Along the way, the story helps to shape sociogenic mindsets and attitudes, and allows the memorisation of culturally engraved lessons (Zipes, 2006, pp. 2-13).

It is widely accepted that stories have been told as long as humans have had spoken language, and that such tales performed an important pedagogical function in the culture in which they were told. Marina Warner has written: 'fairy tales exchange knowledge between an older voice of experience and a younger audience, they present pictures of perils and possibilities that lie ahead, they use terror to set limits on choice and offer consolation to the wronged, they draw social outlines around boys and girls, fathers and mothers, the rich and the poor, the rulers and the ruled ... they stand up to adversity with dreams of vengeance, power and vindication' (1994, p. 21).

As the influential folklorist Alan Dundes has written: 'Folklore *means* something – to the tale teller, to the song singer, to the riddler, and to the audience ... Folktales ... have passed the test of time, and are transmitted again and again. Unlike individual dreams, folktales must appeal to the psyches of many, many individuals if they are to survive' (1980, pp. 33-34).

Zipes believes a meme must be relevant if it is to be passed on (2012, p. 19), while the English psychologist Susan Blackmore has said that memes are only successful if they are emotionally charged and easily memorable (1999, pp. 55-57). Similarly, Walter Burkert, a German professor of mythology and religious cults, has written: 'a tale becomes traditional not by virtue of being created, but by being retold and accepted ...' (quoted in Zipes 2012, p. 7). Burkert then elaborates: 'A tale "created" – that is, invented by an individual author – may somehow become "myth" if it becomes traditional ... (but only if the tale) has the pragmatic function of solving a problem' (quoted in Zipes 2012, p. 38).

In other words, a story such as 'Rapunzel' only survives if it is retold, and it is only retold if it is both memorable and relevant, articulating some desire or dilemma in both the teller and the audience.

The tale's motifs – the walled garden with its tempting green vegetation, the dark sorceress who traps a yearning mother into unnatural longings, the girl with the impossibly long golden hair, the soaring tower guarded by thorns, the blinded prince groping his way through the wilderness – these are all most memorable. Yet what desire do these scenes and characters articulate? What dilemmas do they illuminate?

In order to explore these questions, I have drawn upon Dundes's structural approach to analysing folktales which calls for the comparison of tale variants and the analysis of individual motifemes for their mythical

foundations. In his theory, a motifeme is a unit of a narrative plot which manifests itself as a motif. For example, a common motifeme would be Interdiction + Violation + Consequence (Green 1997, p. 565). In 'Rapunzel', this manifests itself as Walled Garden + Theft of Plant + Surrendering of Child. I have therefore looked closely at the key motifs in the tale in order to understand why they continue to be relevant in contemporary Western society.

To compare the many tale variants, I have, in the following chapters, constructed a 'mythic biography', to use Robin Hood scholar Stephen Knight's term: 'a profile of both the mythological figure and the myth itself' (2003, p. xiii) which aims to not only 'chart the topography of the (tale) but also tried to plumb its meaningful depths, to explore the myth itself' (p. xvi). Knight set out to examine not only the history of Robin Hood, and its chronological evolution through a multiplicity of variants, but also to interrogate the vitality and endurance of the legend to the various cultures in which it was told and re-told, and the figure's mythic resonance within those cultures.

Rapunzel similarly continues to live in contemporary popular culture, as vital as she ever was. And so, in constructing this 'mythic biography' of the maiden in the tower and the many ways she has continued to be retold and reborn, I aim to illuminate – for the first time - the chronology of the tale, its relevance to each new reteller, and the metaphorical and numinous meanings of the tale's motifs which ensure the tale's survival.

As one of those retellers, the act of creating this mythic biography has also allowed me to understand more clearly my own many intuitive and unconscious choices in writing *Bitter Greens*. I wrote my Rapunzel retelling not fully aware of what I was trying to do, yet constantly aware of what I saw as the inner truth of the tale, heard only with the inner ear. Jane Yolen has written: 'Without meaning, without metaphor, without reaching out to touch human emotion, a story is a poor thing: a few rags upon a stick masquerading as a living creature' (2000, p. 24). My aim in writing *Bitter Greens* was to make Rapunzel a living thing, and that is now also my purpose in writing this exegesis.

As Knight wrote: 'the hero of a mythic biography is not dead' (p. xv).

Chapter 2

Maidens in Towers: The Ancestors of Rapunzel

Trying to discover the origin of any fairy tale is a little like trying to find out who invented meatballs, as Angela Carter once famously wrote (1990, pp. ix-x). Like myths, fairy tales are shape-shifters.

Many scholars of fairy tales – from Aarne to Zipes – agree that they have their roots deeply buried in oral and mythic traditions, quite possibly reaching back to the very formation of human speech (Jones 2002, p. xii). These stories were told and retold by parents to their children, who then told them to their own children in turn. They were told by older men and women to the younger generation as they worked at the spinning wheel and the loom, or in the fields and forge, to help hasten the long hours of labour. They were told by travelling storytellers to crowds gathered around a fire in a lord's great hall, or in the village square on market day. They were told by nurses and nannies to their aristocratic charges at bedtime, and acted out on stage by actors in garish costumes and masks (Darnton, pp. 16-17; Jones, pp. 1-6; Warner 1994, pp. xxi-xxiv; Zipes 2006, pp. 52-57). Each time a story was told, it would change just a little. Details would be added for humorous or dramatic effect, or forgotten and lost. Sometimes two or more stories

would be woven together, the most vivid images and motifs the ones that would be remembered. As J.R.R. Tolkien has said, 'The Cauldron of Story has always been boiling, and to it have continually been added new bits, dainty and undainty'" (1997, p. 125).

It is therefore difficult to know what form the earliest 'Maiden in the Tower' tales may have taken. Mircea Eliade, an authority on the symbolic language of the world's religions, has written that folk and fairy tales, though long a literature of diversion and escape, still contain within them mythological structures and symbols. Examples include initiatory ordeals such as battles with monsters, impossible tasks, riddles to be solved, descent into underworld-like landscapes, and, finally, marriage with the princess. Mythic characters and motifs therefore remain within folk and fairy tales, camouflaged but enduringly powerful. He uses a striking metaphor to express this idea. Fairy tales, he wrote, are 'an easy doublet' for myths (quoted in Zipes 1994, p. 2), meaning that they are a brightly coloured garment that slips easily over the older garment.

Zipes has interpreted his comments to mean that individual imaginations may have deliberately camouflaged the structures and symbols of myth into secular folk tales for their own purposes, transforming 'the supernatural into magical and mysterious forces that could change their lives' (p. 3). One purpose may have been to preserve old beliefs and wisdoms as new

religions imposed their own thought systems upon a conquered society.

The German feminist scholar Heide Göttner-Abendroth also believes that fairy tales are 'veiled myth' (1995, p. 136). She sees the remnants of a lost matriarchal mythology hidden within many Western narrative traditions. In Göttner-Abendroth's book *The Goddess and her Heros* (1995), she puts forward the theory that there were once matriarchal societies in the Indo-European region that believed in a Great Goddess who manifested herself in three faces. The first was the Maiden, the goddess of spring and new growth. Her realm was the heavens, the high places. The second was the Woman, the goddess of summer and fertility. Her realm was the earth and all living things upon it. The third was the Crone, a wintry goddess of death. Her realm is the Underworld, where all living things must travel and be transformed before they can return once more to the light (p. xxi-xxii).

Another key figure in these ancient, lost, matriarchal myths, according to Göttner-Abendroth, is the *heros*, the mortal consort of the Goddess. The hero must suffer through some kind of initiation rite to be worthy of becoming the Sacred King and the lover of the Maiden Goddess. As spring turns into summer and the Maiden becomes Woman, the Sacred King is her consort and the land becomes fertile. At the onset of winter, however, he is sacrificed, sometimes literally and sometimes symbolically, by the Crone Goddess and must journey to the underworld. The following spring, he is

reborn or reawakened, usually with the help of the Maiden. In these ancient belief systems, time was therefore seen as circular, rather than linear: the seasonal cycle of growth, death and rebirth repeating itself endlessly (p. xxii). Göttner-Abendroth believes this narrative sequence of initiation, marriage, death and rebirth was first told in pre-literate Indo-European Palaeolithic and Neolithic cultures – around 7,000 years ago - the evidence captured only in a language of ritual stone carvings and paintings (p. xvi).

The ancient sacred narratives were transformed and camouflaged, Göttner-Abendroth believes, under the patriarchal forces of Christianity. 'Eroticism ... was condemned in favour of the principle of universal chastity, and the female figures were accordingly reinterpreted: sin and seduction emanate from every woman who refuses to relinquish her eroticism' (p. 237).

Consequently, the Mother Goddess became simply the mother, then a step-mother or a witch. Her Maiden aspect became a princess, or a much-hated step-daughter. The Sacred King became a prince, or even a tinker or a tailor. The epic cycle of initiation, sacred marriage, descent into the Underworld, and return became simplified and de-mythologised.

Göttner-Abendroth is not the first to postulate such theories, with the poet and scholar Robert Graves famously speculating on the possibility of such ancient matriarchal myths in his much celebrated and much criticised work, *The White Goddess*, first published in 1948.

He in turn was drawing upon the work of Jane Harrison, James Frazer and Margaret Murray. More recently, the archaeologist Marija Gimbutas has written extensively in *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1993) on the many images of goddess-like figures found in Palaeolithic and Neolithic burial sites which, she argues, depicted a single universal Great Goddess. It must be noted, however, that her work has been widely criticized, though none of it has been disproved (Talalay 1999).

Göttner-Abendroth examined a number of well-known fairy tales such as 'Mother Holle', 'Hansel and Gretel', 'Cinderella', 'Sleeping Beauty', and 'Snow White' and concluded 'the unwavering precision of the fairy tale sequences demonstrates nothing more than our matriarchal goddess-*heros*-structure' (1995, p. 136). In her examination of 'Cinderella', for example, Göttner-Abendroth wrote: 'The episodes that reflect Cinderella's relationship to her (dead) mother ... are filled with beauty and magic and make the whole story possible' (p. 142). Cinderella has planted a hazel twig on her mother's grave which grows into a magical tree filled with talking doves – 'Aphrodite's birds' - which assist her in the impossible tasks imposed on her by her dark and terrifying step-mother (a crone-like figure). 'Planting the magic sapling ... is a relic of matriarchal arts which (Cinderella) must learn because ... (her) real task is not to clean house.' Gifts of a golden dress and golden slippers (the colour of the sun) fall from the hazel tree which grows from the grave, realm of the Underworld. 'In the

end, Cinderella is the triumphant, rejuvenated image of the Goddess herself' (p. 143).

Göttner-Abendroth's theories of suppressed matriarchal myths concealed within the structure of fairy tales have had a wide impact on contemporary feminist re-readings of many tales (Haase 2004, p. 15). Zipes wrote in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: 'Heide Göttner-Abendroth has demonstrated convincingly ... that the matriarchal worldview and motifs of ... original folktales underwent successive stages of "patriarchlization"'* (2012, p. 7).

In the instance of the 'Cinderella' story, for example, Zipes has argued that residues of the matriarchal tradition are found in each of the first three major incarnations of the tale by Giambattista Basile, Charles Perrault and the Grimm brothers (quoted in Haase 2004, p. 15-16). Similarly, Louise Bernikow has argued that 'Cinderella' celebrates 'the powerful connection between mother and daughter, who are pitted against a woman compromised by patriarchy' (quoted in Haase 2004, p. 16), while Huang Mei asserts that Cinderella 'does express her will and take the initiative at the crucial events of her life' (quoted in Haase 2004, p. 34). These views are in stark contrast to earlier feminist readings of the tale which saw Cinderella as a 'victim-soul ... passive, waiting patiently to be rescued' (Kolbenschlag 1979, p. 75).

Intrigued by Göttner-Abendroth's writings, I came to wonder if 'Rapunzel' could also be analysed to

show evidence of such suppressed or camouflaged matriarchal myths. I chose to examine La Force's 1697 tale 'Persinette', which – as discussed earlier – is the first to link together the complete chain of scenes and symbols which is today widely recognised as the memplex of 'Rapunzel'.

The heroine of the tale begins as a maiden, kept virginal in a high place. Symbolically, she is closely linked to ideas of gardens and new growth and plants, having been exchanged for a handful of green leaves, and having been named for those green leaves. Even her golden hair, growing with such fecundity, can be seen as a symbol of life and strength and regeneration. The maiden is kept in stasis by the crone, the chthonic goddess of death and darkness. She cannot yet move forward in the cycle of life and seasons. She needs the coming of the hero to begin the ritual of love, death, and renewal.

The hero undergoes an initiatory rite in his quest to woo her, forcing his way through the tangled forest and then climbing the rope of impossibly long golden hair up the tower's height. The two consummate their Sacred Marriage and the maiden becomes a woman, impregnated with twins. The heroine is symbolically wounded by the crone, her hair (a symbol of life and the thread of fate) being cut by shears. The hero is literally wounded by the crone, falling from the tower and having his eyes put out by thorns. Blindly he wanders in the wilderness, in eternal darkness, a symbolic death and

journey to the Underworld. The heroine undertakes her own similar journey, having been exiled to the wilderness where she gives birth to her children, a son and a daughter. It is only after a period of suffering and despair that the hero and heroine find each other. The hero's reawakening to life and light occurs because of the healing tears of maiden-become-mother, and the two become consorts, ruling together. The crone, meanwhile, is herself redeemed by the story's end, having undergone her own journey through darkness to light.

Laid out in this sequential order, it is indeed possible to see, in 'Persinette', the crucial personages and narrative patterns of Great Goddess myths as conjectured by Göttner-Abendroth. It is fascinating to wonder if the well-known story of 'Rapunzel' is indeed 'veiled myth', and so many thousands of years old.

When I began work on my novel *Bitter Greens*, I had never heard of Göttner-Abendroth though I was very familiar with the concept of the Triple-Faced Goddess, and had read James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, and many other books that deal with the idea of threefold goddesses and muses.

The early drafts of *Bitter Greens* featured an old woman telling her story to the Grimm Brothers. I thought she might be Rapunzel herself. I knew that the 'Rapunzel' sections of the book would be set in and around Venice in the 1600s. At that point, I knew of Basile's story 'Petrosinella', but had not yet discovered La Force and

her tale 'Persinette'. I was still fumbling my way forward in darkness, unsure of how to build my narrative.

It is difficult to write a novel full of action, drama, spectacle and suspense when one's heroine is a prisoner. As a result, I began to write *Bitter Greens* from the point of view of the witch, with the following chapters from the point of view of the prince. I wrote more than 30,000 words but became increasingly dissatisfied with the direction my story was taking. Eventually I stopped. For quite some length of time, I was unable to move forward. I was, like Rapunzel herself, held in stasis.

After a series of sleepless nights and troubled days, I realised what was holding me back. 'Rapunzel' is largely a story about feminine power. The key narrative arc is about a girl-child being dominated by her mother-figure, growing up and breaking free, but then finding herself a mother too, in time. It's the women who count in 'Rapunzel': the mother who gives up her daughter for a handful of bitter greens, the witch who locks her in the tower, the girl who gives birth to her twins in the wilderness by herself. Three women, three stories.

I threw out every word I had written and began again. I realised that I needed three narrative strands, and that only the women of the tale would be given a voice. I decided that I would give two of those voices to the maiden and the witch. It would have been a simple and rather obvious choice to give the third voice to Rapunzel's mother. She too had a key role to play in the psychological drama of the tale. However, I chose instead

to give that voice to the teller of the tale, even though I did not yet know who this was. This last narrative position was important to me, I think, because I too am a storyteller. I was trying, intuitively, to express something about my passionately held beliefs about the importance of story. I, like the Shakespearean scholar Harold Goddard, believe that the destiny of the world is determined less by the battles that are lost and won than by the stories it loves and believes in (2009, p. 208).

At this point in my creative journey, I had begun to see in my mind's eye the stories of my witch (a Venetian courtesan) and my maiden (the poor daughter of a Venetian mask-maker and his foundling wife). However, the third narrative point of view in my story was still murky to me. I felt I had to know more about the sources of the story. During the day, I worked on writing the scenes I knew, and at night I began to investigate Rapunzel's ancestry. My research sparked many ideas which worked its way into my writing, both thematically and symbolically, giving me a fresh insight into the importance of the story's key motifs. It also helped confirm for me the importance of choosing a structure for my novel which would resist the patriarchal weakening of the tale and reconnect it to its mythological sources.

It took me a long time to discover the many variants of the Maiden in the Tower tale, and to ascertain the tale's slow evolution. In the following pages, I have laid out the most important versions of the tale in chronological order, with a brief analysis of its place in

the socio-cultural milieu of the time and an examination of any motifs or elements which link it to the story we now know of as 'Rapunzel'. I will then endeavour to show how my new understanding of the tale's origins enriched my own creative responses to the tale.

I began by consulting the Aarne-Thompson-Uther 'Tale Type Motif Index', which is a bibliographic tool designed to help in cases just like mine (Jones pp. 6-7). The ATU index distils world folk tales and fables down to their simplest narrative units, making it easier for scholars to examine their key motifs, themes, and incidents. The most striking and memorable symbolic image in 'Rapunzel' is that of the maiden locked in the tower, and so that is how she is classified, in 'Tale Type 310: The Maiden in the Tower'.

