

TANGLED UP IN BAD RELATIONSHIPS: RAPUNZEL'S UNHEALTHY TENDENCY OF DEPENDENCY

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Introduction

Disney has long had a reputation for feel good movies and inspiring messages of friendship and working hard. Their 2010 release *Tangled* is no exception. The princess movie starring Rapunzel shows viewers the powers of being brave and following dreams. Its example of a strained mother-daughter relationship may even resonate with some children in the audience and serve as encouragement to stand up for themselves or get help if needed. However, a message lurks below the surface of this “inspiring” example of escaping a poor relationship: Rapunzel never really escapes. I argue that Rapunzel blindly transfers her child-like dependency from one unhealthy relationship onto another unhealthy relationship through her dualistic nature of being both confident and vulnerable.

This analysis contributes to rhetorical theory by exposing that morally correct hegemony which should be supported in society may not always be supported by the best examples or artifacts. My main points of this analysis address Rapunzel’s semi-opposing characteristics of confidence and vulnerability. First, I examine how her self-confidence and bravery enable her to take risks and expose her trusting nature. Next, I explore how her state of vulnerability is exposed through three constant themes: openness with her thoughts and feelings, naïve responses to many signals and experiences in the “real world,” and her constant need for confirmation and support from others. I then discuss how my findings reveal how artifacts that appear to positively further hegemonic agendas may be harmful examples within a culture.

Description of Artifact and Social Context

The movie *Tangled* tells Disney's version of the story of *Rapunzel* by the Brothers Grimm: a girl who was locked away from the world in a tower and had ridiculously long flowing locks. Disney's tale explains that the little girl is a princess with golden hair harboring magical healing powers who was kidnapped from her noble parents by the selfish Mother Gothel, an old hag who uses Rapunzel's hair to stay young and beautiful. Rapunzel lives a solitary life in a hidden tower until wanted thief Flynn Rider climbs into her tower and strikes a deal to take Rapunzel to see floating lights she sees annually in the sky. The rest of the film shows the new pair's journey to see the lights as their friendship slowly turns to romance before Rapunzel discovers the truth of her childhood, attempts to break ties with self-centered Mother Gothel, and marries Flynn. Disney's interpretation of this tale aligns with a running theme of contemporary feminism seen in many of their modern movies: young princesses are empowered through emboldened, meaningful actions while still staying within the confines of storybook tales. This negotiated pairing of tradition and revolution has drawn in and perpetuated the trust of millions of people worldwide film after film.

The social context surrounding this artifact captures peoples' tendencies to look for characters and relationships in movies that they can relate to. As a multinational media conglomerate, Disney produces and reinforces cultural norms and values for wide swaths of the population in the United States and abroad. They have recently updated the way female characters are depicted, giving them more powerful stances that echo the global uprising of feminism. The situation of a woman being imprisoned for most of her life – an overwhelming majority of the time by a man – is also familiar to many cultures, which gives *Tangled's* storyline a base for recognition and relevance. However, Disney's choice to keep the antagonist captor a woman as was originally written by the Brothers Grimm displays a denial of contemporary misogynistic reality, therefore conflicting with the company's appeal to modern feminism. As Disney is widely known and respected, an analysis that questions the impact of *Tangled* as encouraging and motivational may impact the lens through which the movie is viewed.

The Power of Hegemony

Hegemony has been used in rhetorical analysis to examine how social norms and dominant beliefs are upheld within society through distribution of artifacts. Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch define hegemony as “the dominant ideology of a society, exerting social control over people without the use of force.”¹ Hegemony controls what people can or cannot say or do but is primarily unconscious — it is a product of logic and already accepted ideals.² Hegemony is not forced but is accepted; if it was forced upon a population, it would be ineffective.³ That is not to say that hegemony is never encouraged; subtle encouragement may be used to align specific thoughts or opinions with a dominant ideology. This technique is useful because it is able to be believed naturally. If an idea was not supported by the people, it would not be within societal norms. It is these “seemingly given ways of being and behaving” that consistently enforce the ways a society defines its most important values.⁴

Ideal ways of behaving and thinking within a collection of people are normalized and stabilized through production and distribution of artifacts such as stories, laws, and visual representations of the values that are held in high regard.⁵ The maintenance of these artifacts — and therefore the hegemonic values

¹ Palczewski, Catherine Helen, Ice, Rich, and Fritch, John. *Rhetoric in Civic Life* (2nd ed.), (State College, PA: Strata Pub. 2016).

