Kate Forsyth

Retelling Rapunzel

Abstract:

This article explores Australian author Kate Forsyth's obsession with 'Rapunzel', from the time she first read the fairy tale as a child in hospital through to her doctoral research into the history of the 'Maiden in the Tower' and her creative responses to the story as expressed in her novel *Bitter greens* and her poem 'In the tower'.

Biographical note:

Kate Forsyth wrote her first novel aged seven and has now sold more than a million books worldwide. Her most recent book, *Beauty in thorns,* is a reimagining of 'Sleeping Beauty' set amongst the passions and scandals of the Pre-Raphaelites. Other novels include *Bitter greens,* a retelling of 'Rapunzel' which won the 2015 American Library Association award for Best Historical Fiction; and *The wild girl*, the story of the forbidden romance behind the Grimm brothers' fairy tales. Named one of Australia's Favourite Fifteen Novelists, Kate has a doctorate in fairy-tale studies and is an accredited master storyteller with the Australian Guild of Storytellers. Kate is also a direct descendant of Charlotte Waring Atkinson, the author of the first book for children ever published in Australia.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Fairy tale – Rapunzel – Memoir

Most of you will not remember the moment in which you first fell in love with fairy tales.

I remember the day. Indeed, the very hour.

I was seven years old, and had been rushed to the Sydney Eye Hospital in the middle of the night with a dangerously high fever. I lay on a trolley, rattling along the corridors. White bars of light flashed over me, then long staves of darkness. Adults spoke incomprehensively above my head. I was lifted and swung onto a narrow bed with iron bars that clicked shut about me.

My mother leant over me. She told me that she had to go, that the doctors would look after me, that she would see me in the morning. I knew that she had to go home to look after my sister and my brother.

She pressed a book into my hand. It had an old-fashioned red leather cover and the words *Grimm's fairy tales* emblazoned in gold, with curlicues above and below. My mother kept a box of books hidden up high on a shelf for just such an emergency.

I listened to her footsteps, going away down the hallway, and then the ding and whoosh of the lift doors opening and closing, and the drone as it sank away, taking my mother from me.

White-coated strangers hung over me, hurting me, shining lights into the one eye that I could open. Needles pierced me. Machines crowded around me, humming and beeping.

They tried to take the book away, but I clutched it close. They called me endearments. Sweetie. Darling. Their faces seemed to recede and approach, recede and approach, in strange undulating waves. Their voices boomed one moment, then shrank to a mouse's squeak. Lights were haloed in shifting coloured spikes.

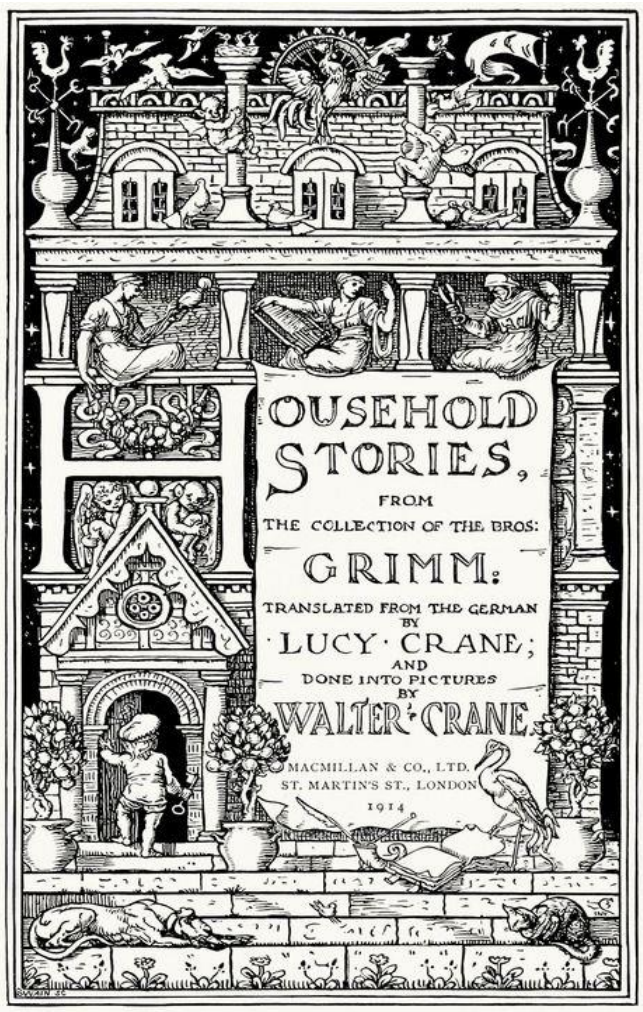
I floated. My bed was a boat upon a sea of darkness. My spirit drifted up and down, a broken thread.

