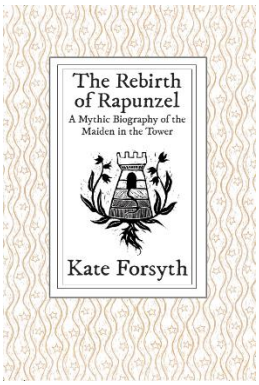
TEXT review

Respelling the world

review by Belinda Calderone



Kate Forsyth
The rebirth of Rapunzel: A mythic biography of the maiden in the tower
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'Rapunzel' is one of the most beloved fairy tales of all time. With themes of isolation, entrapment, and escape, it continues to resonate with audiences even into the twenty-first century. As Kate Forsyth muses, the tale 'tells the transformative journey from stasis and shadows to liberation and light' (7). Forsyth's personal fascination with this tale led her to write *The rebirth of Rapunzel: A mythic biography of the maiden in the tower*.

The book engages with the Rapunzel tale via three key strands: literary analysis, exegesis, and personal memoir. As a literary analysis, the book examines how the tale was 'reborn' again and again through history – evolving over time from antiquity to the present day. As the title suggests, the author attempts to present a 'mythic biography' (31) of the tale – a term used by literature scholar Stephen Knight that refers to evaluating a tale through its chronological development. Initially, Forsyth's aim seems ambitious: 'to trace the cultural evolution of "Rapunzel" from ancient tales of three-faced goddesses right through to Disney's *Tangled*' (5). Yet the book's firm structure and lucid expression guide readers smoothly along this journey. Though Forsyth mentions fairy-tale scholars like Ruth Bottigheimer, Elizabeth Wanning Harries and Donald Haase in her list of influences, her analysis does not necessarily mirror their sociohistorical approach; instead, it tends towards folklore studies, employing the

theories of folklorist Alan Dundes and using the Aarne-Thompson-Uther tale type index (in which 'Rapunzel' is known as 310: The Maiden in the Tower).

As an exegesis, the book explains Forsyth's creative process in writing her novel *Bitter greens*, including the choices she had to make along the way. This aspect of the book interacts beautifully with the mythic biography; as Forsyth presents the many versions of the tale through time, she explains which parts of those versions she borrowed for her own novel. For example, the idea of the heroine's parsley birthmark was taken from Giambattista Basile's seventeenth-century version, 'Petrosinella' (Basile himself makes an appearance in the novel). Given that *Bitter greens* is historical fiction set in the real world, we are also privy to Forsyth's creative strategies in retelling the tale without magic. For example, the hero, Lucio, is cured of blindness not because of the heroine's magical healing tears, but because his eyes were simply closed shut with a crust of dried blood, which the heroine's tears later dissolve.

Finally, the analysis and exegesis are beautifully interwoven with memories from the author's own childhood experiences. Forsyth candidly shares these painful reflections, revealing how she was savaged by a Doberman at the age of two. Though she narrowly escaped death, the attack destroyed one of her tear ducts, causing constant weeping and recurrent infections that confined her to a hospital bed for much of her childhood. Unsurprisingly, the young Forsyth connected strongly with the themes in 'Rapunzel':

> I felt a great affinity with that other young girl, locked away 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. (16)

The author's personal connection to the Rapunzel tale anchors the entire book in memoir. Though these three strands could easily appear quite disjointed, all are presented in Forsyth's simple and clear style – itself reminiscent of a fairy tale – which brings a consistency to the text.

The book is presented in six well-structured chapters. Chapter One begins with Forsyth's own childhood fascination with 'Rapunzel', providing a frame for the analysis to come. In Chapter Two, Forsyth launches into an exploration of narratives prior to Basile's seventeenth-century tale, 'Petrosinella'. Bringing the theories of Heide Göttner-Abendroth into her discussion, Forsyth considers how 'Rapunzel' might be connected to the narrative of the three-faced goddess: maiden, woman, crone. In perhaps the most impressive analysis in the book, she explores the possibility that 'Rapunzel' may have originated as a matriarchal myth that was later recast as a patriarchal myth: slowly 'de-mythologised' (53) and drained of sacred meaning. As Forsyth so poetically puts it, 'Glowering under the cinders of these patriarchal myths were the embers of the hag-ridden tales of the ancient past' (54). Given this focus, Forsyth often valorises earlier tales that seem to reflect this matriarchal myth. She begins her investigation in the fifth century with the ancient Greek myth of 'Danaë and the golden shower'. From there, she moves through other narratives such as the eighth-century Jewish narrative 'The Princess in the Tower', the tenth-century Persian epic poem from Shâhnâma 'Rudâbeh and Zal', even referring to the early Christian legend of Saint Barbara.

Chapters Three, Four and Five will be familiar to scholars of fairy tale, dealing with the three key versions in Western European history: Basile's seventeenth-century 'Petrosinella', Charlotte-Rose de La Force's late-seventeenth-century 'Persinette' and finally Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's well-known nineteenth-century 'Rapunzel'. In these chapters, Forsyth guides the reader as we see the heroine evolve from Petrosinella, to Persinette, to Rapunzel.

In Chapter Six, Forsyth presents a commendable discussion of iterations of the tale since the Grimms. The range of adaptations discussed is comprehensive, including poetry, operas, paintings, novels and graphic novels. Her explorations encompass traditional adaptations of the tale like William Morris's 1858 poem 'Rapunzel', Lou Harrison's 1952 opera *Rapunzel* and Frank Cadogan Cowper's 1908 painting *Rapunzel sings from the tower*. But Forsyth also rightly acknowledges more subversive retellings like Edith Nesbit's humourous 1901 'Melisande'; Nicholas Stuart Gray's 1963 *The stone cage*, told from point of view of Rapunzel's cat; and Anne Sexton's beautiful and disturbing poem in her 1971 collection *Transformations*; not to mention the 2008 graphic novel *Rapunzel's revenge*, in which the heroine uses her unusually long hair as a lasso.

Considering that Forsyth is dealing with such a wide-ranging time period, and simultaneously presenting three kinds of writing, *The rebirth of Rapunzel* is remarkably clear. Fairy-tale scholars who sit firmly within the boundaries of European fairy tales will find this book particularly enlightening. Certainly, other scholars – like Marina Warner in her paper 'After "Rapunzel"' – have already traced the Rapunzel tale through its different versions in the European fairy-tale tradition. But the strength of Forsyth's work is that she bookends this with ancient and contemporary versions, providing a more complete picture of the tale through time.

As she closes the book, Forsyth reveals her aim in writing it: 'I am telling this old tale in order to respell the world' (150). In this, she seems to have succeeded.

Dr Belinda Calderone holds a PhD in Literary Studies from Monash University. Her thesis examined how representations of motherhood changed over time in European fairy-tale history. She has spoken at conferences and taught at universities – often in fantasy and children's literature. Her publications include a book chapter, 'The monster inside me: Unnatural births in early modern Italian and French fairy tales' in Beyond the monstrous: Reading from the cultural imaginary. *She is also Past President of the Australian Fairy Tale Society.*