² Briziarelli, Marco. *Hegemony: Not New Thoughts on a Not New Concept*. (Texas Speech Communication Journal, 2014), 84-96.

³ Schneeweis, Adina G. *Textual and Visual Representations of U.S. Hegemony in a U.S. Film Broadcast on Romanian Public Television*. (Journal of Visual Literacy, 2005), 77-96.

⁴ Evans, Rick. "Masks": *Literacy, Ideology, and Hegemony in the Academy*, (Rhetoric Review, 1995), 88-104.

⁵ Cloud, Dana L. *Hegemony or Concordance? The Rhetoric of Tokenism in 'Oprah' Winfrey's Rags-To-Riches Biography*, (Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 1996), 115.

– can be strategic in order to maintain power hierarchies.⁶ This may be when encouragement comes most into effect. However, Killian argues that the hegemony can be a conduit for advancing just, humane ideals in a powerful way.⁷ This advancement turns the thoughts that a society finds to be morally superior and idealistic into expectations of behaviors that should be enacted by the population. The promotion of hegemony creates moral leadership and identifies the values that are being supported by these leaders in times of question or social struggle.⁸ The ideals that are being recognized as dominant are constructed and combined through interventions using artifacts that support the ideals, thus intertwining the ideals as fundamental components of a culture.⁹ Kaplan explains that hegemony does not take the place of a totality, a firm right versus wrong, but is instead a multi-layered construction of (usually) moral values that society chooses to praise.¹⁰ This demonstrates that supporting hegemony is not necessarily bad and that hegemony does not have to be an “overbearing” ideology that must be rebelled against or broken. Being that hegemony is made of ideals that guide and influence attitudes and behaviors, it is important to understand that the dominant values are often agreeable and seem to be enforced through common sense.

⁶ Khan, Kherstin and Blair, Diane M. *Writing Bill Clinton: Mediated Discourses on Hegemonic Masculinity and the 2008 Presidential Primary*, (Women's Studies in Communication, 2013), 56-71.

⁷ Killian, Justin. *Benevolent Hegemony, American Exceptionalism, and Elusive Enemies: Rethorizing Foreign Policy Rhetoric in a Post September 11th World*. (Conference Papers -- National Communication Association, 2008).

⁸ Greene, Ronald Walter and Hiland, Alexander. *Aune's Leadership: Hegemony and the Rhetorical Perspective on Argumentation*, (Argumentation & Advocacy, 2014), 228-233.

⁹ Yilmaz, Ferruh. *Populist Rhetoric of a Hegemonic Intervention*. (Conference Papers -- International Communication Association, 2008), 1-21.

¹⁰ Kaplan, Michael. *The Rhetoric of Hegemony: Laclau, Radical Democracy, and the Rule of Tropes*, (Philosophy & Rhetoric, 2010), 253-283.

Hegemony in Rhetorical Analysis

The connection between hegemony and rhetoric is a circular one. Hegemony is recognized as a useful theory of rhetoric, while rhetorical practice itself serves as a “theoretical model” for hegemony as a theory.¹¹ Thus, the close relationship between hegemony and rhetoric is often observed in rhetorical analyses while appearing from different angles. A constant practice of hegemony is its application as supporting evidence for any rhetorical argument. The strength of hegemony is exposed within rhetoric to explain the normative view, or the views that a specific population holds as normal standards or beliefs. The casual mention of hegemony within a rhetorical analysis is a common way to expose the reader to important background information necessary to interpret the artifact and its context properly.

In contrast, hegemony as a theory is used as a main perspective for furthering a rhetorical argument when an artifact’s social context is integral to the analysis. Societal implications connected to an artifact impact the artifact’s perceptions both inside and outside the culture that attaches hegemonic value to the story, law, music, text, adage, or other type of recognizable artifact. Hegemonic theory is used to uncover the insider understanding or hidden propaganda surrounding an artifact.¹² The use of hegemonic theory as a primary investigative tool is as common in rhetoric as any other communicative theory and is supplemented in soundness through hegemony’s role in explaining societal importance of an artifact within any rhetorical analysis.