I clutched hold of that book of fairy tales as the only thing that seemed solid and real. A kind of anchor.

At last a kind of quietude fell upon me. They tucked me in so tight that I could not move, brushed a sweat-damp tendril of hair away, put the bell on its long cord next to my pillow. 'You'll feel better soon,' they crooned. 'Try to sleep.'

I could not sleep. The room smelt of pine antiseptic and my own pus. A smell so familiar to me it made me sick. Strange dark shapes, fluorescent light striking through the door, the rattle of the medicine cart, a peculiar low hum, someone calling out in pain.

I opened the book of fairy tales. I began to read.



A boy who exchanged a lump of gold for a horse, then a cow, then a pig, then a goose, then a grindstone, then a drink of water, and each time cried that he was the luckiest boy under the sun.

A princess disguised as a goose-girl, and a horse's head nailed to a stable-door.

A princess who threw a frog against a wall and found herself a prince.

A mother goose who cut her goslings out of the wolf's belly and filled it with stones.

A faithful servant who saves his King and Queen, even though he knows he'll be turned into stone.

A girl locked in a tower, who must let down her hair for a witch to climb and who weeps tears that heal her beloved's blindness.

A brother and sister lost in the forest who push a witch into an oven.

A servant who tasted the king's supper of a mysterious white snake and so learned the language of the birds.

Two sisters.

A boy no bigger than a thumb.

Elves who make shoes.

A robber bridegroom.

A step-son whose bones sing of his murder.

A girl who must spin six shirts from nettles, without uttering a single sound, to transform her brothers from swans.

A princess who sleeps a hundred years in a cage of roses and thorns.

A daughter as white as snow, red as blood, black as ebony.

A name that must be guessed.

A golden bird and a clever fox.

A golden goose and a simpleton.

All night I read. I was no longer in my cage of iron bars and stiff white sheets, but galloping on a silver horse through shadowy forests, listening to birds tell secrets, singing my love to me.

I read that book of fairy tales so many times it fell apart, and once it was too broken to read anymore, I hunted for years to find another. It had to be exactly the same, its mirror image. Same stories, same drawings, same blood-red-and-gilt bindings. Those stories

of the Grimm Brothers had hooked themselves into my heart, and I could not shake them loose.

The tale that haunted me most was the story of Rapunzel, the girl locked in the tower, the girl whose tears could heal blindness.

To understand why it was Rapunzel that so troubled me, I need to tell you another story.

The story of me and the dog.

Stories as salvation[1]

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. I was tossed like a rag doll, my ear was torn from my head and 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.

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 crooked. 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 roused me.

Ten days after the accident, I was gripped by relentless fever, uttering constant high cries, red and floppy as a skinned rabbit. Still no-one could wake me. The doctors told my mother I had bacterial meningitis. 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, she 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 in my skull to help drain away the infection sinking its claws into my brain. 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.

Fuddling up my mucking words again[2]

Fifteen months later, I was readmitted to hospital. My medical records read: 'Blocked tear duct following savaging by dog Oct 1968. Now discharge all time and recently had infection. Pus expressed from L sac.' It was discovered that the dog's fang had destroyed my left tear duct.