The folklorist Alan Dundes has identified a number of limitations with the ATU Tale Type Index, in particular its Euro-centrism, its over-simplification of story structures, and the 'overlapping' of meaning between motif and tale type (1997, pp. 195-202). Similarly, the feminist scholar Torbeg Lundell has pointed out the male bias of the ATU, with women being presented as little more than passive beauties (Haase 2007, p. 618). Nonetheless, its very simplicity was of use to me in locating and analysing variants of the 'Maiden in the Tower' tales and assisting me in building a timeline of the evolution of the story.

It seems the first recorded 'Maiden in the Tower' tale appeared in ancient Greek mythology, in the story of 'Danaë and the Golden Shower'. As recounted in the 5th century BC by numerous Greek dramatists including Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, Danaë is locked in a brazen tower by her father, King Acrisius of Argos, following a Delphic prophecy that he would be killed by his daughter's son. However, Zeus visits her in a golden shower of rain and she falls pregnant. Her son, Perseus, grows up to accidentally kill his grandfather (Roman, L & R 2010, pp. 128-130). 'Danaë and the Golden Shower' contains only two of the key motifs I have identified in the memeplex of 'Rapunzel' – the maiden and the tower. The most striking difference is that the father locks the maiden away from the world, thus upholding models of patriarchal control and domination. Danaë is often depicted in art with long golden-red hair, however, and the narrative arc follows her transformation from imprisoned virgin to a free and active mother. I am also tempted to see a tenuous symbolic link between 'the golden rain' of Zeus's sperm and Rapunzel's healing tears.

Many centuries later, a similar story appears in Jewish narrative traditions. In 'The Princess in the Tower', first recorded in the 8th century, King Solomon locks his daughter in a tower to thwart a prophecy that says she would marry a poor man within the year. 'He ordered the tower to be built without entrances or doors of any kind ... with only a single window in his

daughter's chamber, from which she could look out on the sea' (Schwartz 1985, p. 49). A giant eagle brings a poor young poet to the tower, and the princess and the poet fall in love. In time, the princess gives birth to a baby boy. King Solomon 'understood for the first time how vain it was to try to prevent the decrees of Providence from taking place' (p. 51). Again this story involves a daughter's power struggle with her father, and again the girl is locked away in a tower to keep her from giving birth to a child that might challenge her father's patriarchal dominance. The most striking image is that of the tower without 'entrances or doors of any kind,' which seems to prefigure the tower in 'Rapunzel'.

The Islamic story tradition is rich in tales of women confined within the high walls of a harem, due to the cultural practice of providing an enclosed space reserved principally for the women and children of the household. The story of the lovers Rudâbeh and Zal is of particular interest in a study of old tales which critics believe may have influenced the formation of 'Rapunzel' (Daniel & Mahdi 2006, p. 14; Noy, Ben-Amos & Rankel 2006, p. 376; Getty 1997, p. 37, and others). The romance of Rudâbeh and Zal was recounted by the celebrated Persian poet Ferdowsi in his epic poem 'Shâhnâma', written at the end of the 10th century. Also known as 'The Book of Kings', 'Shâhnâma' was composed in order to be performed by professional storytellers in coffee houses and market-places all over the Middle East (Foley 2005, p. 267). The princess Rudâbeh was described by Ferdowsi

in the following terms: 'About her silvern shoulders two musky black tresses curl, encircling them with their ends as though they were links in a chain' (Ferdowsi 2012, p. iii). The young hero Zal – an albino who had been abandoned on a mountain as a baby - hears of the princess's beauty and travels to her palace, where she is kept closely guarded within her father's harem. While her guards are sleeping, Rudâbeh lets down her tresses to Zal like a long rope. He climbs up her hair and so, scandalously, gains ingress to the forbidden harem⁷. Despite his flouting of the rules of the harem, Zal is permitted to marry Rudâbeh and their son Rostam grows up to become a great Persian hero.

The story of Rudâbeh and Zal seems to be the first time in recorded narrative history that a woman's hair was used – or offered – as a means of gaining access to her. As we all know, the hair ladder is a key motif in 'Rapunzel' tales, and so this story from an epic 10th century Persian poem is an important step in the building of the 'Rapunzel' memplex. It is also fascinating to see one face of Rapunzel – usually depicted so white-skinned and golden-haired – as a dusky-haired, olive-skinned woman from the Middle East.

Medieval romances were rich with tales of damsels in distress and princesses in towers. Perhaps the most famous is the late 12th century story of Floris and Blanchefleur, both born on the same day during a festival

⁷. In some variants of the tale, Zal refuses to climb up the hair ladder as he does not wish to hurt Rudâbeh and so he throws up a rope to her instead (Fee 2011, p194)

of flowers (Hibbard 1963, p. 184). Floris is the son of the Moorish king of Andalusia and Blanche fleur is the daughter of a Christian widow. Afraid his son is falling in love with the beautiful Christian girl, the king sells her to an emir and she is confined within his Tower of Maidens. Floris sets out to rescue Blanche fleur, and gains access to the tower by playing chess with the watchman and returning all his winnings to him until the watchman is forced to give him a favour. Floris is smuggled into the tower in a basket of flowers, and – after a few mishaps - is reunited with Blanche fleur. They are discovered in bed together, but the emir is so moved by the young lovers' courage and fidelity that they are forgiven and allowed to marry (p. 184).

In this medieval romance, the motifs of maiden, tower and prince appear together with the symbology of vegetation for the first time – Blanche fleur means 'white flower' and Floris means 'flourishing' or 'blossoming', and the hero hid in a basket of flowers. It is also the first time we see the hierarchal class system reversed, with the hero being of noble birth and the heroine coming from a much lower socio-economic stratum. In the earlier 'Maiden in the Tower' tales, the heroine had been a princess and the hero had been a poor poet or a foundling (the exception to this is, of course, 'Danaë and the Golden Shower' in which the seducer was Zeus himself).

In Christian narratives, the motif of a maiden locked in a tower is most strongly associated with the

legendary Saint Barbara of Nicomedia (Lanzi & Lanzi 2004, p. 95). Barbara's father, a heathen named Dioscorus, locks her in a tower to remove her from the reach of suitors. She secretly converts to Christianity and, when her father travels away on a journey, orders three windows to be inserted into her bathhouse instead of two, to honour the Holy Trinity. When her father discovers her faith, he declares she shall be put to death. Barbara escapes by passing through the walls of the tower, but is hunted down by her father. Tortured for her Christian beliefs, her wounds miraculously heal overnight and her dark cell is bathed in light. Her own father wishes to be the one to execute her, but when he seizes hold of her long golden hair to hack off her head with his sword, it bursts into flame. He manages to behead her, nonetheless, but is then struck and killed by lightning (p. 95).

Most images of Saint Barbara show her with a tower in the background and long flowing golden hair, foreshadowing generations of illustrations of Rapunzel that have adorned the covers of countless retellings of the tale. However, Saint Barbara differs from other 'Maiden in the Tower' tales by the lack of the loss of her virginity. There is neither poet nor prince to seduce her, apart from her symbolic marriage to the ideals of Christianity.

Nonetheless, the story of Saint Barbara can be seen to be influential in the evolution of 'Rapunzel' because of the wide popularity of this story in Western Europe from the 14th century onwards. This rise in fame may have

been encouraged by her inclusion by the Venetian-born writer Christine de Pizan in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, published around 1405 (Snodgrass 2006, p109.)

De Pizan was born in Venice in 1364, but lived in Paris after her father won a position at the court of the French king, Charles V. In her mid-thirties, her husband died from bubonic plague and de Pizan provided for her young son and daughter by writing poems, songs, stories and philosophic narratives. She was, it has been conjectured, the first woman to earn her living by her pen (Brown-Grant 1999), and must have been an inspiration to later women writers such as La Force.

Mary Ellen Snodgrass, the author of the *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literature*, has identified de Pizan's story of Saint Barbara as a 'prototype' for the 'Rapunzel' fairy tale (2006, p. 109). *The Book of the City of Ladies* may have had greater impact on later writers of the tale than those earlier mythic variants, due to its immense popularity. It was read by queens, princesses, and noblewoman as well as scholars, and was disseminated widely throughout Europe (Willard 1984). Her work was known to have been read by such luminaries as Marguerite of Austria, Queen Eleanor of Portugal, Mary of Hungary, Louise of Savoy, and Anne of Brittany, twice queen of France (Wilson 1984, p. 339).

By examining these ancestors of Rapunzel in chronological order, it is possible to see how an ancient matriarchal myth may have been recast first as a patriarchal myth, then slowly drained of sacred meaning,

its mythic symbols and structures camouflaged by the 'easy doublet' of the medieval romance. The narrative dynamic of the triple-faced goddess became instead a story about a king, a god and a helpless princess. Then – after the passing of many hundreds of years - the god too was drained of power, becoming a poet or a foundling or a prince. The epic cycle of initiation, sacred marriage, descent into the Underworld, and return was simplified and de-mythologised.

Yet, it seems possible to argue that these early 'Maiden in the Tower' tales still managed to retain at their core themes of love, nature, magic, and the erotic which Reneé Lorraine has identified as central to a gynocentric aesthetic (1993). The narrative engine of these stories was sensuality and fecundity, their most striking images ones of golden rain, giant eagles, flowing tresses of hair, baskets of flowers, and lovers entwined together in nakedness. Fear of death and loneliness were cast out by the ecstasy of life-affirming sex and, in most cases, the birth of a child.

It was only in the late Middle Ages that the 'Maiden in the Tower' tale lost even this last remnant of matriarchal mythology. The maiden was not seduced, she did not bear a child, and she did not escape her tower. Instead she was martyred. Murdered by her own father's hand. The images are all patriarchal: lightning, fire, swords. The aftermath is death, desolation and ashes.

Yet, as Chinua Achebe has written, 'The story is everlasting. Like fire, when it is not blazing, it is

smouldering under its ashes' (quoted in Yashinsky 2010, p. 6). Glowering under the cinders of these patriarchal myths were the embers of the hag-ridden tales of the ancient past, stories which - as feminist author Jane Caputi has described so eloquently - celebrated 'the monstrous, the female, the feminine, the body, the beast, the erotic, the dark, the green, the earth, and the undercurrents ...' (Caputi 2004, p. 20).

Intuitively I had always recognised that the 'Rapunzel' fairy tale was a story of love and desire and sexual awakening, and that the maiden was symbolically linked to the garden and the plant for which she is named. I had also instinctively recognised the importance of telling part of the tale from the witch's point of view. My research into the tale's history brought me a much deeper and richer understanding of the importance of these earthy, erotic associations, however. I began to deliberately look for ways in which to connect my retelling of the fairy tale to the gynocentric aesthetic of the ancient stories I had discovered.

One way was to foreground forests and gardens and flowers in the story. The walled garden of Charlotte-Rose's mother at their château in Gascony is reflected in the walled garden of the convent in which she is incarcerated and the walled garden of the sorceress La Bella Strega in Venice. Images of roses, bees, and healing herbs are repeated throughout the text (I explore this aspect of the tale more deeply in the following chapter).

Most significantly, I began to draw upon the most ancient and hidden aspects of the tale to develop the dramatic arcs of my major characters' journeys of transformation.

At the simplest level, the three heroines of *Bitter Greens* allowed me to represent the three phases of womanhood – Maiden, Woman, Crone – and thus the three-faced aspect of the Great Goddess. However, the story of each of my three characters begins when they are children and follows their lives as they each mature into women, and so each embodies their own individual growth towards maturity and wisdom.

The story of Charlotte-Rose begins in the spring before her tenth birthday. The king, Louis XIV, came to stay at her home, the Château de Cazeneuve. Charlotte-Rose's boldness displeases him, and as a result her mother, the Baroness de Cazeneuve, is forcibly taken from her home and locked away in a convent. The loss of her mother has a profound effect on Charlotte-Rose and she never forgives the king. At the age of sixteen she is employed as maid of honour to the queen and chafes against the strictures of the gilded cage that is the royal court. Eventually, following a string of scandalous love affairs and escapades (including the delightful episode where she dressed up as a dancing bear in an attempt to free her younger lover), Charlotte-Rose too is incarcerated in a convent, where she must find within herself the strength and courage to change her life.

Margherita's story begins when she is seven and first meets the courtesan known as La Strega Bella (the beautiful witch). She is forcibly taken from her parents and kept locked away in L'Ospedale della Pietà, a Venetian foundling home, till the age of twelve, when she is taken to the tower that shall be her prison for the next five years. She cannot escape this tower until she learns to overcome the bonds of fear that tie her back as strongly as the spell the witch has cast upon her.

The story of the witch, Selena Leonelli, starts when she is eleven and her mother kills herself after being cruelly raped. It follows her apprenticeship to the witch Sibillia, said to be a thousand years old and in hiding from the Inquisition. Selena is bound to the city of Venice by Sibillia and may not leave. As she grows into womanhood and becomes a courtesan like her mother had been, Selena also finds herself imprisoned by her irrational fear of time and death, and, by the end of her tale, she too finds herself locked in the tower.

All three women pass from being virginal girls into sexually active women, and Margherita conceives and gives birth to twins, one of which has fiery-red hair like the sun, the other with hair as dark as night. All three women, in time, find the strength and courage to escape their prisons. Margherita learns to use the witch's own magic against her but, in the end, forgives and releases her. In her final scene, she sings the role of Proserpine, the goddess of spring, in the first ever opera staged in Florence. Selena seeks to make reparation for

her evil acts by a life spent as an apothecary, using the natural power of the earth for healing. Charlotte-Rose writes the story she has been told in order to win her own liberation and salvation. All three play out the mythic cycle of initiation, descent into the Underworld, and, ultimately rebirth and return to the world, and so thus all three are symbolic representations of all three faces of the Great Goddess.

My research into the history of the tale helped me realise that I wanted to reclaim the mythic power I had sensed, even as a child, in 'Rapunzel'; to illuminate not only the story itself but what may have been its lost purpose, to teach understanding of the world and the self, and to assist in the difficult transformative journey towards wisdom.

Chapter 3

Walled Gardens:

Giambattista Basile & 'Petrosinella'

Giambattista Basile's story 'Petrosinella', published in 1634, was the first tale to bring together many of the key motifs we recognise from 'Rapunzel' – the theft of forbidden food from the walled garden, the witch (in this case, an ogress), the surrendered child, the tower, the ladder of golden hair, the prince, and the seduced maiden. However, the ending was distinctly different from the tale we know: the maiden and the prince escape together, and the girl uses her captor's own magic to defeat and destroy her.

As this chapter will outline, Basile was steeped in the oral storytelling traditions of southern Italy and also likely to have heard, in his travels to Venice and elsewhere, the Jewish and Persian versions of the Maiden in the Tower tale. His story – with its clear traces of older matriarchal myths - was to have a profound influence upon both Charlotte-Rose de la Force's writing and also upon my own, as I will show.

Basile wrote 'Petrosinella', in the early 1600s, while a soldier-of-fortune in service to the Venetian Republic. He was by nature a man of letters and in his later life would be a courtier in Naples, writing songs, poems and plays for his patrons. 'Petrosinella' was one of a collection

of humorous tales called *Lo Cunti de li Cunti* (The Tale of Tales), published in Naples in 1636, four years after his death (Canepa, in Raynard 2012, pp. 25-27).

He was born in 1566 in the small village of Posillipo, not far from Naples which was then one of the largest and most culturally active cities in Europe (Canepa 1999, p. 26.) He was born into a poor middle-class family, with a great many brothers and sisters including the composer Lelio Basile, and the celebrated singers Adriana, Margherita and Vittoria Basile. It is believed Basile left Naples in 1599 or early 1600, probably due to his failure to find a patron to fund his literary career. He made his way slowly towards Venice, where he enlisted as a soldier of fortune (Canepa, in Raynard 2012, p. 26).

At the turn of the 17th century, the Most Serene Republic of Venice was a small but powerful city built on more than a hundred small islands in the marshy Venetian lagoon. A city had existed in that spot for more than a thousand years, ruled by an elected Doge and a Council of Ten, chosen from the nobility. For centuries, Venice had been the most prosperous city in Europe, due to its strategic position at the head of the Adriatic Sea and its control of the Mediterranean shipping lanes between the Byzantine Empire, Persia, and northern Europe (Brown 1997, p. 9). In Venice, Basile would have heard many tales brought by sailors and merchants from faraway lands, including – quite possibly – the Persian love story of Zal and Rudâbeh.

As well as being the hub of world mercantile trade, Venice was also the centre of the European publishing industry. Aldus Manutius had founded the Aldine Press there in 1494, printing the works of Plato, Aristotle, Ovid, and other Greek and Latin classics. His publishing house published small, inexpensive books bound in vellum that could be carried about in a saddlebag or satchel, and read anywhere at any time (Chamberlin 1982, pp. 147-148). These 'Aldine Editions' resulted in the popular dissemination of many old myths and legends throughout Europe, and are highly likely to have been read by Basile during his term as a Venetian soldier. The story of 'Danaë and the Golden Shower' was certainly well-known in Renaissance Venice, for the Venetian artist Tiziano Vecelli (better known as Titian) painted the Greek myth five times between 1544 and 1556 (Goffen 1997, pp. 215-25).