Entanglement: *Tangled’s* Dependent Main Character

In this analysis, I focus on the character of Rapunzel and her personality traits, mannerisms, conversational and talking style, and her relationships with characters Mother Gothel and Flynn Rider. After analyzing *Tangled* and Rapunzel’s character through a hegemonic viewpoint, two main themes emerge in support of my argument that Rapunzel transfers her dependency from one unhealthy relationship – with Mother Gothel – onto another

¹¹ Kaplan, *The Rhetoric of Hegemony*, 253-283.

¹² Khan and Blair, *Writing Bill Clinton*, 56-71.

unhealthy relationship – with Flynn Rider. The themes of confidence and vulnerability are inherent products of her atypical upbringing, which lead her to depend on another person at all times. Rapunzel's character development throughout the movie demonstrates that although she does escape the toxic relationship she has with her mother, she only does so by becoming blindly dependent on Flynn.

In order to understand how confidence and vulnerability come into play in shaping Rapunzel's relationships, one must first understand the content of those relationships. Initially, the audience is able to see that Mother Gothel and Rapunzel's relationship does contain love based off of mutual care and small showings of affection, components seen within an ideal mother – daughter relationship. However, the relationship is wrought with more dependency than one would expect from a 17-year-old girl. This dependency on Mother Gothel is brought upon by Rapunzel's physical and social isolation and Mother Gothel's manipulative comments which deviate from the hegemonic norm of parenthood. For example, in one scene Mother Gothel draws Rapunzel over to the mirror and says, "I see a strong, confident, beautiful young lady." Rapunzel's brightened face almost immediately turns to shock and then hurt when Mother Gothel continues, "Oh look, you're here too," implying that Mother Gothel was referring to herself as the young, beautiful woman. The mother-daughter relationship is also riddled with small acts of defiance from Rapunzel, such as when Rapunzel groans or rolls her eyes in response to her mother's frequent critiques.

Derogatory comments come often from Mother Gothel, producing a visible pattern of Rapunzel's fearful or disappointed reactions to her mother. However, because Rapunzel has only ever interacted with her mother, she knows no better than to believe that their relationship is a typical one. These belittling exchanges coming from a woman instead of a man provide an unexpected angle of representation in the scenario of captivity identified by society. Mother Gothel's role of antagonist is revealed as both captor and perpetuator of stereotypical woman-on woman verbal abuse, with the latter furthering a misogynistic worldview. This scenario evokes a hegemonic oxymoron in relation to the perpetuation of violence: while society deems domestic and personal abuse immoral, these practices are still a common part of life. Thus, one could argue that while physical and mental manifestations of misogyny are not

morally supported, they are still woven into the social ladder made up of hegemonic values that continue to oppress women.¹³

Once Flynn enters the picture, a relationship with many elements similar to the mother-daughter relationship emerges. Friendship is established between him and Rapunzel, but Flynn uses manipulation under the guise of concern to try to convince Rapunzel to give up on her quest to see the lights and return back to her tower. Rapunzel's quest brings her out into the "real world" which requires her to rely on Flynn almost by default, as he is the only person she knows who can help her navigate the foreign place. This echoes the familiar storyline of a man as a rescuer, the only one fit to properly lead a girl in the right direction. The common "princess plot" of Disney culture continues as Rapunzel's dependency on Flynn gradually solidifies into genuine, mutual attachment, which then turns to romance. Again, Disney's storyline reverts to misogyny by portraying a man as the physical and romantic savior of the girl. This portrayal also denies the common reality of men being perpetrators of violence.

In response to Rapunzel escaping a harmful relationship with her mother, hegemonic ideals would support this situation. Rapunzel separates herself from her verbally abusive and physically constraining mother, which appeals to the moral view that one should not stay in abusive relationships. The end result is also acceptable because she develops a mutually romantic attraction that fosters support, drawing on hegemony that normalizes healthy social support groups and encourages romantic relationships. However, I argue that this is a deceiving perspective because Rapunzel transfers her feeling of love, pattern of dependency, and tendency to be manipulated from her mother onto Flynn, the first person she comes into contact with from the outside world.