I was treated, but had to return to hospital on February 24, then again on March 17 and March 24. So began a pattern that would re-occur again and again during my childhood. I had developed chronic dacryocystitis (a recurring infection of the tear-duct). My eye wept all the time. The tear duct would become blocked, an abscess would form, my temperature would soar, and I'd be rushed to hospital.

I can still remember the strange, dreamlike sensation that would come over me as my temperature climbed. I'd hear a roaring in my ears, like an ocean inside a shell. My feet and hands would seem huge and clumsy, as if a giant's limbs had been grafted on to mine, and then they would seem very small and faraway, as if I had eaten Alice's cake in Wonderland. Nightmares plagued my sleep.

I had operation after operation at the Sydney Eye Hospital to try to insert an artificial tear duct. They all failed. I was the only child in a ward of little white beds. Given the bed next to the window, I looked out on to a high green hill with a huge old tree rising from its crest, beside a grand sandstone building.

I now know this was a Moreton Bay fig tree growing close to the wall of the Art Gallery of NSW.

At the time, it seemed like a magic faraway tree growing beside a castle. I used to imagine galloping up that green hill on a winged horse that would then leap into the air and take me away.

Is it any wonder that so many of my stories feature towers and dungeons and prisons?

I first tried to rewrite the 'Rapunzel' fairy tale when I was twelve. I had already written three novels by then, called *Runaway*, *Far, far away* and *Daughter of the mountain*.

My first novel was published when I was thirty. It tells the story of a girl who can speak to birds and animals, a witch that sleeps in a nest of impossibly long golden hair, a blind prophet, a boy that can heal with the laying on of hands, cursed towers and young men transformed into ravens.

In the year I turned forty, I wrote in my diary, 'I am very keen on writing a novel based on Rapunzel – a dark, gothic retelling of a dark, gothic fairy tale.' By that time, I had written and published two-dozen books, all preoccupied with themes of imprisonment and escape, wounding and healing, death and rebirth.

The Tower is one of the most familiar and most awful motifs of the 'Rapunzel' fairy tale. The maiden is locked away from the world in order to control her. The Tower stands in for all the harems, convents, madhouses, attics and basements that women have been confined in throughout human history. It symbolises any limitations that restrict our freedom and prevent our psychological growth.

But 'Rapunzel' is not simply a story about a maiden locked in a tower. It's about a girl who escapes.

As a little girl, when I read 'Rapunzel', it gave me hope that maybe, one day, I too would escape my prison of pain and loneliness. Maybe, one day, I too would be free.

That is why, I think, escape is such a potent theme in my writing.

I would like to share with you three different ways I engaged with the Tower motif whilst I was reimagining 'Rapunzel'.

The first is from my novel *Bitter greens*, describing the waking of the heroine in her prison.

The Tower[3]

The Rock of Manerba, Lake Garda, Italy – Spring 1595

Margherita stirred. The motion was difficult. Her head felt heavy and restricted, as if it was bound down with weights. She tried to sit up, looking around.

Her hair flowed down the pillows and along the bed, tumbling down to the floor in waves and ripples like a bolt of golden satin unwinding. Across the floor, the hair spread, filling the small room with silken coils.

'Hold still,' the sorceress said. She was kneeling beside the bed, a long curved needle in one hand, threaded with fine golden filaments, a long flow of bronze-coloured hair in the other. Margherita stared with wide frightened eyes as the sorceress deftly sewed the bronze locks into the others.

Each time she bound the hair, she chanted:

By the power of three times three, I bind you to me.

Thou may not speak of me, nor raise a hand to me

Nor stir from this place where I have cast thee.

It was as if her words wrapped chains around Margherita's wrists and ankles and tongue, fettering her. She could not move or speak, though whimpers of terror struggled in her throat. Soon, all the hair was braided into one long thick rope, which snaked around the small shadowy room.

