From Rags to Witches

The grim tale of children's stories

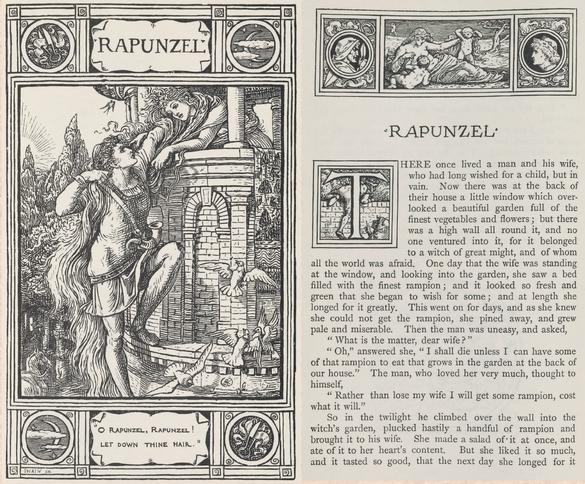
Rapunzel

A pregnant woman experiences overwhelming cravings for a plant growing in a witch's garden, only for her husband to be caught in the act of stealing it. As punishment, the witch takes their child, either at birth or as a young girl.

The girl is named after the plant, which only became Rapunzel in the eighteenth-century German translation by Friedrich Schulz that was included in *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (1812). Prior to this, Giambattista Basile's and Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de la Force's seventeenth-century tales name the plant, and the heroine, Parsley.

After several years in her tower, Rapunzel is visited by a Prince. Here the tales diverge. In Basile's *Petrosinella*, the heroine drugs the witch with poppy juice so she and the Prince can continue their romance undisturbed. When a third party betrays them, she orchestrates her own escape. After a short but eventful chase involving magic animals that tear the witch apart, the couple live happily ever after.

Later Rapunzels betray themselves, commonly through ignorance in asking why her corset is tighter, not realising she is pregnant, although the witch immediately understands. Only under Wilhelm Grimm's puritanical pen does Rapunzel foolishly ask why the witch is heavier than the Prince. On his next visit, the Prince finds the witch instead of Rapunzel in the tower, leaps out, and is blinded by the thorny bushes below. He wanders the wilderness for several years before stumbling across the exiled Rapunzel and their illegitimate twins. Her tears cure his blindness, and they return to his kingdom and his family. Rapunzel never reunites with hers.



Rapunzel, from *Household stories: from the collection of the Brothers Grimm*, translated from the German by Lucy Crane; and done into pictures by Walter Crane (1963). PT2281.G3.Z barcode 1003427940.

Young girls in the medieval period were often sent to live with another family, either as a future wife or, as is possibly the witch's intention, as a domestic servant. The witch keeps Rapunzel in an enchanted tower, using her hair to climb up to visit her daily. A Prince becomes entranced with Rapunzel's beauty and sweet voice, copies the witch and climbs into the tower, much to Rapunzel's initial terror.

'Rapunzel', *Early poems of William Morris*, illustrated by Florence Harrison (1914). Central Store 2 PR5078.E2 barcode 6002108520.

Description of Rampions from *The herball, or, Generall historie of plantes gathered by Iohn Gerard* (1636). Special Collection Over.X RS164 GER barcode SC124.

The name of the plant, but not the girl, is often anglicised to rampion. To a modern audience Rapunzel's father risks a lot simply for a salad. In the more superstitious medieval and early modern period, it was thought dangerous to deny pregnant women's cravings, a belief possibly rooted in fact as food cravings have been linked to nutritional deficiencies. Early audiences would have implicitly understood his motive.

Being locked in a tower is a common, and predominantly female, fate in traditional tales. It may be based on the life of St Barbara, whose pagan father locked her in a tower, but it is also a warning to parents that their daughters will grow up no matter what.

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