¹³ Greene and Hiland, *Aune's Leadership*, 228-233

Ledwith, Margaret. *Antonio Gramsci and Feminism: The Elusive Nature of Power*, (Educational Philosophy & Theory, 2009), 684-697

Perpetual Pattern of Confidence

The theme of confidence is evident in Rapunzel's personality in her internal and external dialogues. She has many moments where she is sure of herself and what she is attempting to do. This is often seen in conversation with her mother. Despite Mother Gothel's attempts to shut down Rapunzel's inquiry about seeing the floating lights, Rapunzel interjects multiple times, attempting to get her words out no matter how many tries it takes. Her self-confidence also allows her to intermittently defy her mother and gain some ground for herself. Later in the film, Mother Gothel tries to convince Rapunzel that she has imagined her romance with Flynn, to which Rapunzel strongly responds, "You're wrong!" The audience can see her facial expressions doubting her mother's words before she boldly stands up for herself. This and other acts of defiance gradually build upon one another until Rapunzel transfers her trust and love over to Flynn. These moments support the rise in the societal value of verbal women: women who are unafraid to use their voices and stand up for their rights, beliefs, and feelings. This is a positive dominant ideology that has gained traction recently as feminism encourages bold actions and words as movement toward empowered womanhood.¹⁴

In addition to interactions with her mother, Rapunzel also faces unknown situations with confidence and bravery. For example, after capturing Flynn in her tower, Rapunzel boldly states "I'm not afraid of you" before circling the restrained stranger, wielding a frying pan. She negotiates with Flynn, convincing him to be her guide to the lights, and ensures that she is getting the last word in the conversation by putting herself in charge of the situation. These personality features of bravery and self-assuredness contribute to her adventurous spirit and sure-footed nature, which in turn create a trusting tendency — she takes the words of others at face value. While those characteristics themselves are seen as "good" and socially supported, they lead her to trust in and fully depend on a stranger she has just met. This is a problem because she starts out her friendship with Flynn on the basis of blind trust and complete comfort in her plan. The audience sees Flynn breaking some of this trust as he tries to

¹⁴ Ledwith, *Antonio Gramsci and Feminism*, 684-697.

persuade her to return home, which she interprets as empathy for her indecisive situation.

While the relationship between Flynn and Rapunzel ends healthily, this was not the only option. As Flynn is a high-profile thief, Rapunzel unknowingly put her faith and confidence into one of the kingdom's most wanted criminals. Her confidence shields her from adopting a wary persona. Additionally, she is comfortable with the experience of leaving the tower because she is adventurous, but she still must rely on Flynn for guidance and navigation. This literal dependency fosters a sense of connection to Flynn, demonstrating her unhealthy need to constantly rely on someone else for physical and emotional comfort as she has found in her mother since childhood. This reliance itself may not be a terrible practice but is viewed as anti-hegemonic due to its inherently unhealthy foundation built upon a lack of communicated truth.

Multiplicity of Vulnerability

The theme of vulnerability seems to contradict Rapunzel's self-confidence, as she is receptive to others' comments and often takes them to heart. It is this dualistic nature that anchors her child-like need for support in various forms. She is confident in front of Flynn and freely expresses her feelings and thoughts. Although these healthy and socially-encouraged practices are demonstrators of comfort in the friendship, they indicate her tendency to be open and vulnerable with her emotions. For instance, after she has explored the world outside of her tower, Rapunzel enters a conflicting monologue by repeating the phrase "I can't believe I did this" with both positive and negative inflection, indicating both pleasure and grief. She becomes distraught and cries, only looking up when Flynn comes over to comfort her as she explains her internal confusion. Rapunzel's ease of crying in front of a stranger indicates her delicate yet comfortable relationship with showing emotion. She is also incredibly naïve to many social cues, signals, and experiences. When a nearby bush begins to rustle, she shrieks and leaps onto Flynn's back before he explains that the danger was only a rabbit. Her captive-like upbringing shielded her from understanding social and natural situations. These mannerisms are frequently seen and encouraged in women, furthering the hegemonic connection of emotion and

femininity. Another dimension of her vulnerability lies in her constant need for confirmation of her feelings and ideas – a need that encourages her to actively look to others for support. She often bases her dispositions off of others’ support or lack thereof. For example, Flynn calms her split feelings over leaving her tower by explaining that this sense of rebellion is “part of growing up.” This validation of her feelings allows Rapunzel to carry on with her adventure guilt-free.

These characteristics of emotional openness, naivety, and seeking validation influence her inherent needs to express herself freely while being supported, thus encouraging child-like dependency on another person for emotional satisfaction. Her overall vulnerability makes her susceptible to the manipulation of others because she does not see the influence of the attention – she sees only the attention itself. This counters hegemony because while one should be open and care about other’s thoughts to some extent, one should not let these factors completely direct one’s life. Rapunzel’s tendencies never allow her to completely escape relationships that are unhealthy on the outside but seem normative to her. Although she is able to recognize that Mother Gothel is controlling, manipulative, and damaging, Rapunzel fails to notice that Flynn is cunning and self-serving. Therefore, when she realizes that she is no longer able to draw support from her mother, she hastily switches to Flynn as a source of comfort and love.