'Now you are mine, sealed and bound,' La Strega chanted.

She uncoiled the plait, wound it about a hook at the side of the window, then threw the end over the windowsill. It unfurled like a rope of living gold, reaching to the base of the tower a hundred feet below. Low thorny bushes crowded about the base of the tower, starred with tiny white flowers. Below were sharp rocks, the beginning of a

precipitous stairway cut into the stone, and beyond, nothing but air. The tower was built on the edge of a cliff, and far below, distant as a dream, lay a blue lake, cradled in forest at the base of towering snow-capped mountains.

'You see, there's no point trying to escape,' La Strega whispered in Margherita's ear, one hand on her shoulder. 'You would be broken on those rocks if you were stupid enough to jump. To make sure you don't try, I'll lock the shutters behind me.'

'Please don't. Please.'

'Don't worry,' La Strega murmured. 'I'll be back soon. A month is not so very long.' She climbed up onto the windowsill, holding the plait between both hands. For a giddy moment, Margherita thought of pushing her out. La Strega smiled down at her. 'I'll be back in a month. Take care. Remember that if I fall and die, or if you damage your hair somehow, so you cannot throw it out to me, you'll starve to death up here. No one knows you are here. No one can help you.'

Then the sorceress began to climb down the side of the tower. The pull of her weight on Margherita's hair was almost unbearable, even with the help of the hook. Sobbing, Margherita braced herself against the wall. Eventually, the jerking stopped. A distant voice called, 'I'll be back when the moon is full once more.'

Then silence.

Margherita pulled up the braid, hand-over-hand-over-hand, until it lay coiled about her, then stepped to the ground, staring about her.

One small room. A tap. An empty bath. A large basket of firewood. A bed with rumpled pillows and silken coverlet.

No door, no stair, no open window, no air, no light, no sound.

A kind of madness possessed her. She ran about the room, looking for a way out. She shook the shutters with all her strength and battered her fists upon them. She put her mouth to the heart carving and screamed for help. She stared down the stinking hole in the latrine. She went back to the window and screamed again. She sat on the floor and sobbed into her hands. She wrenched at the plait, seeking to tear it out by the roots. She paced the floor, dragging the plait behind her. She shouted and called and cried and begged, till her throat was raw and her voice hoarse.

Tears blinded her. *No way out, no way out, no way out ...*

There must be a stair, she thought. La Strega and the giant could not have brought the bed and the table and the chairs and the pantry and the bath and everything in through that narrow window. *Under the carpet*, she thought.

She set to work moving the table and chairs and the bath. This took a while and a great deal of effort, for they were heavy and she was only twelve and all alone, but eventually all the furniture was shoved together on one side of the room. Margherita folded back the carpet and sat back on her heels.

A trapdoor was set in the flagstones.

It was made of stone and was as long as a pace on all four sides.

It had no handle.

By evening time, she had gouged away enough stone to lever the trapdoor up just a few inches.

Step by step by timid step, she went down, till the staircase opened out into the lowest floor – a dark echoing place with heavy beams on the ceiling and a floor of hard-packed earth. It was so lightless down there, it could well have been midnight instead of noon.

Margherita lifted up her candle and then, with a jerk and a scream, dropped it. Darkness snuffed her. She fell to her knees, her hands covering her face. Her breath came in sharp uneven gasps.

The cellar was filled with skeletons.

Maidens in towers – The ancestors of Rapunzel[4]

The second piece of writing I'd like to share with you is a chapter from my doctoral exegesis *The rebirth of Rapunzel: A mythic history of the maiden in the tower*.

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 (2003: ix).

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.

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 (Jones 2002).

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 Tolkien has said, 'The Cauldron of Story has always been boiling, and to it have continually been added new bits, dainty and undainty' (1997: 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 are, he wrote, 'an easy doublet' for myths, meaning that they are a brightly coloured garment that slips easily over the older garment (Zipes, 1994: 8).