It is also possible Basile heard or read the Jewish tale of 'The Princess in the Tower' as there were many Jews in Venice at that time, and – despite, from 1516, their confinement at night within the confines of the Ghetto – the publishing of Jewish texts flourished under the direction of Daniel Blomberg and other owners of printing presses (Davis & Ravid 2011, p. 169). In 1553, Pope Julius II ordered the destruction of the Talmud, and many Jewish texts were burned in Piazza San Marco. However, the printing of Hebrew books continued covertly until the interdiction was lifted in the mid-sixteenth century. Certainly Basile - a man interested in

old tales - would have had ample opportunity to listen to stories told by a Jewish *maggid*, as the Ghetto at that time was a curiosity that drew many visitors from Venice and elsewhere (Davis & Ravid 2011, pp. x-xix). As a Roman Catholic, Basile would have been familiar with the story of Saint Barbara – it was claimed her bones lay in a chapel on the Venetian island of Murano for centuries. Venetian churches were filled with images of her life and martyrdom, including the famous polyptych painted by the Venetian artist Palma Vecchio in the church of Santa Maria Formosa in 1524 (Doody 2007, p. 243).

From Venice, Basile travelled to Crete (then called Candia), where he served under the Venetian nobleman Andrea Cornaro, who invited him to join the Accademia degli Stravaganti. It is conjectured that he may have begun work on *The Tale Of Tales* at this time (Rak, quoted Canepa 1999, p. 27). In 1608, Basile returned to Naples where he took up a position at the court of Luigi Carafa, prince of Stigliano, writing songs, plays and poetry for his patron. For the next few years, he moved from court to court, taking up positions at Mantua, Montemarano, Zuncoli, Avellion, and elsewhere, using his writing skills to scratch out a living at the various princely courts. In 1631, Mount Vesuvius erupted, and this disaster was followed by a severe outbreak of influenza. Basile died of its effects on 23 February 1632. His sister Adriana arranged the posthumous publication of a number of his writings, including *The Tale of Tales*, between 1634 and 1636. Its ribald vitality and sheer

inventiveness ensured its survival when most of Basile's other writings have faded away into obscurity (Canepa 1999, pp. 33-34).

The Tale of Tales was a collection of fifty tales, framed by the story of a princess who could not laugh. Various storytellers gather to tell her stories in the hope they can amuse her. One old crone tells the story of a girl named Petrosinella, which begins: 'Once upon a time there was a pregnant woman named Pascadozia, who leaned out of a window overlooking the garden of an ogress and she saw a beautiful bed of parsley. All at once she had such a craving to have some of the parsley she felt she would faint' (Zipes 2001, p. 475).

Basile wrote his fairy tales in the Neapolitan dialect, and so he used the local word 'uerco'. This was later translated into the Italian 'orca', generally translated as ogre. In Nancy L. Canepa's examination of Giambattista Basile's tales, *From Court to Forest*, she devotes a whole chapter to 'Significant Others: Ogres, Fools and Forests.' Ogres, she believes, 'have their most distant origins in the classical underworld deity Orcus ... (and) are imagined as savage monsters that devour humans – in particular children' (1999, p. 176). I make reference to this in order to highlight the danger of stealing parsley from an ogress's garden and the vulnerability of any child given up to such a cannibalistic creature. It also seems possible to me that, implicit in Pascadozia's sudden and dangerous craving, the ogress's magic was at work, setting a snare for her.

Nonetheless, Pascadozia steals the parsley and continues to steal until she is inevitably caught by the ogress. She tries to excuse herself by saying she fears her baby will be disfigured by a parsley-shaped birthmark on her face if she does not satisfy her cravings. This is a well-known Italian superstition: a pregnant mother must always be given what she craves, else her thwarted desires could mark the baby (Mazzoni, Zipes and more). The ogress then threatens her until Pascadozia agrees to give up her baby. When the little girl is born, she has a birthmark shaped like a fine sprig of parsley on her breast. So she is named Petrosinella, which means 'little parsley', both for the blemish and for the stolen plant. When the little girl turns seven, the ogress begins to dog her steps, saying, 'Tell your mother to remember her promise.' Eventually the mother cries: 'Take her!' and so the ogress does, seizing Petrosinella by the hair (Zipes 2001, p. 476).

The ogress locks her up in a tower in the forest, which has 'neither doors nor stairs but only a little window', a phrase with strong echoes of that used in the 8th century Jewish tale, 'The Princess in the Tower'. 'It was through this window that the ogress climbed in and out of the tower, using Petrosinella's long hair – 'and it was very long hair indeed' (p. 476). Petrosinella's hair is described as 'golden banners', and the prince falls in love with her when she sticks her head out of the window and lets her hair down to be bleached by the sun (p. 476). Bleaching one's hair in the sun was common practice for

women in Renaissance Venice, where hair of a red-gold colour was highly prized. The Venetian artist Tiziano Vecelli painted women with this red-golden hair colour so often the shade is now called Titian (Cooper 1971, p. 75).

Petrosinella and the prince flirt and eventually make an assignation, the girl giving the ogress a narcotic so that she will sleep. After Petrosinella pulls the prince up by her long braid of hair, he makes 'a little meal out of the saucy parsley of love,' a reference to the parsley-shaped birthmark on her breast. A few lines later, the prince descends by 'the same ladder of gold' (Zipes 2001, p. 476). The prince returns to the tower many times, till the lovers are betrayed by a nosy neighbour who informs the ogress about their liaisons. The ogress tells her neighbour that it is impossible for the maiden to escape as she is bound by a spell. Her only chance of escape is to find and use three magical acorns hidden in the beam of the kitchen.

Petrosinella overhears the ogress's comment and, when the prince comes that night, steals the acorns and makes a ladder out of rope so she and the prince can escape. The ogress is woken by her neighbour's call of alarm, however, and chases after the lovers. Petrosinella throws the acorns over her shoulder, one by one. The first transforms into a ravenous hound, the second into a ferocious lion, and the third into a wolf that devours the ogress. In this way, the ogress is defeated and killed, the heroine Petrosinella gaining access to – and learning to

use – the witch’s own magical powers in order to triumph over her.

‘Petrosinella’ is a joyous, bawdy romp, filled with sexual innuendo and a baroque playfulness with language. It is also, most definitely, a story about feminine power: Pascadozia the mother, the ogress (a sinister and liminal figure), and Petrosinella the daughter are the key characters and, although the mother must submit to the ogress and give up her daughter, the girl herself outwits and escapes the ogress.

The south of Italy, Naples, and Sicily were treasure chests of oral storytelling (Zipes 2012, p. 168). On his travels Basile is likely to have heard many tales of witches, goddesses, hags and great mothers and daughters. As Robert Darnton has written, oral storytelling traditions often survive in remarkably stable forms throughout long periods of history, even after the onset of widespread literacy (1985, pp. 16-20). Certainly, the triad of maiden/mother/crone, believed by Göttner-Abendroth to be a remnant of pre-literate matriarchal myths, seems embodied in Basile’s tale in a way that was not in earlier Maiden in the Tower tales.

‘Petrosinella’ would in turn inspire a number of variants which were collected in the Mediterranean area in the late 19th century, including ‘Fair Angiola’, collected in 1885 by Laura *Gonzenbach* from Sicily, and ‘Anthousa the Fair with the Golden Hair’, first recorded in Thrace, Greece, in 1890 (Heiner, 2010). Both of these tales include

the motif of three magical obstacles and the devouring of the ogress.

There are a number of interesting disparities in these Sicilian and Greek tales. 'Fair Angiola' is the closest to Basile's tale, following much the same sequence of events, except that it is jujubes, or red dates, which are stolen from the witch's garden, not parsley. One detail in particular interested me. When Angiola is seven years of age, the witch approaches her in the street and tells her to inform her mother that it is time to give her up. After the third failed approach, the witch bites off the top of the girl's finger. 'Angiola went home in tears and showed her mother her finger. "Ah!" thought her mother, "there is no help for it. I must give my poor child to the witch, or else she will eat her up in her anger"' (Heiner 2012, p. 15). This is truly a representation of the witch as devouring mother.

The three magical obstacles in 'Fair Angiola' are also different. Instead of acorns, the maiden takes three magic balls of yarn and they are transformed into soap, nails, and finally a river. The witch is not eaten, or killed, but lives to curse Angiola with the face of a dog. In the end, however, the witch relents and gives Angiola some magic water to restore her beauty, so she and the prince may marry.

The Greek variant, 'Anthousa the Fair with the Golden Hair' begins with the prince knocking over the witch's pot of soup, and so she curses him to crave Anthousa as much as she craved soup. The prince

searches for the maiden in the tower and persuades her to flee with him. Anthousa takes three magical objects – two combs and a scarf – which are then transformed, one by one, into a swamp, a hedge of thorns, and a sea. Once again the witch is not killed but only delayed, and in the end she too is moved to mercy and helps Anthousa win her prince.

Basile's story was an inspirational force upon my own creative reinterpretation of 'Rapunzel' in a number of significant ways. As stated in my Introduction, I read about Basile's life and work very early on in the planning process of my novel *Bitter Greens* and was immediately inspired by the possibility of a Venetian setting. I have always been fascinated by Venice and had read many books, both fiction and non-fiction, set in that beautiful but doomed city.

Basile's story also gave me the time of my setting – the 16th century – a period which I have always found interesting. The story told from the point of view of my witch Selena begins in 1504 and moves through to 1582. Margherita's story begins in 1590 and ends in 1600. It was a tumultuous period in Venetian history, with war, plots against the Pope, witchcraft hunts, castration of boy singers, and outbreaks of plague all providing me with ample material to build what I hope was a compelling and suspenseful plot.

It was at this stage of my creative journey that I named my novel *Bitter Greens*. It is named for the parsley

that the pregnant woman steals from the ogress's walled garden at the start of Basile's story, the parsley that the girl is named for and which marks her breast. By choosing this title I wanted, somehow, to capture the dynamic and dualistic nature of the ancient vegetative myths I had discovered buried deep within the fairy tale of 'Rapunzel'.

Parsley is a symbolically significant plant, as rich in allusion as an apple or a rose. Its Latin name, *petroselinum crispum*, is derived from the Greek word 'petros' which means 'stone,' referring to the way the plant grows in stony places, and 'selinon', the ancient Greek word for parsley. It is from this formal Latin that the heroine's name 'Petrosinella' is coined in Basile's story. Parsley has long been associated with death and sorrow, according to *The Dictionary of Plant Lore* (Watts, p. 286). Legend says the plant first sprouted in the blood of Archemorus, the old fertility king, whose very name means 'forerunner of death.' Wreaths of parsley were laid on Grecian tombs, and the expression 'to need only parsley' was a euphemistic expression that meant someone was only a step away from death. The Romans dedicated the herb to Persephone and to funeral rites, with wreaths being placed on tombs. Early Christians consecrated it to Saint Peter, guardian of the gates of heaven. In medieval times, it was believed that it was unlucky to transplant parsley, with sayings such as 'plant parsley, plant sorrow' persisting for many years.

Parsley's long association with death led naturally to an association with evil. For example, virgins could not plant it without risking impregnation by the Devil, and its slow germination was because the seeds had to travel to hell and back two, three, seven, or nine times (depending on sources) before they could grow. In *Bitter Greens*, the old nun Seraphina tells Charlotte-Rose that they were the only two women in the convent who could safely plant parsley seeds, thus intimating that she, like Charlotte-Rose, is not a virgin.

Parsley was also associated with sexuality and fertility. The Greek physician Dioscorides said parsley 'provokes venery and bodily lust', and in Spain it is fed to sheep to bring them into heat. In parts of England, parsley wine was drunk as an aphrodisiac and the phrase 'curly parsley' was once used as a euphemism for pubic hair (Albertson, E. & Albertson, M. 2002, p. 227). Another old saying is 'sow parsley, sow babies', and it was believed that a garden in which parsley refused to grow was sign of barrenness in the house (Watts, p. 286).

Parsley contains the compound apiole, a uterine stimulant, and so the herb was an abortifacient if taken in the early stages of pregnancy, but would be given by midwives to hasten along a slow and difficult labour (Duke, 1996).

In *Bitter Greens*, my witch-figure Selena teaches Margherita's mother Pascalina how to make a love spell using parsley to seduce Margherita's father Alessandro and convince him to marry her. Later, when Pascalina is

pregnant, she is overcome with an insatiable longing to eat more of the witch's parsley. 'I must eat some or I shall die,' she says (p. 101). The midwife tells Alessandro that he must give Pascalina what she craves, otherwise her thwarted desires will mark the baby. When Margherita is born, she has a parsley-shaped birthmark on her breast. This last detail is one which appears only in Basile's version of the tale.

Another element that I used from Basile's story, which does not occur in any other versions, is the age the child is taken from her parents. In Basile, Petrosinella is taken by the ogress at the age of seven; in later renderings of the tale, the child is taken at birth. My heroine Margherita is also taken from home at the age of seven. I decided to do this firstly because I wished my character Margherita to have happy memories of her home and parents and, secondly, so she would be aware she had been kidnapped and long to return to her family. Margherita is sent to the founding hospital and musical academy, the Ospedale della Pietà, in Venice, where she would have been taught to sing. Although the heroine does not sing in Basile's version of the tale, she does in La Force's version and so in nearly all later versions. In *Bitter Greens* Margherita is re-named Petrosinella by the witch, and is called by that name thereafter. However, she refuses to accept the false name and makes for herself a mantra in which she tells herself, 'Her name was Margherita. Her parents had loved her. One day, she would escape.'

At twelve, Margherita is taken from the Ospedale and locked up in a tower on a peninsula jutting out into a deep lake. This edifice is based on a real-life tower at Manerba de Garda, a small town on Lake Garda in northern Italy. In Renaissance times, a tower was built there on the site of a shrine to Minerva, Roman goddess of wisdom and war. Thorns still grow around its ruins. It took me a long time to find the right place for my imaginary tower, yet when I read about the tower at Manerba, it felt as if it was meant to be. I very much wanted to connect Margherita to the ideal of ancient feminine wisdom embodied by Minerva.

It is Basile who first gave his heroine the extraordinarily long golden hair which was to become the most recognised visual symbol of 'Rapunzel' tales. In some stories and illustrations, the girl's hair is yellow; in others, it is a vivid red-gold. I always knew my Rapunzel would have the latter and, indeed, a startling large number of my fictional heroines have long red hair. Red is the colour of blood and fire and the rising full moon, and so symbolises the forces of life, love, passion, and fertility. It is also the colour of the Mother Goddess's cloak in Göttner-Abendroth's theory of matriarchal myths.

In *Bitter Greens*, both my witch-figure Selena and my maiden-figure Margherita have golden-red hair, and it is the vibrant colour of her hair that draws the former to the latter. The intensity of Selena's attraction to red hair could be seen as fetishistic. As Wendy Cooper has

written, of all the hair colours, red is the one that can excite the most extreme reactions, 'perhaps (because of) the legend that red-haired women are especially passionate', with redheaded women in the 16th and 17th centuries often put to death on suspicion of witchcraft (1971, p. 71).

One of my biggest problems, in re-writing 'Rapunzel' as a historical novel, was how to explain the impossibly long hair without the escape hatch of magic. Most retellings do not bother to explain or show this unnatural growth; those that do simply say it was due to the witch's sorcery. I had to find another explanation. In *Bitter Greens* Margherita has the hair of eight dead girls – former prisoners of the tower - sewn into her hair by the witch Selena.

Later in the story, Margherita seeks to find a way to escape her imprisonment. Her tower room, like the one in Basile's story, had no visible door or stair. Margherita is sure there must be another way out, however. Finding a trapdoor hidden under the carpet of her tower room, Margherita spends days chipping away at the stone until she can raise the trapdoor, and descend the steps hidden below into darkness. Hidden far below, in the cellar, she finds the skeletons of eight dead girls. One of the skeletons has, 'a thick hank of filthy, matted hair coiling in the cavity below her ribs'. This girl would have been suffering from trichophagia, which is the compulsive eating of one's own hair. It is an impulse control disorder associated with trichotillomania, or the

pulling out of one's own hair, and is normally caused by intense anxiety and stress. Trichophagia is often called 'Rapunzel syndrome' and, since hair is indigestible, can lead to death (Frey et al 2005, p. 9). It seemed to me quite likely that a girl kept locked away in a tower for years may well develop an anxiety disorder centred on hair, particularly when her captor had trichophilia.

Another compelling detail of Basile's tale was that his heroine was bound to her tower by a spell, and could not escape until she learned to use the ogress's own magic against her. I had always been troubled by the heroine's inability to escape her tower earlier, and this seemed to be a very likely and powerful reason for her not to simply climb down a rope brought to her by the prince. Margherita not only needs to learn to use the witch's magic, but also to overcome her own paralysing fear and sense of powerlessness.

A key motif that I borrowed from Basile – and also from the Sicilian and Greek variants – was that of the three magical objects that transformed into obstacles in the path of the witch. However, I did not use Petrosinella's three acorns, but rather ones inspired by the Greek tale 'Anthousa the Fair with the Golden Hair'. The heroine in that tale stole two combs and a scarf from the witch. When she threw them over her shoulder, they were transformed into a swamp, a hedge of thorns, and the sea. I felt that the use of tools normally used in the control and confinement of hair was symbolically more powerful than the use of acorns (as powerful as these

are.) So my maiden Margherita threw a hair-snood made of silver thread which transformed into a net to entrap the witch; a ribbon which changed into a thick rope so that she can climb out the tower window; and a comb which turned into the thicket of thorns about the tower base which later blinded the young prince, Lucio. In this way, Margherita overcomes the witch by using her own magic against her, just as Petrosinella did in Basile's tale.