Overall, this argument demonstrates how the often positively-viewed personality traits that contribute to Rapunzel’s character combine to form a dualistic nature of confidence and vulnerability. These conditions play off one another to create a weak nature that seeks a constant source of dependence. Rapunzel is first manipulated by and dependent on her mother; later, she is caught in a similar – albeit safe-looking – relationship with Flynn. This transfer contradicts the hegemonic ideals required to have truly supportive relationships. Although Rapunzel is characterized as a strong young woman unafraid to make decisions and take risks, it is questionable if she is ever truly independent. One may conclude that her confidence in both exploration and personal expression fail to paint Rapunzel as her own person despite being portrayed as a “role model character” by Disney. The attempt to describe her as a character of free-will and

bravery is shrouded by the manipulation and lack of choice offered to Rapunzel, discrediting her as a vision of social ideals.

Contribution to Rhetorical Theory

This analysis of *Tangled* and its character relationships reveals another dimension of hegemony through understanding the use of artifacts to promote moral ideals. Although hegemony is often supported within a population, the propaganda through which hegemony is continuously spread and supported may not necessarily support the virtues it claims to support. This is an important consideration because hegemony is maintained through artifacts that exemplify what values the public finds acceptable.¹⁵ Hegemony can be supported or challenged, and the artifacts that provide evidence for either position allow the argument to be taken seriously.¹⁶ In order for a society to maintain its normative ideals, artifacts appearing to support or challenge those ideals must be carefully examined to ensure they serve as adequate examples for their own cause.

Corporations such as Disney must be held responsible for the values they attempt to perpetuate, as companies and name brands have a large amount of social influence and power¹⁷. For example, this analysis reveals that while the movie *Tangled* appears to be an example of encouragement to leave toxic relationships, it actually fails as a good example because Rapunzel's harmful environment is only transferred to a less obvious source. Instead of the current reputation that surrounds the film with positive messages and pushes its status as an example of how to break free from oppression, the reputation of the movie should reflect the reality of its messages. Denial of the film's content would create distrust in the company, potentially causing harm to the beloved monolith that is Disney. Even if the public chooses to ignore the lack of positive example the movie

¹⁵ Yilmaz, *Populist Rhetoric*, 1-21.

¹⁶ Killian, *Benevolent Hegemony*

¹⁷ Grushina, Svetlana. *Corporate Social Responsibility Through the Lens of Communication Theory and Research*, (Conference Papers -- National Communication Association, 2008).

provides, Disney as a company should not deny its literal material when confronted with its true translations.¹⁸

As this analysis demonstrates, popular movies, books, or other forms of storytelling often appear to be publicly backing hegemonic values – especially those that come from a popular source. The stories we tell are told for a reason; they resonate with people by representing ideas that people support. People learn life lessons about themselves, relationships, and cultures through what they see and hear. Thus, it is natural to promote dominant ideals through characters and stories that can be loved and understood, that resonate with the public.¹⁹ Artifacts are integral in circulating hegemony within society and should continue to do so, yet I suggest that these artifacts be held true to their own meanings. Disney does not have apologize for their content but should simply not deny the evidence that *Tangled* harbors some unhealthy themes. In order to maintain a pure dominant ideology, society must scrutinize the artifacts that are praised publicly as examples of hegemonic ideals. This avoids the perpetuation of unhealthy practices disguised as life choices to be encouraged.

Conclusion

In summary, I argue that *Tangled's* Rapunzel blindly transfers her child-like dependency from one unhealthy relationship onto another unhealthy relationship through her dualistic nature of being both confident and vulnerable. Her self-confidence leads her to adventurous situations in which she unwisely trusts in a new relationship while her vulnerability solidifies her need for an external source of validity and emotional freedom. These anti-hegemonic values combine to show why examples of simple solutions to serious problems should be carefully inspected before being raised to hegemonic status – no matter how perfect or princess-like examples may seem.

¹⁸ Grushina, *Corporate Social Responsibility*

¹⁹ Cloud, *Hegemony or Concordance*, 115.

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