The German feminist scholar Heide Göttner-Abendroth also believes that fairy tales are 'veiled myth'. She sees the remnants of a lost matriarchal mythology hidden within many Western narrative traditions ... (manifesting 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 (Göttner-Abendroth 1995).

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.

The ancient sacred narratives were transformed and camouflaged, Göttner-Abendroth believed, under the patriarchal forces of Christianity.

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.

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 … is the first to link together the complete chain of scenes and symbols which is today widely recognised as the memeplex 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.

The first recorded 'Maiden in the Tower' tale appeared in ancient Greek mythology, in the story of 'Danaë and the Golden Shower' (Roman & Roman 2010: 129). 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. '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.

Many centuries later, a similar story appears in Jewish narrative traditions. In 'The Princess in the Tower', first recorded in the eighth 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 2010: 50).

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'.

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).

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 tenth century. 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 let down her tresses to Zal like a long rope. He climbs up her hair and so, scandalously, gains ingress to the forbidden harem.

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 (Getty 1997). As we all know, the hair ladder is a key motif in 'Rapunzel' tales, and so this story from an epic tenth century Persian poem is an important step in the building of the 'Rapunzel' memeplex. 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 twelfth century story of Floris and Blanchefleur, both born on the same day during a festival of flowers (Hibbard 1963: 184). Floris is the son of the Moorish king of Andalusia and Blanchefleur 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 Blanchefleur. He is smuggled into the tower in a basket of flowers, and – after a few mishaps – is reunited with Blanchefleur. 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.

In this medieval romance, the motifs of maiden, tower and prince appear together with the symbology of vegetation for the first time – Blanchefleur means 'white flower' and Floris means 'flourishing' or 'blossoming', and the hero hid in a basket of flowers.

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: 218). 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.

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 Renee Lorraine has been identified as central to a gynocentric aesthetic (Lorraine 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.

Perhaps 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' (qtd in Yashinsky 2010: 8). 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: 20).

As I wrote *Bitter greens*, I realised that I wanted 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.

In the Tower

By the time I had finished both *Bitter greens* and *The rebirth of Rapunzel*, I thought I had exorcised the dark terrifying shape of the Tower from my imagination. However, I had one more thing to write – a poem. The first poem I had written in years.

Walled in my old stone tower
the bitter taste of tears
always in my throat
only a slit to put my eye to
yet how full of change is that sky

I watch the stars wheel past
seasons turning and turning
the one tree on that faraway hill
once more bursts into life
green in the shadows
golden in the light

Walled in my silent tower
how can I frame the words
to tell my story
my heart is a riddle
green sickness in my soul
loneliness the heaviest burden
how I long to slip free
of this empty shadowed tower
fly on muffled wings like the owl
white against the thorns
black against the moon

Walled in my cold stone tower
I conjure a steed from flame
An invisible cloak from ashes
A frail ladder from cobwebs
I make a dagger from ice
A key from bone and wishes
I spin a song from the silence
One day someone shall sing my refrain
Green in the shadows
Golden in the light

Free of my shadowy tower
We shall bind ourselves together
With tendrils of green

With tresses of gold
We shall build a castle of light and air
And banish silence with song
Together we'll dance in the forest
White against the thorns
Black against the moon.

Notes

1. Extract from 'Stories as salvation' by Kate Forsyth in *Once upon a time in Oz: GRIFFITH REVIEW 42* Summer 2013: 23.
2. Extract from 'Fuddling up my mucking words again' by Kate Forsyth, *Good Weekend*, November 17, 2012.
3. Edited extract from *Bitter greens* by Kate Forsyth, Random House Australia, 2012: 130-182.
4. Edited extract from *The rebirth of Rapunzel: A mythic biography of the maiden in the tower* by Kate Forsyth, FableCroft Publishing, 2016: 35-58.

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