Another detail which I borrowed from the Basile variants is the device of the witch biting off the top of the little girl's finger which appears in the Sicilian tale, 'Fair Angiola'. I wanted the effect of emotional shock and surprise that this would cause the reader, and also to destabilise their expectations. This was not 'Rapunzel' as they knew it.

Finally, Giambattista Basile himself appears as a minor character in *Bitter Greens*, in the final section of Margherita's story. He meets my heroine and hero after their final confrontation with Selena. In that chance meeting, Giambattista (named by his first name here to distinguish the fictional man from the real man) expresses his desire to write stories but admits unhappily that he must go to Venice to work as a soldier instead, due to his lack of funds. Margherita and her prince Lucio share their story with him (thereby explaining how he could come to know the tale), and he disapproves of the ending. Giambattista thinks the witch should have been killed which is, of course, what happens in his version of the tale.

In Basile's story, desire is the engine which drives the plot. The mother's craving for parsley, the ogress's wish for the child, the prince's lust for the imprisoned maiden, and her longing to be free. I see this sensuality as a blossoming of the story's deeply buried roots in the ancient fertility religion of the Great Goddess, and so my novel *Bitter Greens* is also filled with yearnings and desires of all kinds.

Chapter 4

Healing Tears: Charlotte-Rose de La Force & 'Persinette'

In 1697, sixty-four years after the posthumous publication of 'Petrosinella', the French noblewoman Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de La Force published her own collection of fairy tales, named - like Basile's collection - *The Tale of Tales (Contes Des Contes)*. This collection included La Force's Maiden in the Tower tale, 'Persinette'.

La Force was born into an aristocratic family in 1650, the younger of two sisters. Her father – who died when she was only a baby - was the seventh son of the Duc de La Force, a proud and fervent Huguenot who had fought against the king in the bloody religious wars of the early 17th century. Her mother was King Louis XIV's second cousin and the chatelaine of a medieval castle in Gascony, the Château de Cazeneuve (Souloumiac 2004, p. 35-37). Situated about twenty-five miles south of Bordeaux, on the pilgrim's road that ran from Santiago de Compostela to Vézelay, the Château de Cazeneuve had been constructed as a fortress in the early 14th century by the Duc d'Albret. Its thirteen outer walls were built high and strong about an inner courtyard, with two cone-topped Rapunzel-like towers at the front (p. 34). In the sixteenth century, the château was used as a hunting lodge by the young Huguenot king, Henri III of Navarre.

His marriage to the French Catholic princess Marguerite de Valois (known to history as Queen Margot) sparked the bloody St Bartholomew's Day massacres in August 1573 in which thousands of French Protestants died. Their marriage was unhappy and King Henri later incarcerated his wife, Queen Margot, in a series of strongholds for eighteen years, including at the Château de Cazeneuve. Growing up there seventy-odd years later, La Force would have been very familiar with the stories of the imprisoned queen and her struggles to live a self-determined life. Every day she would have seen the quotation Queen Margot had engraved on the drawing room mantelpiece: 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and a prison will never be a place of beauty' (p. 36).

Growing up in south-west France, La Force would have been steeped in the troubadour tradition of Aquitaine, with its poems and songs and stories of medieval romance. La Force would also have read tales from the famous *Bibliothèque Bleue*, booklets of stories covered in cheap blue-grey wrappers that were carried around by peddlers in their sacks. Many of these stories were translations of obscure medieval *chansons de geste*, and other tales of bold derring-do (Thelander 1982, pp. 467-496; Darnton 1985, p. 63). It is therefore most likely that La Force would have known the story of Floris and Blanchefleur, though she may not – being Protestant – have known that of St Barbara and her tower.

When La Force was ten years old, the royal court came to stay at the Château de Cazeneuve for a few

nights. His Most Catholic Majesty King Louis XIV was on his way to Spain to meet his new wife, the Infanta Maria Theresa of Spain. Two years later, La Force's mother, the Baroness of Cazeneuve, was forcibly taken from the château and incarcerated in a convent, even though she was a devout Huguenot. She was to be imprisoned until she recanted her faith and was baptised as a Catholic. Since she died in the convent, it seems she refused. La Force and her elder sister Marie became wards of the king (Souloumiac 2004, pp. 39-40).

At the age of sixteen, La Force was summoned to court to serve as one of Queen Marie-Therese's ladies-in-waiting. She scandalised the court with her wayward behaviour, first taking as her lover Molière's protégé, the actor Michel Baron, and then becoming engaged to the Marquis of Nesle. It was whispered that La Force had ensnared the marquis with black magic. She was eventually called before the *Chambre Ardente*, the French Inquisition, and questioned, but no charges were laid. The French court was at that time convulsed by the Affair of the Poisons, a scandal about poison, murder, Satanism and infanticide which had implicated the king's favourite mistress. Whether it was La Force's kinship with the king, or whether the king feared what further investigations would reveal about those closest to him, can never be known, but La Force was lucky not to be burned at the stake like many other women at that time (p. 41).

Then La Force fell in love with a much younger man, Charles Briou. When his family kidnapped him and

locked him up in their château, La Force disguised herself in a bearskin and visited with a travelling troupe of actors. Hidden in the guise of a dancing bear, she was able to speak with her lover and make a plan for his release. As soon as he was free, the couple eloped and for ten days were blissfully happy. Then Briou's father had La Force charged with unlawfully marrying a minor (even though they married a month after he had turned 25, the legal age of consent), and the court found in his favour. The marriage was annulled and La Force was charged a thousand gold *louis* (p. 41).

Desperately poor, La Force turned her hand to writing. She had always been an active figure in the Parisian literary salons of the late 17th century, being one of the earliest *conteuses*, or female fairy tale tellers, along with the Baroness d'Aulnoy, Madame de Murat, and Mademoiselle L'héritier. It was here that the craze for fairy tales began, with participants being called upon to 'invent' and tell tales on the spot (Harries 2001, p. 61).

La Force also wrote a series of 'secret histories' – historical novels that told the 'true' story of people such as the scandalous Queen Margot, published as *Histoire de Marguerite de Valois, reine de Navarre* in 1696. Her books were enormously popular, although most had to be published outside France to escape the king's censors. Rumours that she had become the Dauphin's mistress, and the publication of some satirical Christmas carols, displeased the ageing and now fanatically devout king, and La Force was given the choice of exile or the convent.

Although she was born a Huguenot, La Force had already abjured and converted to Catholicism after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 outlawed Protestantism. La Force therefore chose the convent, and spent the next eleven years locked inside its high, stone walls. While there, she wrote her collection of fairy tales, which was published in 1697, the same year as Charles Perrault's *Tales from Mother Goose* and the Baroness d'Aulnoy's *Tales of Fairies* (Souloumiac 2004, pp. 41-42).

Unlike Perrault's tales, D'Aulnoy and La Force's tales were sophisticated, complex, and self-consciously literary. Elizabeth Wanning Harries believes such tales 'are complex in their reimaginings of well-known and more conventional fairy-tale patterns and motifs.' (2003, pp. 16-17). Two-thirds of all the fairy tales written and published in France between 1690 and 1715 were written by just seven women, including D'Aulnoy, La Force, La Force's cousin Henriette-Julie de Murat, Perrault's niece Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier de Villandon, and Catherine Bernard, who said of the *conte de fées*: 'the (adventures) should always be implausible and the emotions always natural' (Harries 2003, p. 35).

La Force's fairy tales, published under the pseudonym "Mademoiselle de X", proved very popular. The money she earned through her writing, plus her growing literary reputation, at last secured her freedom, but she was not permitted to return to court. She moved to Paris and was an active figure in the literary salons until her death in 1724, aged 74 (Souloumiac 2004, p. 44).

In La Force's tale 'Persinette'⁸, a pregnant woman longs for some parsley, but it is such a rare plant that it grows only in a fairy's beautiful garden. The woman's husband is troubled by her longing but walks along the walls of the garden day and night trying to find a way to climb over. One day, he finds the gate to the garden open and steals a handful of parsley, which his wife eats hungrily. The wife's desire for parsley only grows, however, and her young husband again seeks to steal some for her. Again he finds the gate open, but this time he is caught by the fairy. She tells him that he can have as much parsley as he likes if he will give her the child once it is born. Taken from her parents at birth, the child is named Persinette, a name coined from the French word *persil* meaning 'parsley'. As in Basile's story, the symbolic linkage between child and plant is clear.

Persinette is locked up in a silver tower in the middle of the forest at the age of twelve. Although she has every luxury, the young woman is lonely and sings to amuse herself. A young prince hears her and falls in love with her. Overhearing the fairy's command, 'Persinette, let down your hair so I can climb up,' the prince calls out the chant and the maiden lowers her golden hair to him. He climbs up and jumps into her chamber, where he bows down before Persinette 'and embraced her knees with an ardour that was to persuade her of his love'.

⁸ I have drawn upon Jack Zipes' translation of 'Persinette', published in *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition* (2001, pp479-484).

Persinette's heart is 'full of all the love she could possibly feel for this prince'.

In a short time, Persinette falls pregnant but, due to her naivety, has no idea what her sickness means. The fairy however, recognises 'the malady'. She cuts off Persinette's braid, casts her out into the forest, then - invoking her power - she causes the prince to throw himself from the top of the tower. He is blinded by thorns and wanders about in desperation, groaning Persinette's name. Some years pass. At last he hears the sound of a familiar voice singing. He finds Persinette and her twin children, more beautiful than the day is bright, to whom she has given birth to while alone in the forest. Persinette weeps with joy. 'But what a miracle! No sooner had her precious tears fallen on the prince's eyes than he regained his full vision'.

However, when Persinette and the prince try to eat, all their food turns to stone and their water to crystals. Herbs turn into toads and venomous snakes, 'birds became dragons and vixens flew around them, glaring at them in a terrifying way'. Clutching their children in their arms, the couple prepare themselves to die. The fairy is, at last, moved to mercy by their unwavering love and courage. She transports them to safety at the king's palace where they are greeted with delight, and 'nothing in the world could be compared to the happiness in which (the prince) lived with his perfect wife'.

La Force's tale 'Persinette' (1697) was therefore the first in which the complete 'Rapunzel' memplex appears: the theft of the forbidden food, the surrendering of the child, the woman of mysterious magical powers, the maiden, the tower, the hair-ladder, the prince, the birth of twins, the healing tears, and the redemption of the captor through her final mercy to her captives. No other variant of the tale culminates in this way. As Getty has written: 'Mlle de La Force's ending ... was her own unique creation' (1997 p39).

La Force's changes to the story have a profound impact upon the development of the heroine's agency. In 'Persinette', the young woman sings 'in the most extraordinary way' to comfort herself in her loneliness and so draws the prince towards her. Although she betrays herself in her innocence, when Persinette is banished to the wilderness, she bears twins alone, without help, and cares for them alone, without help. Persinette heals the prince's blinded eyes with her tears, and then prevails upon the fairy to forgive and help them, and so is responsible for the fairy's redemption as well as her own salvation. It was La Force's version of the tale which spoke to me most powerfully - both as a child imprisoned by illness caused by my own inability to control my tears, and as an adult searching to make sense of this fairy tale that had haunted me for so many years.

The method by which La Force came to know Basile's story 'Petrosinella' is a mystery. The story had not yet

been translated into either Italian or French, and was not widely known outside Naples where it was published. The fairy tale scholar Suzanne Magnanini has found a number of possible routes by which Basile's stories could have arrived in France in the 1680s. A French printer working in Naples, Antonio Bulifon, had printed an edition of *Lo cunto de li cunti* in 1674. It is possible that a copy was purchased from him by the Benedictine monk, Jean Mabillon, in 1685 while on a book-buying mission for the French king. Otherwise, Bulifon may have brought a copy of the tales to France himself when he returned to France in 1687 (Magnanini, pp. 78-92).

Zipser has argued that oral sources are the primary explanation for the explosion of fairy tales in France in the 1690s. Many of the *conteuses* such as d'Aulnoy and La Force make reference to nannies and servants who told them tales; he also believes that it is highly unlikely that the French fairy tale retellers could decipher Basile's difficult Neapolitan dialect (2012, pp. 166-167). However, I think it worth remembering that La Force, like most aristocratic Huguenot women of her time, was extremely well-educated. It is likely she could read both Latin and Italian. The Neapolitan dialect, when written, shows some key resemblances to both of these languages (Galiani, quoted in Bottigheimer 2012, p. 89).

There were many Italians at the French royal court in the late 1600s, including the family of Cardinal Mazarin, who was born in Naples in 1602 and acted as the French chief minister until his death in 1661. His

seven nieces, known collectively as the Mazarinettes, were all born and grew to young adulthood in Italy. They were brought to Paris by their uncle and became well-known figures in the court life of the late 17th century, marrying into many important aristocratic families. La Force would have known the Mazarinettes well in her role as maid-of-honour to the queen, particularly Olympe Mancini, the second eldest of the Mazarinettes, who was superintendent of the Queen's household (Fraser 2006, pp. 36-37). In addition, most Italians at the time were familiar with the Neapolitan dialect because of its use in theatre and *commedia dell'arte* (Canepa 1999, p. 64).

It is therefore entirely possible that a group of *conteuses* – La Force among them – found a book of bawdy Italian fairy tales and managed to translate some, if not all, of the stories. Perhaps the reason why the first half of La Force's 'Persinette' is so similar to Basile's 'Petrosinella', but the second half so different, is simply because she only managed to translate the first few pages before her patience, her eyesight, or her willingness to decipher the dense and difficult dialect ran out. I, however, think it far more likely that La Force simply took from Basile's tale the motifs and plot points that spoke to her most powerfully, and rewrote the end to please herself. In *Bitter Greens* I solve the mystery quite differently. Charlotte-Rose hears the story of the girl in the tower from the old nun, Sœur Seraphina, who is, as it is revealed at the end of the book, intimately involved in the circumstances herself. In this revelation, the three

narrative strands are tied together in an unexpected and surprising way (or so I hope).

La Force's first significant change to Basile's tale was to transform the antagonist from an ogress, a hideous cannibalistic creature, into a fairy, something at once more mysterious and more benign. As Marina Warner has described in *From the Beast to the Blonde*, the word 'fairy' has its roots in the Latin word 'fata' which refers to a goddess of destiny: 'fairies share with Sibyls knowledge of the future and the past, and ... foretell events to come and give warnings' (1994, pp. 14-15).

Basile never gave his ogress a motive for locking away Petrosinella. La Force, however, says, 'Before Persinette reached the age of twelve, she was a marvel to behold, and since the fairy was fully aware of what fate had in store for her, she decided to shield her from her destiny' (Zipes 2001, p. 480). The tower in which Persinette is locked away is silver, and therefore symbolic of the moon. It is furnished splendidly with all a girl could ever want. As in 'Petrosinella', the prince comes and seduces Persinette, but from that point on the story departs from Basile's version. Persinette betrays herself by not realising that her 'maladie' is in fact pregnancy, the fairy cuts off her 'precious braids', and Persinette is cast out into the wilderness, bears twins by herself, and in time finds the prince and heals his blinded eyes (pp. 482-483). However, the family is still lost and starving. In La Force's tale, the fairy is moved by their flight and takes

pity upon them, magically restoring them to the prince's family. In this way the fairy herself is redeemed.

Annabel Patterson has written: 'Interpreted by specific cultures yet relevant throughout the ages, the fable speaks ... in metaphoric codes that can emancipate both the teller and listener ... Fables tell us that we have choices to make' (quoted in Zipes 2012, p. 13). Scholars such as Dundes and Zipes contend that this is also true of fairy tales and other types of folklore such as songs, nursery rhymes, and legends (Dundes 1980, pp. 33-40; Zipes 2012, pp. 17-20). Fairy tales therefore gain much of their power from the way their motifs become metaphoric codes, carrying hidden meanings that can empower both teller and listener. La Force was born in Gascony, which has a long tradition of travelling troubadours who carried news and subversive views concealed in songs or fables or folk tales (Goffman and Joy 2007, p. 123). She would have been acutely aware of the ways in which her tale would be read by the king and the court.

I believe it is possible that, in La Force's story, the tower stood for the convent in which she was incarcerated and the figure of the fairy, the girl's captor, was a representation of the king, on whose order La Force was imprisoned. This explains why the captor was no longer a hungry ogress but instead a wise and protective fairy, and why La Force lavished so much time on describing her kindness and thoughtfulness. Persinette angered the fairy by her disobedience – as La Force had angered the king – but in the end, the fairy

took pity on her and restored her to the life of the court, as La Force herself no doubt wished to be restored.

La Force may also have deliberately drawn upon the symbols and narrative structures of pre-literate goddess myths which endured in the rich Gascon folklore of her childhood. The Aquitaine area is rich in evidence of such gynocentric myths. One striking example is an ancient lead tablet found near Larzac, a town a few hours east of Préchac where La Force grew up. Dated to 90BC, the tablet depicts women performing a secret ritual and is inscribed: 'Behold the magic of women, their special underworld names, the prophecy of the seer who weaves this magic' (Monaghan 2009, p. 295). Many Palaeolithic stone sculptures and bas-relief carvings depicting voluptuous female figures have also been found in Aquitaine and the Pyrénées – more so than in any other part of the world (Dixson & Dixson, 2011)

La Force may have chosen to change the character of the girl's captor from the cannibalistic monster in Basile's tale to a wise Sybil, a goddess of destiny, in order to deliberately link the story back to older gynocentric myths that celebrate all aspects of feminine power. In these tales, the older woman embodies the third face of the Great Goddess and is an agent of the forces of transformation that bring about rebirth and regeneration.

La Force's crone keeps the maiden safe in a silver tower (a symbol of the moon) until the time for growth and change has arrived. She tests both the

maiden and the hero, then – when the time is ripe – cuts the maiden free so she can be reborn into the world and become a mother of twin babies, a boy and a girl. Like Apollo and Artemis, they embody the dualistic nature of the universe, the forces of day and night, light and darkness, sun and moon, masculine and feminine. It is by the crone's actions that the maiden reaches her full potential in the world, as an agent of liberation, healing and redemption, and the hero fulfils his role in the sacred marriage that keeps the wheel of life and death and rebirth turning. In La Force's tale, the crone therefore regained her original role as the harbinger of change and growth, a 'midwife to the psyche' (Caputi, in Larrington 1992, p. 433).

La Force's motifs of wounding and healing, darkness and light, sacrifice and redemption, were most likely introduced in the full knowledge of their ancient symbolic meaning. As Harries says in *Twice Upon A Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale*, 'the conteuses (were) ...knowing, educated, worldly-wise ... with a wry and sometimes sardonic view of the narrative constellations they are reusing and revising ... (their) complex tales work to reveal the stories behind other stories, the unvoiced possibilities that tell a different tale' (2001, pp. 15-17).

It was these metaphoric codes in La Force's tale, preserved in the Grimm Brothers' version, which first drew me to the story now known as 'Rapunzel'. It was La

Force's steadfast refusal to conform to the strict patriarchal norms of 17th century French society that drew me to want to tell her life story.

La Force's tale 'Persinette' was the first tale in which the witch cuts off of the maiden's braid of impossibly long hair, an act which I find symbolically significant. Because hair continually replenishes itself, it has for centuries been imbued with symbolic power. In social-political history, having one's head shaved can be a form of humiliation. Prisoners-of-war often have their hair cropped close to the skull, while French women suspected of being collaborators at the end of the Second World War had their heads shaved against their will (Koppelman 1996, p. 87). The story of Samson and Delilah, and the Norse Goddess Sif (whose glorious golden hair was chopped from her head by the trickster Loki) are just two of many myths associated with the cutting of hair.

In such stories, hair is nearly always associated with strength, power and sexuality; in other words, with the potency of life. Hair is thus linked to the magical thread of life which is spun, measured, and finally severed by the Three Fates of ancient Greek mythology. The witch's scissors are reminiscent of what Milton described as the "abhorred shears" of Atropos, the third of the Fates. As mentioned above, fairies are etymologically and symbolically linked to the Fates, and so the cutting of Persinette's hair by the fairy can be seen to be symbolic of both the loss of her virginity and a kind

of metaphoric wounding, or death. However, the cutting of the braid can also be interpreted as the cutting of a symbolic umbilical cord, and Persinette's expulsion from the small tower room as a kind of birth. As discussed earlier, the key psychological drama of gynocentric mythology is that of birth, life, death and rebirth. So the cutting of the maiden's hair symbolically ends one life and begins another. Similarly, the cutting of Charlotte-Rose's hair in the opening chapters of *Bitter Greens* signifies the end of her courtly life and the beginning of a new life in very different circumstances.

As stated previously, La Force's motif of the healing tears was the story element that resonated with me most powerfully and so I was always going to include this as a key scene in my retelling of 'Rapunzel'. It is one of the most strikingly original aspects of La Force's tale. The anthropologist Marija Gimbutas sees tears as being divine: 'the eyes of the goddess are the source of life-sustaining water' (2009, p. 53). Symbolically tears are linked to life-giving rain and the salty waters of life-endowing amniotic fluids, and to the ocean, cradle of all existence.

In the Bible – which La Force would have been well acquainted with, thanks to her Huguenot upbringing – the prophet Ezekial is horrified at the sight of women 'weeping for Tammuz'. Tammuz was the consort-king of the goddess Ishtar. He had been banished to the underworld and could only be resurrected to life again by the weeping of tears. The ritualistic lament by

the priestesses of Ishtar was thus seen as a powerful and sacred ceremony in a pre-Christian fertility rite, which explains Ezekial's revulsion (Nelson 2005, n.p.).

I therefore find it most striking that La Force chose to use tears as a source of healing and enlightenment in her tale, when she would have been acutely aware of its links to a goddess-worshipping pagan religion. In fact, La Force seems to have shown little piety at a time when questions of religion were causing dissension and war all through France. She abjured the faith of her forefathers when Protestantism was outlawed, unlike many other Huguenots who either died or fled France, and - unlike most of the *conteuses* - her tales are remarkably free of religious expressions.

When using the motif of the healing tears in my own work, I had to think how best to frame this scene plausibly within a historical context while still retaining the beauty and mystery of the scene. In *Bitter Greens*, Lucio's eyes are not put out by the thorns, but glued shut with dried blood from his scratched face. Margherita's tears moisten the crust of dried blood and wash it away, so that he can see the gleam of light through her red-gold hair. Margherita draws the blinded Lucio to her through the darkness of the night by the sound of her singing, just as she earlier drew him to the tower and into love.

This aspect of the tale had always been one that appealed to me – the entrapped girl who sang with all her strength and so summoned the instrument of change and release to her. Whenever I argue in public forums

about Rapunzel being perceived as the typical 'passive princess' (which I seem to do quite often), I point out that she was certainly no princess (her parents were so poor they sold her for a handful of bitter greens), and she was certainly not passive. She sings though she can have had little hope of being heard; she pulls the prince up by her hair, giving him ingress to her tower; she allows him to seduce her (there is no suggestion of rape in any of the early versions of 'Rapunzel'; sexual congress is described as both willing and joyful); and, in most versions of the tale, she conspires with him to escape the tower.

Persinette's song is born out of her body and her breath. It is pure emotion expressed in sound. Unlike screaming - which exhausts the physique, rasps the voice, and unsettles and alienates with its raw expression of rage and terror - singing can be sustained over a long period of time and invites empathy and connection. I have always felt that the maiden's singing was an important and beautiful part of the fairy tale, and so I have a strong element of musicality in the novel. Margherita spends time at the Ospedale della Pietà in Venice, where she is taught to sing, and she ends the book singing in the first opera ever performed, Jacopo Peri's *Euridice*. I also drew on Renaissance musical terms such as cantata, reverie, and interlude as the titles for each section, to highlight the importance of singing and music, which I see as a metaphor for the maiden discovering her own voice, and using that voice to save herself.

As an oral storyteller, I too need to use my voice in order to connect with an audience, to entrance and enchant them, to sway them emotionally and, I hope, to communicate some kind of new understanding. So I felt an affinity with the girl who sings out from her lonely tower room, and I understood why she kept on singing even with no hope of ever being heard. Singing is like storytelling. We tell stories to entertain, to express ourselves, to warn, to teach, and to change the way people think – strong motivations, I believe, for both La Force and myself.

Chapter 5

The Dark Sorceress:

Wilhelm Grimm & Rapunzel

Almost a hundred years after La Force wrote 'Persinette', her tale made its way over the Alps and was transformed at last into the tale known as 'Rapunzel'.

Once again, there is no clear path from La Force's story and its eighteenth-century German incarnations, which would find their best-known expression in the Grimm Brothers' collection. La Force's *Contes des Contes* was reprinted in French several times between 1707 and 1725, and then translated into German for the first time by Frederick Immanuel Bierling in 1765, and included in Volume 8 of his collection *Cabinet der Feen* (Bottigheimer 2012, p. 197). A young German writer named Friedrich Schulz then included a version of the tale in the fifth volume of his novel *Kleine Romane*, published in 1790 (Zipes 2001, p. 484). Schulz himself claimed that he had heard the tale from a 'gute Frau', but the story is so close to La Force's most scholars believe he must indeed have read her tale (Getty 1997, p. 40), perhaps during his travels to France in 1789.

Schulz's 'Rapunzel' is a loose translation of La Force's story, and adheres closely to the major plot points. He did, however, make a number of modifications. The most obvious of these is the changing

of the maiden's name to 'Rapunzel'. No scholar has been able to definitively explain this name change. It is interesting to conjecture a number of possible reasons. 'Rapunzel' is the common name of *campanula rapunculus*, a wild herb called 'bellflower rampion' in English, and commonly shortened to 'rampion'. The word is derived from *rapa* which means turnip. The roots of rapunzel can be boiled and eaten like parsnips, and the leaves – although bitter – can be used in a winter salad. In spring, the young shoots can be blanched and eaten like asparagus. Nowadays, *campanula rapunculus* is more usually grown for its pretty, blue sprays of flowers (Watts 2007, p. 313). Marina Warner, however, links rapunzel to German rampion, once nicknamed 'kings-cure-all' for its supposed healing properties (2008). Now better known as evening primrose, it is a bright golden plant that certainly reflects the much-vaunted colour of the maiden's hair.

Schulz may have changed the heroine's name because parsley is a Mediterranean plant that grows best in warm, temperate climates, and so may have been relatively unknown in northern Germany, where Schulz was born. Perhaps Rapunzel simply sounded prettier - or as the Swiss fairy tale scholar Max Lüthi has postulated - more forceful in the German tongue. The German translation of 'Persinette' or 'Little Parsley' would be 'Petersilchen'. As Lüthi wrote, 'Rapunzel sounds better in the German tale than Persinette, it has a more forceful sound than *Petersilchen* ... To be sure, in folk beliefs the plants called rapunzel do not play any important role,

quite in contrast to those ... such as parsley and fennel, apples and pears, which are attributed eroticizing and talismanic properties' (quoted in McGlathery 1991, p. 130). It can therefore be seen that the change of the heroine's name to Rapunzel drained much of the symbolic meaning from the herb, and in many cases led to the link between girl and plant being broken.

Two other significant changes in Schulz's version were that the prince is not flung from the tower by the witch, but leaps himself in a fit of despair, and Rapunzel betrays herself by complaining to the witch that her dress has grown too tight for her (a device I use in *Bitter Greens*, as a sign of the innocent naivety of the young woman who does not know she is pregnant).

The Grimm brothers included the 'Rapunzel' fairy tale in their first fairy tale collection, *Kinder-und-Häusmärchen*, published in 1812. Jakob Grimm was then 27 years old and his brother Wilhelm a year younger. They had been born in Hanau, in Hessen-Kassel, then a small electorate in the crazy patchwork of countries that made up the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation. The brothers were the eldest of a family of five, with three other boys and a girl born after them. The death of their father in 1796 had changed the lives of the Grimm family profoundly. Their mother was left without any income but a small pension. Her sister, Henriette Zimmer, offered to help with the two eldest boys' education, and so Jakob and Wilhelm went to live in

Kassel, where their Aunt Zimmer was a lady-in-waiting to the Electress Wilhelmine.

With the patronage of the Elector, the two young men were admitted to university at the University of Marburg, studying law. One of their professors, Friedrich von Savigny, inspired them with a love of history and literature. Jakob did not complete his law degree, instead accompanying von Savigny to Paris and returning to Kassel in 1805, determined to find a way to build a career from his love of philology. Wilhelm matriculated from university and returned to Kassel in 1806, the same year that Napoleon's Grand Army invaded the small electorate. The Elector fled, with his family and cartloads of treasures, and the citizens of Hessen-Kassel came under French rule. Napoleon created a new Kingdom of Westphalia by mashing together half-a-dozen small kingdoms, and set his 22-year-old brother Jerome to rule.

As a small act of defiance against the cultural domination of the French, the Grimm brothers began to collect old folk tales. Initially, they transcribed tales from old books and manuscripts, including 'Rapunzel' from Schulz's *Kleine Romaine*. At this time, the brothers were aiming to keep their stories as close as possible to the original source – whether oral or literary – and so their 'Rapunzel' was similar to Schulz's version, except that, for some reason, Wilhelm omitted the fairy's final act of mercy. She disappears from the story and is not heard of again. Another key change is that La Force's description of the luxuriousness of the fairy's silver tower is not

included, making the story both simpler and darker (Heiner 2013, p. 3).

In 1808, Frau Grimm died. Her widow's pension was suspended, and the young members of the family were so poor they could only afford a single meal a day. Meanwhile, Napoleon slowly conquered most of the rest of Europe. The first fairy tale collection was published on December 20, 1812, the same time as news of Napoleon's disastrous march on Moscow became known.

The *Kinder-und-Hausmarchen* was a failure. Only 900 copies sold in the next three years. Even worse, the Grimm Brothers were critically lambasted. One reviewer said the stories were 'the most pathetic and tasteless material imaginable', and several singled out 'Rapunzel' for especial criticism, Friedrich Rühs writing: 'What proper mother or nanny could tell the fairy tale about Rapunzel to an innocent daughter without blushing?' (Tatar 2003, p. 18). In a culture as rule-bound and conservative as the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nations, a tale which derived much of its power from uncontrollable longings and sexual desire was always going to be frowned upon.

In 1819, the Grimm Brothers brought out a new edition of the fairy tales. As Harries has said so vividly, 'those nervous nineteenth century Nellies' reworked many of the stories to make them more palatable to a conservative, middle-class readership (2001, p. 8). In their choice of tales, and in their comprehensive reworking of the language of the tales chosen, the Grimm Brothers

served a socialisation process that celebrated the attitudes of the bourgeoisie society in which they lived, one which 'placed great emphasis on passivity, industry and self-sacrifice for girls, and on activity, competition, and the accumulation of wealth for boys (Zipes 2012, p. 58).

Of the editorial emendations made by Wilhelm Grimm, those to 'Rapunzel' were among the most profound. In the 1819 version Rapunzel betrays herself by remarking that the witch is much heavier to pull up than the prince, rather than by complaining her dress no longer fits her, thereby alerting the witch to her pregnancy. Rapunzel and the prince are 'married' in the tower, and after her banishment into the wilderness, Rapunzel no longer gives birth to twins, though the children continue - rather confusingly - to appear at their parents' reunion in all the ensuing editions. The tale continued to be cut and modified until the Grimms' seventh and final edition in 1857, from which most other retellings of 'Rapunzel' are descended (including Lucy Crane's version which is the one I read as a child).

As Tatar notes in *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, 'it is easy to leap to the conclusion that Teutonic prudishness or the Grimms' delicate sense of propriety motivated the kinds of changes made in 'Rapunzel'. That may well be the case. But it is far more likely to assume that Wilhelm Grimm took to heart the criticisms levelled against his volume and, eager to find a wider audience, set to work making the appropriate changes. His nervous sensitivity about moral objections

to the tales in the collection reflects a growing desire to write for children rather than to collect for scholars' (2003, pp. 18-19).

There is no doubt that Wilhelm Grimm's changes to the story drained it of much of its subversive power. Rapunzel is a far less active and appealing character than either Petrosinella or Persinette. Her self-betrayal to the witch makes her seem stupid, and the erotic charge of the Italian and French versions is utterly diluted and made pale and limp (Basile's prince feasts upon the parsley of love, La Force's prince embraces her knees with ardour, but the Grimms' prince talks to her in a friendly way and takes her hand).

Nonetheless, Wilhelm Grimm made one key change which I find interesting and powerful. He changed La Force's benign fairy into a sorceress, a figure of mighty and fearful magic. The word 'sorceress' comes, through tangled by-ways, from the Latin *sors* which means 'lot, fate, or fortune'. It therefore means 'one who influences fate or fortune'. It is a powerful word, much darker than fairy. Wilhelm Grimm also gave his sorceress a name – Mother Gothel - and a voice.

In earlier versions of the tale, there is little direct speech at all. Wilhelm Grimm, however, gives his characters voices, and none has so much to say as the sorceress. Rapunzel's mother speaks once, the father, the prince and Rapunzel each speak twice, but the sorceress speaks six times, including the haunting incantation, 'Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair,' and her final

unforgettable speech, in which she compares herself to a cat and tells the prince she shall scratch out his eyes (Bottigheimer 1987, p. 181). This is the last the sorceress is heard of or seen in the Grimm version. We never discover what happens to her after that.

The disappearance of the witch from the tale is an interesting omission, particularly since evil stepmothers are often given short shrift in Wilhelm's moral universe, punishments including dancing in red-hot shoes, being rolled down a hill in a barrel studded with nails, having mill-stones dropped on their heads, or being burnt to ashes. Such graphic and violent punishments reflect the historical practice of witch-hunts in Germany, with sorcery remaining punishable by law well into the late 18th century, when Wilhelm Grimm was a young boy.

Yet his sorceress is neither devoured, like Basile's ogress, nor moved to pity and mercy like La Force's fairy. She is simply never heard of again. Perhaps Wilhelm's recent loss of his own loving and somewhat suffocating mother was still too raw for him to punish a mother for being too over-protective. Perhaps his austere Calvinist soul was troubled by the story's themes of sexual desire and strange yearnings. Perhaps he simply could not bring himself to redeem the witch whose garden grows the parsley that causes the mother to pine away, the witch whose tower imprisons the growing young girl, the witch whose magic causes such unnatural burgeoning of her hair, the witch who can cause a young man to be so scarred and blinded.

The sorceress in the Grimm version is halfway between Basile's grotesque, anthropophagic ogress and the firm but loving fairy in La Force's tale. Grimms' sorceress retains the sense of standing between wildness and civilisation, human and non-human, life and death. She is dangerous, but not hideous. She is cruel but not cannibalistic. She is formidable, but not without vulnerabilities. The empowerment of the witch in the Grimms' version of the tale makes her a far more interesting character than she had been in Basile and La Force's earlier variants.

In *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1975), Bruno Bettelheim takes note of the age at which Rapunzel was locked in the tower (the 1857 Grimm edition says that Rapunzel was twelve, a detail first added by La Force in 'Persinette'.) Although Bettelheim's work has been criticised both for its heavy Freudian emphasis and its narrowness of focus (Zipes 1979, p. 181; Darnton 1985, p. 10), his work has been highly influential on later fairy tale scholarship.

Bettelheim writes: 'Hers is ... the story of a pubertal girl, and of a jealous mother who tries to prevent her from gaining independence – a typical adolescent problem which finds a solution when Rapunzel becomes united with her prince' (p. 16). Bettelheim later notes that in a girl's oedipal fantasy, the mother is split into two figures: the pre-oedipal wonderful good mother and the oedipal evil stepmother (p. 114). This dichotomous view of the mother – true mother/false mother, kind

mother/evil mother – has strong echoes of the Jungian archetypes of the ‘Good Mother’ who gives life and the ‘Terrible Mother’ who takes it away. The first is the bringer of life and fertility. The second is a devourer, a goddess of death and decay. As Joseph Campbell wrote: ‘She is the womb and the tomb: the sow that eats her farrow’ (1993, p. 114).

Most critical interpretations of ‘Rapunzel’ focus on this symbiotic mother-daughter relationship. For example, Maria Tatar has written, ‘Mother Gothel figures as the consummate overprotective parent’ (2004, p. 55) and Sheldon Gould has stated: ‘The witch’s demand ... serves to remind us that witches, despite their wicked nature, have maternal longings ... Her decision to keep Rapunzel in the tower flowed not from malice but from maternal concern’ (1999, pp. 157-160). Similarly, for Joan Gould, ‘Rapunzel and her foster mother are White Bride and Black Mother. Rapunzel is first confined and then abandoned. The mother-witch’s fury is what pushes the girl from one condition to the other’ (2005, p. 217).

There are two problems with this interpretation of ‘Rapunzel’. The first is that this split between the ‘good mother’ and the ‘bad mother’ is not actually an accurate representation of the roles of the female characters in this story. The ‘true mother’ gives in to her strange craving for forbidden food and so must pay the price by surrendering her daughter. The ‘false mother’ arguably locks her foster-daughter away because she intends to keep her safe from such dangerous desires. Nonetheless,

both true and false mothers put their own fears and wants ahead of the well-being of the girl.

In addition, the false mother is the source of fecundity and life in the story, with her garden filled with lush greenery and her magic which causes Rapunzel's hair to grow to such luxuriant lengths that it can be used as a rope. The true mother is the one that is hungry, the one that devours the salad greens that give her daughter her name. She is the one that surrenders her daughter.

I thought about these matters a great deal in creating my character of the witch in *Bitter Greens*, for it is her voice and her story that makes up one of the three narrative threads. I needed to somehow make her a sympathetic character, despite all the evil that she does. Also, because I was writing a historical novel, I had to make sure that she was a woman with no greater supernatural powers that would have been believable in Renaissance Italy.

My research of the period had taught me that 16th century women of the Venetian Republic were kept tightly confined within certain roles. They were nuns, wives, or courtesans. Reading about the salons of the courtesans, where the discussion of art, music, literature and politics was as important as their sexual availability, I decided that my witch-figure – Selena Leonelli, called La Strega Bella or the beautiful witch - would be one of these *cortigiane onesta*. I read the biography of Veronica Franca, the most famous of the honest courtesans, and found a few horrifying facts about their lives that sparked

ideas about what may have so misshapen a woman's life that she felt the need to lock another young woman away. Discovering that there had been a deadly outbreak of bubonic plague in Venice in the 1580s, I wove that into her life also.

I had also discovered, during my research, that the 16th century Venetian artist Tiziano Vecelli (better known in English as Titian) had famously painted the same red-haired woman – believed to be a courtesan and his mistress - over and over again during the seventy-odd years of his artistic career. This was an extraordinary fit with what I had already planned for my witch, and so Selena became Titian's mysterious red-haired muse.

Finally, I needed to understand Renaissance Italian attitudes to witchcraft. My research led me to Carlo Ginzburg's *Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century* (1966), which draws upon the official Inquisition archives from the 16th & 17th centuries. Ginzburg shows that the peasant culture of Renaissance Italy was deeply rooted in early European fertility cults which bear a striking similarity to Göttners-Abendroth's theory of an ancient matriarchal mythology. This belief system was called *La Vecchia Religione*, or the Old Religion. Female witches were called *strega* and male witches were called *stregone*, and their rituals were seasonal and ecstatic. Each village had a witch who was one of the 'Benandanti' (good walkers). On four ritual occasions of the year, they battled with the 'Malandanti' (evil walkers) in a conflict to protect the crops of the

people. Confessions of these 'witches' were recorded by the Inquisition after 1575. I drew upon this research in my creation of the beliefs and practices of my witch Selena, as well as the work of academics and anthropologists such as James Frazer and Marija Gimbutas.

Jungian psychologists believe the archetypal figure of the mother must be confronted and transcended in the process of individuation. In other words, a child must break free of the tie to the mother figure before he or she can go grow into a strong and individual adult (Watts, Cockcroft & Duncan 2009, p. 246) This links back to Göttner-Abendroth's theories of the three-faced goddess: the role of the crone is always that of forcing transformation and change.

In terms of thinking through my representation in *Bitter Greens* of the relationship between Rapunzel and the witch, these readings helped me to conceive of the story as one surpassing that of a young-woman-as-prisoner. It is the story of a young woman, held in a state of stasis, who somehow finds the way to break free and be transformed from child to woman, from maiden to mother, from powerless prisoner to a powerful agent of birth, healing and redemption. None of this would be possible if she did not have to struggle against the figure of the dark feminine, the witch.

Indeed, in *Bitter Greens*, the reformed witch Selena in one sense gives birth to the maiden Margherita through her storytelling. She invents the girl, as she

invents the tale, and so is the girl's metaphorical mother as much as midwife.

Although it is clear that Wilhelm Grimm's changes to the story diluted much of the agency of the heroine, his work also simplified and streamlined the story, and brought a freshness and poetic intensity to the language. When people think of 'Rapunzel', they think of the Grimms. It is their version – with the never-to-be-forgotten addition of the chant, 'Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair' - which entered popular imagination and did much to ensure the story's survival, as I explore further in the following chapter.

Chapter 6

Girls in Attics:

The Descendants of Rapunzel

Since the Grimm Brothers' version of 'Rapunzel' was first translated into English in the mid-19th century, there has been an astonishing array of retellings, reimaginings and revisionings of the tale, including poems, short stories, novels, operas, ballets, and animated children's films.

Feminist thinking about fairy tales in the 1970s would drive a lively reassessment about the gender politics of stories such as 'Rapunzel' and the power such tales have in shaping – and misshaping - women's 'psycho-sexual self-concepts' (Lieberman, quoted in Hasse 2004, p. 3). By the 1980s, feminist scholars proposed that 'myth, tale, and tragedy must be transformed by bold acts of reinterpretation in order to enter the experience of the emerging female self' (Heilbrun, quoted in Hasse 2004, p. 5).

Meanwhile, fairy tale studies by both men and women were rediscovering the female sources of many of the tales, from the long-ignored *conteuses* of the 17th century Parisian salons to the middle-class women who told the Grimm brothers so many of their most famous tales. Long-lost tales were revived, and long-known tales

were illuminated by new understanding of their sources and evolution (Haase 2004, pp. 8-21).

Fairy tales studies nowadays are therefore deeply informed by new and sometimes ambivalent thinking about gender, politics, psychology, and society. This can create a kind of 'cognitive dissonance' (Haase 2004, p. 27) in readers of fairy tales and fairy tale retellings, who may on the one hand be entranced by the beauty of the tales and, on the other hand, feel guilty because of the tales' perceived role in upholding outmoded patriarchal and bourgeois views of society. As a writer working in the 21st century, it is impossible for me not to be aware of this dissonance, and also aware of the way retellers of tales must choose to maintain and reproduce the fairy tale framework, or to disrupt and transgress it (Preston, in Haase 2004, pp. 198-200).

It is also impossible for me to work without being acutely aware of the retellers of the tale who have gone before me, each reimagining the tale in new ways and so disrupting and destabilising the original sources. In this final section of my mythic biography of Rapunzel, I examine the most interesting and influential of these retellings and the ways in which they helped shape my own individual creative vision.

The Grimm brothers' *Kinder-und-Hausmärchen* was translated into English for the first time in 1823 by Edgar Taylor, but he saw Rapunzel as being too sexually provocative and so did not include it. This English

translation, entitled *German Popular Stories*, was aimed specifically at children, and much of the violence, cruelty and sexuality was toned down, to make the stories, as David Blamires notes, 'more reassuring and less disturbing' (2009, p. 154). The book was beautifully illustrated by George Cruickshank, which was a major factor in its popularity.

Its unexpected success inspired Wilhelm and Jakob Grimm to produce their own children's edition, illustrated by their brother Ludwig, and generally called the 'Small Edition', published in late 1824. Wilhelm chose fifty-two stories, also excluding 'Rapunzel', although the story continued to be included in the KHM 'Large Editions' until the final version published in 1857.

In 1846, 'Rapunzel' was translated into English for the first time by John Edward Taylor, cousin to Edgar Taylor, in a collection named *The Fairy Ring: A New Collection of Popular Tales*. The story was renamed 'Violet', and the pregnant mother craved the flowers of the violet to smell instead of green leaves to eat (Blamires 2009, pp. 160-161).

In 1853, a new translation of the Grimm tales appeared in a two-volume edition entitled *Household Stories*, published by Addey & Co. The books were illustrated by Edward H. Wehnert and it is believed he was also the translator, with the assistance of members of his German-speaking family (Blamires 2009, p. 163). In Wehnert's version, the plant is named as a radish and the

girl is named Rapunzel, and so the symbolic link between the forbidden food and the girl is definitively broken.

Lucy Crane's collection was published in 1882 and illustrated by her brother Walter (Blamires 2009, p. 170). In this collection, the plant is named rampion and the girl Rapunzel (though the story states that these are the same). Lucy Crane's small collection was followed by the magisterial translation by Margaret Hunt in 1884, which included all scholarly notes.

The first creative response to the tale was made by the Victorian poet and artisan William Morris, who met the poet Edward Burne-Jones at Oxford in the 1850s. Both shared a love of all things medieval and magical, which led them to becoming friends with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, and William Holman Hunt, founding members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. It was probably Millais who introduced Morris to the Wehnert edition of Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, as he had been taught painting by Wehnert in Jersey as a boy (de la Sizeranne 2008, p. 161).

Morris's imagination was seized by the tales, and, in particular, by the tale of 'Rapunzel'. He began work on a long poem with the same name in late 1857. It was around this time that Morris met his future wife, Jane Burden. In February 1858, he persuaded her to marry him. He was not quite twenty-five years old, and Jane was only eighteen. The same month, the publishers Bell & Daldy published *The Defence of Guenevere & Other*

Poems at Morris's expense. 'Rapunzel' was the sixth of these poems, and has all the atmosphere of a dream, and the corresponding dreamlike disconnection from time and space. Although the poem was inspired by a story, there is no sense of narrative causality in the events.

The three key characters in Morris's 'Rapunzel' (the prince, the maiden and the witch) all speak in turn. The witch cries again and again, 'Rapunzel, Rapunzel, Let down your hair!'; 'Rapunzel, Rapunzel, weep through your hair!'; 'Is there any who will dare, to climb up the yellow stair, Glorious Rapunzel's golden hair?' (These lines seem to be the origin of the well-known catchphrase, 'Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair, so I may climb the golden stair.')

The poem is rich with sensuality. The prince, on seeing Rapunzel, cries:

Glowing all crimson in the fire
Of sunset, I behold a face,
Which sometime, if God give me grace,
May kiss me in this very place.

The next stanza begins: 'Evening in the tower', and Rapunzel speaks:

It grows half way between the dark and
light;
Love, we have been six hours here alone,
I fear that she will come before the night,
And if she finds us thus we are undone.

The two then escape the tower: 'Now let us go, love, down the winding stair, with fingers intertwined'.

Once the two are free, the prince reveals his name -
Sebald - then renames Rapunzel:

Gold or gems she did not wear,
But her yellow rippled hair,
Like a veil, hid Guendolen!

Names, as Morris would well have known, are very important in fairy tales. The name Rapunzel was given to the maiden in the original Grimm source to remind her that her own mother had given her up in order to indulge her uncontrollable longing to eat the plant of that name. The name Guendolen, however, comes from the Welsh. The word *gwen* means 'white, fair, blessed' and *dolen* means 'ring, circle, or links in a chain'. The heroine's new name is filled with potent symbolism – a ring is an emblem of wholeness, completeness, and the circular pattern of life, death and rebirth, the cycle that has no beginning and no end. The prince – by giving the heroine a new name - has given her the chance for a new beginning.

After their crowning as king and queen, Prince Sebald says:

I took my armour off,
Put on king's robes of gold,
Over the kirtle green
The gold fell fold on fold.

This seems, to me, a clear decision, on the part of the prince, to put away his trappings of war, and to embrace principles of love and peace, symbolised by the

'green kirtle' of nature. The prince's choice exemplifies Morris's own passionate love of nature and the Pre-Raphaelites' philosophy of returning to an older, pre-industrial mode of life (Harvey & Press 1991, pp. 110-116).

Love clearly triumphs. Guendolen says, at the end of the poem:

I am so glad, for every day
He kisses me much the same way
As in the tower; under the sway
Of all my golden hair.

The witch, that inscrutable representation of the dark feminine in the poem, calls despairingly from hell:

Guendolen! Guendolen!
One lock of hair.

Recent feminist readings of Morris's work have highlighted his preoccupations with themes of love and redemption, and pointed to the extraordinary number of 'wise' and 'cunning women' in his work. Florence C. Boos, Professor of Victorian Literature at the University of Iowa, called his work "explosively sexual' and said, 'the hero is always seeking, he is always guided by this inner ideal, which to him is associated with fertility, and with life, and with sexuality without guilt or malice or possessiveness' (2007).

With his poem 'Rapunzel', Morris looked below the surface of the Grimm fairy tale to find a story of an archetypal quest for self-realisation, a mythic journey of separation, initiation and return. He recognised the

strong undercurrents of sexuality in the original fairy tale, understood its universal themes of love and longing and liberty, and gave voice to the powerful mythic archetypes of Maiden and Crone. His poem inspired both the sensual painting of *Rapunzel Sings From the Tower* by Frank Cadogan Cowper in 1908, and Lou Harrison's 1952 opera *Rapunzel*. For me, it is the sheer beauty, romance and sensuality of the poem which appeals and which I tried to capture in my own interpretation of 'Rapunzel'. I too wanted my work to be filled with symbolic images of life, love and redemption, and to hold within it a sense of the numinous, as well as of the sensuous. I used two quotations from the poem as epigraphs in *Bitter Greens* in homage to Morris, my favourite pre-Raphaelite.

Edith Nesbit is an author who certainly knew William Morris and his work, though 'Melisande', her light-hearted, comic *Rapunzel* retelling - published in 1901 - is different in every way. Nesbit was the niece of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his sister Christina (the author of 'Goblin Fruit') and friends with May Morris, William Morris's daughter.

Born in 1858, Nesbit met her future husband Hubert Bland at the age of eighteen and married him a few years later when she was seven months pregnant. The marriage was tempestuous and unconventional, with Nesbit raising her husband's two illegitimate children as well as her own three, and his mistress living with the

family as their housekeeper and secretary. Refusing to wear the tight-fitting, figure-enhancing clothes of the era, Nesbit cut her hair short and rolled her own cigarettes (Campbell 2010, p. 64).

Being the primary breadwinner for the family after her husband was struck down with smallpox, Nesbit began to write with her first novel *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, which was published in 1899. In her short story 'Melisande' (1901), the heroine is cursed by an evil fairy at her christening and grows up bald, but finds herself facing a whole other set of problems when her wish for golden hair is fulfilled:

'The Princess's hair began by being a yard long, and it grew an inch every night. If you know anything at all about the simplest sums you will see that in about five weeks her hair was about two yards long. This is a very inconvenient length. It trails on the floor and sweeps up all the dust, and though in palaces, of course, it is all gold-dust, still it is not nice to have it in your hair.' The king's fairy godmother suggested: 'Why not advertise for a competent Prince? Offer the usual reward.' (Nesbit, in Auerbach & Knoepfmacher 2014, p182)

The prince Florizel answered the advertisement, and was able to help break the curse, and the two married in the end. The story gently parodies the usual fairy tale style of the time and was applauded for 'mocking earlier stereotypes of females magnified by male desire' (Auerbach & Knoepfmacher, quoted in Campbell 2010, p. 64).

'Melisande' was thus the first reworking of 'Rapunzel' with a subversive (pre)feminist edge, something which I too wished to do in my own retelling. Similarly, Nesbit's story had a fresh and unusual mixture of realism and fantasy, which kept her work sharp and unsentimental and helped make it feel real, as if it had really happened. I also like to keep my fantasy strongly rooted in the real, and in *Bitter Greens* I wanted to create that feeling of aliveness and possibility. Nesbit has been called 'the first modern writer for children' by her biographer Julia Briggs (2000, p. xi). Earlier children's books were marked by their didacticism, but as attitudes towards the concept of childhood changed throughout the 19th century, so did the type of books being written for children. Nesbit was the first to set her tales of magical adventure in an ordinary, everyday setting that child readers would instantly recognise, and she was also one of the first to create child protagonists that were neither cloyingly perfect nor flat and one-dimensional. Her work signalled a cultural shift in children's literature towards works that challenged traditional models of thought and behaviour (Campbell, L.M 2010, p. 63), and she is acknowledged as being a strong influence on many later children's writers including Edward Eager, C.S. Lewis, and Nicholas Stuart Gray, the writer of the next significant Rapunzel retelling, almost a hundred years later.

Born on 23 October 1922, in Scotland, Gray made up stories and plays from a young age to amuse his brothers and sisters, and to try and escape his unhappy childhood. Gray left home at the age of fifteen, finding work as an actor and stage manager. His first play was produced before he was twenty years old, and he turned to writing for children in 1949 after seeing a hundred or more children queuing up for the cinema and wondering why there was no comparable entertainment for them in the theatre. He wrote the play *Beauty and the Beast* as a result; it was shown at the Mercury Theatre in London in 1950. Gray wanted, he has said, 'to give the children a sense of magic. Nobody attends to this enough. They give them too much realism. They can see it all on the box, they can see frightful things there. But they're not being given a world to *escape* to ... the world of the imagination. Children must have an escape line somewhere' (Wintle, J. & Fisher, p. 152).

The Stone Cage was published in 1963 and is a retelling of 'Rapunzel' from the point of view of the witch's cat. Gray's story line follows the basic plot of the well-known Grimm fairy tale, which had been translated into English in 1884 by Margaret Hunt. Her translation was based upon the 1857 edition of the Grimm's *Kinder- und-Hausmärchen*, in which the character of Rapunzel is at its most passive and childlike. There is no mention of any sex, or pregnancy, or birth of twins in that tale, and Rapunzel betrays herself to the witch by complaining how much heavier she is to pull up than the prince.

Within the narrow confines of that tale, Gray created a story that celebrates the redemptive power of love. Tomlyn the cat and Marshall the raven – natural enemies and rivals for the witch’s rare expressions of affection – are united in their desire to save Rapunzel. They protect her from the witch, an old, ugly and malicious woman who craves power.

The story begins when the witch tricks a woodcutter into giving up his newborn daughter. He asks her what she intends to do with the baby. ‘Mother Gothel answers the man’s question in a small and faraway voice: “I will teach her my craft. Teach her to be the greatest and wickedest witch in all the world”’ (p. 63). However, her plans are thwarted when Tomlyn and Marshall lay a spell on the little girl so that she is unable to work magic. Rapunzel grows to maturity, frustrating and angering the witch in her inability to remember even the simplest of spells.

The two conspirators bring a young man to the witch’s garden in the hope he will rescue Rapunzel, but unwittingly she betrays him by complaining how much heavier the witch is to pull up. He leaps from the tower and is blinded. Again, the cat and the raven work to bring Rapunzel and the prince together again, even though Rapunzel has been banished to the dark side of the moon. In the final confrontation, the raven tells the witch he no longer fears her. Rapunzel agrees, ‘very clearly and gently: ‘I’m not afraid of Mother Gothel,

either.' 'The witch gave a shrill cry ... "You must fear me! You must! Sorcery can only thrive on fear' (p. 238).

Rapunzel's courage – and the bravery of her animal friends – together overcome the witch and she is transformed by the raven's magic into a bare and lifeless-looking tree. There she must stay, 'dead and dried, till a heart may grow inside' (p. 242). Rapunzel and her prince return to the human world, but the raven and the cat stay with the witch on the dark side of the moon, to look after her until she returns to being human. In the final scene, Tomlyn the cat pours a few drops of water on the tree's roots, and a small, green leaf uncurls from a bare twig. In this way, Gray shows how the animals' faithfulness and compassion to the witch, despite her wickedness, hold out the hope of her redemption.

As stated previously, *The Stone Cage* was the first spur to my desire to write my own retelling of 'Rapunzel'. Although I too wanted to show how courage and compassion can win out over malice, I always felt that Gray's heroine was too sweet and biddable, and that she must have suffered more in being confined within such a small space all of her life. I felt the story needed an extra charge of both dread and desire.

The next revisioning of 'Rapunzel' was to wrest the fairy tale back into the adult realm. It was the seventh poem in Anne Sexton's collection *Transformations* (1971), and described by her 'this book of odd tales/ which transform the Brother Grimm' (p. 2).

Sexton was born Anne Gray Harvey in November 1928 into a comfortably middle-class family in Newton,

Massachusetts. Her childhood was troubled. Her father was an alcoholic, her mother emotionally distant, and although she was close to her great-aunt, Anna Ladd Dingley, Sexton was later to accuse both her and her father of incestuous abuse.

At the age of nineteen, Sexton eloped with Alfred Muller Sexton II (nicknamed Kayo). Her first daughter, Linda, was born in July 1953, and Sexton was diagnosed by post-natal depression. The birth of her second child, Joyce, in August 1955 triggered another wave of rage and despair. On her 28th birthday, she attempted suicide for the first time (Middlebrook 1991).

In 1957, Sexton began to write poetry, encouraged by her therapist Dr Martin Orne. She joined several Boston writing groups, meeting poets such as Maxine Kumin, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath, who were to be highly influential to her writing. Her first book of poems, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, was published in 1960. Only five years later, Sexton received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *Live or Die* (1966), the culmination of an extraordinary list of honours.

However, poetic inspiration began to fail her. Months followed in which she was unable to write. One day in 1970, she was talking on the telephone with Maxine Kumin about her writer's block, when Sexton mentioned the story of 'Snow White' which she felt reflected her own life. When Kumin said that she could not remember much about the tale, Sexton asked her daughter Linda to read the story to Kumin on the phone.

As she listened 'little sparks' were fired in her imagination. Sexton began to see the possibility of writing a series of poems based upon fairy tales (Middlebrook 1991, p. 333).

The poem 'Rapunzel' (1971) begins:

A woman
who loves a woman
is forever young.

At once Sexton ruptures the usual reading of 'Rapunzel' as a story about an over-protective mother-figure, reframing it as a lesbian romance. This is a radical retelling of the traditional tale, subverting usual narrative expectations of the tale as a heterosexual love affair. The poem continues, a little further on:

Many a girl
had an old aunt
who locked her in the study
to keep the boys away.

Later, the 'old aunt' – the witch of the poem - implores the girl: 'Give me your nether lips/ all puffy with their art/ and I will give you angel fire in return'.

These erotic images may have been inspired by Sexton's relationship to her own 'old aunt', Anna Ladd Dingley, whom Sexton believed had molested her. The incident was told by Sexton to her psychotherapist Dr Orne in a 'trance-like state'. Certainly, there is no doubt that incest 'repeatedly surfaces, like a dark fin, in Sexton's work' (Hughes 1991). A recent analysis of her life and

work by Dawn Skorczewski concludes that Sexton was, in all probability, an incest survivor.

In this section, there are two references to water. The first, 'for I am at the mercy of rain' seems to reference both Rapunzel's healing tears and the sense of rain as a force of nature, pounding the narrator down. The second, 'the sea bangs into my cloister', extends the impression of strength and power and even violence of the lovers' meeting while also playing with the vernacular of the verb 'bang' as an euphemism for sexual intercourse. The sea, like all bodies of water, has always been associated with the feminine, as well as being a symbol of the subconscious, while a cloister (from the Latin *claustrum*, meaning enclosure) refers literally to a nunnery's inner garden and metaphorically to a woman's womb.

The poem is filled with images of gardens and plants: 'The yellow rose will turn to cinder', 'Let me hold your heart like a flower/ lest it bloom and collapse', 'we lie together all in green/ like pond weeds', 'They are as tender as bog moss'. The plant rampion is described as 'life-giving' twice, and at the end of the poem Rapunzel's tears are described as 'cure-alls', a reference to German rampion's common name 'king's cure-all'.

The poem finishes with the conclusion that 'mother-me-do/can be outgrown ... just as a tricycle', intimating that the girl outgrew her love for the 'aunt' as she herself grew into womanhood. The poem concludes 'only as she dreamed of the yellow hair, did moonlight sift into her mouth', a line of subtle beauty that is limned

with the radiance of the moon, symbol of romantic love, while referencing ancient mythic beliefs as the moon as a goddess of powerful feminine magic.

Anne Sexton's poem *Rapunzel* was significant in the way it reframed the tale in a contemporary setting with contemporary language. It also disrupted expected readings of traditional fairy tales, opening them up to new ways of thinking. The poetry collection *Transformations* was thus one of the first works of creative narrative to subvert and even sabotage well-known fairy tales of the Western canon.

Sexton's work was inspired and informed by the immense social, political and philosophical upheaval of the 1960s, during which the norms of a patriarchal and bourgeois society were challenged and upset. New thinking about the role of women in society and about racial and sexual identity led to many new voices and forms of literary expression and a desire to give voice to those who had been rendered mute by society ⁹.

I have long been fascinated by Anne Sexton and her work, and first read *Transformations* in my undergraduate degree. I remember the shock and thrill of that first reading. I wanted to capture some of that electrifying charge of subversion and transformation in

⁹ Anne Sexton's work helped ignite an explosion of feminist fairy tale scholarship in the work of such scholars as Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Marcia R. Lieberman and Mary Daly, which then reverberated in the stories and novels of such writers as Robin McKinley, Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Tanith Lee and Terri Windling, who all wrote strikingly original and often revolutionary fairy tale retellings in the decades to follow. Much as I would love to discuss their work, the length restrictions of this exegesis mean that I, unfortunately, cannot.

my novel *Bitter Greens*. I also wanted to explore the possibility of a lesbian relationship between captor and captive, an interpretation of their relationship that seems impossible not to consider in light of new thinking about gender, sexuality and the body in the 21st century.

In the late 1990s, 'Rapunzel' was once again retold in novel form by Donna Jo Napoli, helping to spark a tsunami of fairy tale retellings for teenagers that is still rippling strongly today.

Donna Jo Napoli was born into a large Italian-American family in 1948. She never intended to become a writer, though she was an avid reader. After suffering a miscarriage, Napoli worked through her grief by writing letters to a friend, who saved them, telling her they should be turned into a novel. Napoli realised then that she loved to write, and she began to try her hand at stories (Crew 2010, p. 4).

One day her daughter, Eva, asked why there were so many mean women in fairy tales. Napoli's 'little feminist heart beat hard' in response (p. 19), and prompted her to write the award-winning *The Magic Circle*, a retelling of Hansel and Gretel told from the point of view of the witch.

Her next published novel was *Zel* (1996), a retelling of Rapunzel set in Switzerland in the mid-1500s. Napoli chose to tell the tale from three different points of view: Zel (a nickname for Rapunzel), her mother – who remains nameless – and Konrad (the son of a count). The

story began from the point of view of Zel on the eve of her thirteenth birthday, a happy, curious child looking forward to the adventure of going to town. The narrative is written in the present tense, another unusual choice, perhaps used to heighten the sense of immediacy, perhaps to create a childish, living-in-the-moment voice.

The next chapter is a sharp change of gear, moving to the more formal, controlled first person voice of the mother. There is a cruel undertow to her voice. The cloth merchant angers her by saying her daughter must be nearly old enough to marry. The mother thinks: 'I would hiss at her ... I could whisper to her of berries that turn poisonous as they roll into her mouth, of greens that catch in her throat and choke' (p. 18).

Meanwhile, back at the smithy, Zel meets a boy who is intrigued by her frankness and lack of deference. When Konrad gets home, it is to find his father has announced his betrothal to another girl. Konrad is horrified.

The next section is far darker and more psychologically intense. Once Mother realised Zel has met – and liked – a young man, she grows angry and tells Zel that she is taking her to 'a safe place', a tower abandoned many centuries before (p. 64). Zel lives alone in the tower for two years. Her mother visits her for only one hour every day. In the meantime, Konrad grows obsessed with finding Zel again. All experience a kind of madness: the mother unhinged by the possessiveness of her love, the daughter harrowed by her solitary

imprisonment, a young man fixated on a girl he barely knows.

We discover the mother's motivations for her cruelty: she had been a barren woman who grew so fixated by her need to have her own child that she makes a Faustian deal with the Devil. Here, in the middle of the book – the psychic pivot of the story – Napoli retells the Rapunzel fairy tale in the mother's cold, precise, angry voice: 'One day the pregnant woman sent her beery husband on an errand of thievery. He climbed the wall and stole rapunzel. The barren woman watched him from the shadow of her home' (p. 132).

When the story returns to Zel's point of view, the narrative coherency has broken down, reflecting the emotional tumult of the imprisoned girl. Konrad finds her, watches Mother climb up, and then down, the braids of hair, and then climbs up them himself, before seducing Zel: 'He believes he might die, he might burst like the constellation of Perseus in August – a shower of shooting stars – but for her call, her cry ...' (p. 180) It is a scene of intense and visceral sensuality, startling for its time.

The final scenes happen quickly, each shift between point of view quickening, each chapter only a few pages long. The plot line follows the traditional narrative trajectory. However, in Napoli's retelling, there was one clear distinction – the witch at once repents of her action and uses the very last of her strength to grow brambles around the tower to catch Konrad and save his

life. The final words of the witch in the narrative were:

'He lives. I die.'

The final section is extremely brief, with the point of view changing to that of an omnipresent and omniscient narrator (where each previous chapter has named the narrator in the heading, this final the section is entitled simply 'All'). Blind and alone, Konrad wanders, drawn on by a force he cannot understand. Zel raises her daughters and creates with her hands, though 'fear can still seize her' (p. 214). The witch is still present in the narrative. She says: 'I watch the world. I have no powers anymore. I see as though through a goose eye.' Then, a few pages on, as Konrad gropes his way towards Zel, the witch says: 'I listen to the world. I have no powers anymore. I hear as though through a man's ears.' Zel weeps on Konrad's eyes and the final words of the book are: 'And they see each other and, yes, oh, yes, we are happy' (p. 227).

Zel is an extraordinary imaginative achievement, a dark, poetic, psychologically acute novel of obsessive love that gives the witch-figure a voice and a motivation for her actions, something that I hoped to do in *Bitter Greens*. I also loved Napoli's bravado in her willingness to play with language and allow the incoherency of her text to reflect the incoherency of a girl driven mad with her imprisonment. This too is something I like to do in my own writing, and a technique I employ in *Bitter Greens*.

Zel was to inspire a great many other young adult novels that draw upon fairy tales, including the

'Rapunzel' retellings *The Tower Room* by Adèle Geras, set in a 1960s girls boarding school (2005); *Golden: A Retelling of Rapunzel* by Cameron Dokey in which the heroine is born bald (2006); and *Letters from Rapunzel* by Sara Lewis Holmes which tells a the story of a modern-day girl whose father is battling with depression (2007). This new flowering of fairy-tale-inspired fiction for teenagers occurred at the same time as a general boom in the genre: between 1995 and 2005, there was a 25 per cent rise in the number of books published for young adults (Hill, C. 2014, p. 3).

The number of 'Rapunzel'-inspired short stories also quickened, with eight such stories in the next eight years. The most striking are by Lisa Russ Spaar, Emma Donoghue, Tanith Lee and Beth Adele Long, whose story contains a section wittily entitled 'Instructions on How to Raise your Captor, Jailer, and Negative Mother Figure up Into a Tower by Your Hair.'

'Rapunzel' poems also continued to be written during this period, most notably by Gwen Strauss, Lisa Russ Spaar, and Nicole Cooley.¹⁰ Strauss writes, in her poem 'The Prince': 'All my childhood I heard about love/but I thought only witches could grow it/in gardens behind walls too high to climb' (Beaumont & Carlson, p. 75).

¹⁰ These poems all appeared in Beaumont & Carlson 2003. Please see Appendix 1 for a list of other 'Rapunzel'-inspired novels, short stories and poems

In 'Rapunzel Shorn', Spaar writes: 'I'm redeemed, head light/as seed mote, as a fasting/girl's among these thorns, lips/and fingers bloody with fruit' (p. 74).

Cooley's poem 'Rampion' (p. 164) is concerned with the relationship between mothers and daughters: 'Once upon a time/a woman longed for a child, but see how one desire easily/replaces the next ...'

Discovering these poems, and many others published in *The Poets' Grimm: 20th Century Poems from the Grimm Fairy Tales* (Beaumont & Carlson, 2003), was a delight; it led me to put extracts from my favourite 'Rapunzel' poems as epigraphs at the beginning of each section of *Bitter Greens*. I had a number of reasons for doing this. Firstly, I wanted to share these beautiful, powerful poems with others. Secondly, I wanted to use the poems to highlight the key themes or events in each separate section. For example, in one of the darkest sections of Charlotte-Rose's narrative, I use a poem by Arlene Ang in which the prince 'failed to see the woodpile/of chewed bones at the corner of the hearth.' Finally, I wanted to show that the 'Rapunzel' fairy tale continues to be as alive and relevant today as it was hundreds of years ago.

This was amply demonstrated in 2008, when the husband-wife writing team, Shannon and Dean Hale, reinvented the tale as a wise-cracking, whip-cracking graphic novel set in the Wild West, illustrated with energy by Nathan Hale (no relation to the authors).

Shannon was already a well-known reteller of fairy tales for a young adult audience; this collaboration was her husband Dale's first book.

Rapunzel's Revenge is an exuberant and funny version of the fairy tale, set in a mythic Wild West world. The heroine, Rapunzel, is the pampered yet lonely daughter of an immensely rich and powerful woman who has 'growth magic' which enables her to make plants grow far beyond their natural state. Rapunzel is troubled by dreams and curious about the world beyond her mother's hacienda, but is never permitted to see what lies beyond. On her twelfth birthday she manages to scale the high wall and sees that beyond the hacienda a terrible industrial wasteland, devoid of trees, where countless people labour in mining pits among black-belching smoke-stacks. 'Well, I'll be swigger-jiggered and hung out to dry,' Rapunzel says (2008, p. 12).

Rapunzel climbs over the wall and goes down into the mining pits, where she at once meets her real mother and realises she had been snatched by Mother Gothel. The two are forcibly separated, and Rapunzel goes back to the hacienda to confront the woman she now knows is her kidnapper. Rapunzel is banished to an immensely tall tree in a swamp. In the tree, Rapunzel's hair grows 'ridiculously long'; she begins to use it as a skipping rope, as a whip to smack away spiders, and as a swing. One day she uses her hair to lasso another tree in the forest and rappels her way to freedom. Eventually she meets up a rapscallion thief named Jack (who once climbed a

beanstalk). They team up, and set out on a wild adventure to help the helpless and defeat Mother Gothel.

Rapunzel does most of the fighting, using her long, thin, red braids of hair like a lasso, while Jack is quick on his feet and quick with a joke. Together they grapple with outlaw gangs, surly henchmen, a pack of rabid coyotes and an ungrateful little girl, all the while avoiding their 'Wanted: Dead or Alive' posters. The story is told primarily through sharp and witty dialogue, allowing the illustrations to do most of the work.

When asked why she and her husband Dale chose the 'Rapunzel' fairy tale to parody, Hale answered: 'Rapunzel seemed to have built-in weapons of kick-butt proportions, besides suffering through one of the most pathetic fairy tales of all time in need a serious makeover. (Why on earth didn't the prince just bring her a rope, for Pete's sake?)' (Blasingham 2010, p. 518). A good question, and one which I had to consider in my own very different retelling of the tale. For me, it was important that the heroine's escape from the tower was not too easy. She needed to struggle to find the strength and the courage and some kind of understanding of herself and the witch before she could break free.

Two years after the publication of *Rapunzel's Revenge*, Walt Disney Animation Studio released a funny, light-hearted retelling of the well-known Grimm tale entitled *Tangled*. It featured a girl who can use her magical hair as a lasso, and a wise-cracking thief as the hero. It is hard to

believe the similarities between *Rapunzel's Revenge* and *Tangled* are mere coincidence. Shannon Hale certainly noticed the resemblances herself, tweeting in January 2011: 'Just watched Tangled. Feeling slightly violated.' (Hale 2011).

Released on 24 November 2010, *Tangled* was Walt Disney Animation Studio's 50th animated motion picture and their first to be shot in 3D. It cost the studio \$260 million to create, making it the most expensive animated film ever to be made, but earned more than \$590 million worldwide (Muljadi n.d., p. 366-387). The studio promoted it with the tagline: '*Tangled* is the ultimate story of breaking free after being grounded for life.'

The story, the studio announced in its publicity material, 'is based on the classic German fairy tale *Rapunzel* by the Brothers Grimm.' Most journalists added the adverb 'loosely'. That is probably an understatement. There is little remaining of the original story except for a girl in a tower, a witch, and a whole lot of hair.

Disney Animation Studios adroitly sidestepped most of the key moral dilemmas in the tale. Their heroine is not a poor girl sold for a handful of lettuce, but a beloved princess kidnapped from her bed. The tower is not a prison, but a vast and luxurious palace. Most importantly, it is not difficult for Rapunzel to leave her tower – she can simply abseil her way out anytime she pleases, thanks to the magical properties of her glowing,

golden hair. The only bar to her freedom is her duty to the woman she thinks is her mother.

The film deliberately sets out to be light-hearted, fast-paced, and sentimental. It makes the occasional nod to its forebears, but always in as frivolous and amusing way as possible, as in the following dialogic exchange:

Flynn Rider: Alright, blondie ...

Rapunzel: Rapunzel.

Flynn Rider: Gesundheit!

The narrative purpose of the movie is not to recount Rapunzel's escape from the tower – this occurs easily and joyously in a matter of seconds – but rather her journey towards the unmasking of her false mother and finding her true parents.

Tangled has its moments of charm, despite its abandonment of many of the key motifs of the plot, but the character of Mother Gothel is not one of them. She remains a cartoonish character, shallow and manipulative, with no moral ambiguity. As Mother Gothel says in *Tangled*, 'You want me to be the *bad* guy? Fine, now I'm the *bad* guy.'

One consequence of changing Rapunzel from a surrendered child to a stolen child is the alteration of the whole power mechanics of the tale. It is no longer what Bottigheimer calls 'a rise fairy tale', but rather becomes 'a restoration fairy tale'. The key difference, Bottigheimer explains in *Fairy Tales: A New History* (2009, pp. 11-13) is that in a restoration tale, the protagonist first loses, then - after a series of adventures and lessons - is returned to

their proper social and economic status. However, in a 'rise fairy tale', the story begins with 'a dirt-poor girl or boy who suffers the effects of grinding poverty and whose story continues with tests, tasks, and trials until magic brings about a marriage to royalty and a happy accession to great wealth' (2009, p. 11-12). The former upholds the socio-political status quo. The latter holds out the hope for social-political change.

Zipes said in an interview in 2013 that 'the Disney promoters should have called the film *Mangled* because of the way it slaughtered and emptied the meaning of the Grimms' and other 'Rapunzel' folk tales ... The major conflict is between a pouting adolescent princess and a witch. The Disney films repeatedly tend to demonize older women and infantilize young women. Gone are any hints that 'Rapunzel' might reflect a deeper initiation ritual in which wise old women keep young girls in isolation to protect them' (Cotfield & Hirai 2013, p. 3).

Disney's abandonment of the key motifs of the 'Rapunzel' tale and its messages about growth, transformation, and the hard journey towards wisdom shows that there is no steady 'evolution' from conservative attitudes to less conservative ones with the passing of time. Each teller makes their own individual choices in what aspects of the tale are to be preserved or abandoned, and thus even a story as full of camouflaged mythic power as 'Rapunzel' has the potential to be drained of all meaning whatsoever.

The Disney film *Tangled* did not have any creative influence on me, simply because I did not watch it until after I had written the first few drafts of my novel. However, I have included the animated fantasy here because it is impossible to examine any fairy tale without looking at its interpretation by the Disney studios, the most influential and in many ways controversial purveyor of fairy tales in contemporary times. Besides, it seems somehow fitting to bookend my mythic biography of Rapunzel between the great psychodrama of life, death and rebirth told in the oral tales of an ancient gynocentric religion and the frivolous, female-reductive whimsy that is *Tangled*. As Marina Warner writes: 'this process of loss has to be resisted' (1994, p. 417).

Right from the beginning of my creative journey, I wanted to restore the mythic power I sensed in 'Rapunzel'. The more I read, the more urgent this desire became for me.

As explored earlier in this exegesis, I feel 'Rapunzel' continues to be told and retold because it is a tale about escape. However, as this exegesis has outlined, it also has a deeper mythic resonance. The quintessential symbols and structural patterns of 'Rapunzel' are those of ancient tales that celebrate the ritual wounding and death of both heroine and hero in their journey through darkness and fear towards brightness and courage. I feel that we discard such metaphorical meaning at our own peril, and

that it is my job – as a storyteller, poet and novelist – to
strive to keep such wisdom alive.

Conclusion:

The Rebirth of Rapunzel

I began by wanting to retell a tale that has haunted my imagination since I was a child.

My desire led me on a journey that was far more difficult than I could ever have imagined. I had to discover the lost life of Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de La Force, the woman who wrote the tale as it is best known. I had to write three separate narrative threads, each set in a different time and place, each requiring an immense amount of research to bring the world of the story to life. I had to imagine myself into the skin of a woman who locked girls away from the world, and I had to imagine what it would be like to be one of those girls. I read and pondered hundreds of books, articles, stories and poems, and I wrote hundreds of thousands of words.

It took me seven years, a potent fairy tale number. Seven years spent wandering through the thorn-tangled forests of fairy tale, often afraid that I was lost, even more often afraid that I would fail. I struggled for a long time with the technical difficulties of writing such a complex novel, with my worry that it was all taking so long and was so hard and I was keeping my publishers waiting, with my anxiety that I was not a good enough writer to pull off all I was trying to do.

In this exegesis, I have articulated my motivations and purposes in re-telling 'Rapunzel', an ancient tale of terror and transformation, desire and deceit, imprisonment and escape, romance and redemption.

At first, I wished to understand why it is that this fairy tale has had such a fierce hold on my own imagination. I wanted to re-create some of the beauty and mystery and romance of the tale, which first enchanted me as a child; and I hoped to explore some of the more troubling aspects of the tale, the darkness and cruelty and eroticism which were ignored by those retellings of the tale which depicted a smiling maiden combing her hair in a rose-decorated turret. I also wished to rescue Rapunzel from the widely held misconception that she was 'a passive princess waiting patiently for her prince to come' (Wolf 2008, p. 167).

As I studied the tale in depth, my motivations became more complex. My discovery of La Force's life and work spoke strongly to my own feminism. Why is Charles Perrault remembered, I wondered angrily, when the women writers of the same era are forgotten? What about Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville, the Baroness d'Aulnoy, who invented the term 'fairy tale' and who was published before Perrault? What about Catherine Bernard, author of 'Riquet with the Tuft', Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier de Villandon, Perrault's niece and collaborator, or Henriette-Julie de Castelnau, the Countess of Murat and La Force's cousin? Their stories

are extraordinary, beautiful and powerful, and yet they are scarcely known outside academia. I felt an urgent need to rescue them also, to celebrate their lives and works, and to waken the rest of the world to their stories.

My discovery of La Force and her circle of brilliant clever and largely forgotten female *conteuses* also connected very strongly to a deep and abiding preoccupation of mine: the necessity of storytelling. Implicit in the broad-ranging and sometimes strident arguments about fairy tales and gender is the belief that the stories of our society help shape who we are. Most famously, the 1970s feminist Marcia R. Lieberman has written 'millions of women must surely have formed their psycho-sexual self-concepts, and their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behaviour would be rewarded and of the nature of the reward itself, in part from their favourite fairy tales' (in Haase 2004, p. 3). Equally implicit, then, must be the idea that one way to change the shape of who we are is to change the stories we tell.

This concept is at the heart of a movement in feminist creative arts that Jane Caputi has called 'psychic activism'. She appeals to female creative artists to actively bring about - by a reworking of the world's symbols, myths and language - an evolutionary shift in consciousness. 'One of the most significant developments to emerge out of the contemporary feminist movement was the quest to reclaim that symbolising/naming power, to refigure the female self from a gynocentric perspective,

to discover, revitalise and create a female oral and visual mythic tradition and use it, ultimately, to change the world', Caputi wrote (Larrigton 1992, p. 425).

Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor express the same aims in other words: 'Witches cast spells, not to do evil but to promote changes of consciousness. Witches cast spells as acts of redefinition. To respell the world means to redefine the root of our being. It means to redefine us and therefore change us' (1987, p. 425). If we can change the tale, we can change the world.

What I have come to realise is that some kind of psychic activism is at the heart of what I try to do in my storytelling. I am hoping to use old myths and tales in order to create new ones. I am retelling this old tale, in order to respell the world.

For me, 'Rapunzel' is such an old wise story, yet its archetypal wisdom is veiled by centuries of dust and cobwebs. In my novel *Bitter Greens* and in this exegesis, I'm trying to blow off those cobwebs and rub away the tarnish, hoping to make the brightness of the original myth shine out once more.

The journey has not been easy for me. Writing about my childhood illnesses has stirred up many unhappy memories that I had thought laid to rest long ago. Some scenes in *Bitter Greens* were so dark and disturbing they were difficult to write, and I suffered nightmares and anxiety as a result. The writing itself took so long and was at times so exhausting it took its toll on my loved ones as well on me: 'Why couldn't you just

write a simple fairy tale retelling like everyone else!' my husband exclaimed at one point.

Yet one thing that studying 'Rapunzel' has taught me is that all growth comes at some cost. To gain some kind of profound transformation, we need to undertake that journey into darkness, that symbolic wounding and death, before we can again travel upwards into light and understanding. Rapunzel had to have her long braid of hair cut off and be cast out of the tower to wander alone in the wilderness, before she could become the mother and queen and goddess she was meant to be.

So, in choosing to retell this tale, I was like a sorceress or a hag, the crone whose symbolic function is to be 'a midwife to the psyche' (Caputi, in Larrington 1992, p. 433). I stood on the threshold between the story's past and the story's possible future, one foot in green shadows, one foot in blazing light, one hand drawing out a thread, one hand wielding the snip-snap of shears. I was the midwife at Rapunzel's rebirth, and my own.

Appendix 1:

Retellings of 'Rapunzel'

Adult Novels

Forsyth, K. 2012, *Bitter Greens*, Random House Australia.

Children's & Young Adult Novels

Durst, S. 2007, *Into the Wild*, Razorbill, USA.

Durst, S. 2008, *Out of the Wild*, Razorbill USA.

Flinn, A. 2013, *Towering*, HarperTeen, USA.

Dokey, C. 2006, *Golden: A Retelling of 'Rapunzel'*,
Simon Pulse, USA.

Geras, A. 1990, *The Tower Room*, Hamish Hamilton, UK.

Gray, N. S. 1963, *The Stone Cage*, Dennis Dobson, UK.

Hilton, K.C., 2013, *My Name is Rapunzel*,
Amazon Digital Services, USA.

Mason, J. B. & Stephens, S.H. 2004, *Princess School: Let Down
Your Hair*, Scholastic, USA.

Masson, S. 2014, *The Crystal Heart*, Random House,
Australia.

Meyer, M. 2014, *Cress*, Feiwel & Friends, USA.

Mlynowski, S. 2014, *Whatever After #5: Bad Hair Day*,
Scholastic Press, USA.

Napoli, D.J. 1996, *Zel*, Puffin Books, USA.

Robins, M.E. 2013, *Sold for Endless Rue*, Forge, USA.

Turgeon, C. 2013, *The Fairest of Them All*, Touchstone, USA.

Picture Books & Graphic Novels

Berenzy, A. 1996, *Rapunzel*, Henry Holt, USA.

Gibbs, S., 2011, *Rapunzel*, Harper Collins Children's Books,
USA.

Hale, D. & Hale, S. 2008, *Rapunzel's Revenge*,
Bloomsbury Children's Books, USA.

Holmes, S. 2007, *Letters from Rapunzel*, Harper Collins, USA.

Impey, R. & Bailey, P (illus.) 2001, *Rapunzel and
Rumpelstiltskin*, Orchard Books, USA.

Lisi, V. 1995, *Rapunzel*, Leopard Books, UK.

Matthews, C. & Blackwood, F. (illustr.) 2005, *Emily's
Rapunzel Hair*, ABC Books, Australia.

Rogasky, B. & Hyman, T. S. (illus.), 1982, *Rapunzel*, Holiday
House, USA.

Stanley, D. 1997, *Petrosinella. A Neapolitan Rapunzel*, Puffin
Reprint, USA.

Storace, P. & Colón, R. (illustr.) 2007, *Sugar Cane: A Caribbean
Rapunzel*, Jump at the Sun, USA.

Wilcox, L. & Monks, L. (illustr.), *Falling for Rapunzel*,
Putnam Juvenile, USA.

Zelinsky, P.O. 1995, *Rapunzel*, Dutton, USA.

Short Stories & Novellas

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- Bishop, A. 1997, 'Rapunzel' in Datlow, E. & Windling, T. (eds.) *Black Swan, White Raven*, Avon Books, USA, pp.122-141.
- Bradley, J. 2013, *Beauty's Sister*, Penguin Books, Australia.
- Donoghue, E. 1997, 'The Tale of the Hair' in *Kissing the Witch*, HarperCollins, USA, pp. 83-99.
- Crane, L [1886] 1973, *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, Crown Publishers, USA, pp. 32-36.
- Friesner, E. 2000, 'Big Hair', in *Black Heart, Ivory Bones*, Avon Books, USA, pp. 23-37.
- Frost, G. 1995, 'The Root of the Matter; in *Snow White, Blood Red*, Avon Books, USA, pp. 161-195.
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- Wade, S. 1995, 'Like a Red, Red Rose' in *Snow White, Blood Red*, Datlow, E. & Windling, T. (eds.) Avon Books, USA, pp. 21-49

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¹¹ I compiled this list of 'Rapunzel' retellings with the help of Heidi Anne Heiner's Sur La Lune Fairy Tale website and Terri Windling's article on Rapunzel at the Journal of Mythic Arts. I am sure there are many other 'Rapunzel' retellings that I have missed, or which were created after I had finished my exegesis. I hope to discover them in time.

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