

TANGLED

Directed by Nathan Greno and Byron Howard

Produced by Roy Conli

Distributed by Walt Disney Pictures

Released in 2010

The modern fairy tale, or a modern telling of a venerable fairy tale, faces a dilemma in its telling. All too aware of feminist complaints of male patriarchy, female passivity, presumptuous sexual norms, and the trap of motherhood contrasted with the empowerment of working, filmmakers walk a fine line constructing narratives that permit the male counterpart (dubbing him the hero could prove controversial) an opportunity to rescue the girl-woman, who is only needing help to *complete* the journey-of-liberation she has already undertaken.

Ignoring for the moment the divergent desires of the male cinemagoer, if the fictional man is merely an accessory to the action then women cinemagoers are unfulfilled. Women in the real world are determined to liberate themselves, but only because no man has proven equal to the task. Indeed, we face an epidemic of passive, undisciplined, selfish, emasculated men. Fairy tales reflect reality as much (or as little) as they ever did. But what resonates today is different.

Here's how our fairy tale unfolds in *Tangled*: Tower-dweller Rapunzel sets out to discover the meaning of the floating lanterns. (Subconsciously she's searching for her parents. In the classic fairy tale the father or family sends the hero on his quest. The lanterns are both a clue to identity and a call to the search. So the family is in effect sending Rapunzel out.) Rather than a wicked stepmother she has a wicked false-mother who, instead of being jealous of Rapunzel's beauty, covets her power to grant eternal youth. Leaving the tower, the heroine feels guilty for betraying the false-mother, not realizing how undeserved that affection is. Rapunzel doesn't seek love. However, her romance with Eugene strengthens the quest-narrative because Eugene's apparent betrayal of Rapunzel seems to affirm the false-mother's admonition that the world is too dangerous for Rapunzel to handle. Perhaps now the emotionally battered heroine will abandon her quest and accept the reality of her little world—she has magic hair that evil men crave, and the only safe place to be is ensconced in a tower. (People, especially children, accept the reality they are confronted with.)

Thus the story of the quest morphs into a battle over the hair—will Rapunzel stay or go? She wins this battle by discovering the false-mother's true nature, refusing to sing again (so the hair will never yield its rejuvenating power-burst). Only at the story's end does the more conventional mini-quest (Eugene breaking out of prison, undertaking a rescue of Rapunzel) supplant Rapunzel's abandoned quest (reunion with her parents).

As Eugene progresses from breezy thief to benign lover (he makes no moves on Rapunzel during their boat ride, even providing lanterns for them to launch in a flurry of chaste hyper-romance), Rapunzel grows as well, finding her 'voice' ("Did I mumble, Mother?"), failing not from any spiritual deficiency, but because she is physically overwhelmed and gagged. The undemonstrative Eugene, channeling his surplus energy into the rescue, is stabbed by the false-

mother and faces death. The movie, having proven itself quirky, glossy, and charming, now finally achieves something really worthwhile.

If real love means sacrifice, especially the sacrifice of being apart forever, then what transpires is a lesson to us all. Rapunzel volunteers to remain with her tormentor indefinitely, provided she be allowed to heal Eugene. He, gallantly, protests, and just as she's about to save him he cuts her hair with a piece of shattered mirror, dooming himself, but freeing her. The effect is shocking, and cathartic in its suddenness, violence, and resolution of tension.

Then, in classic Disney fashion (*Tarzan*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*), the villainess falls to her death by "accident."

By cutting Rapunzel's hair, Eugene guarantees that both her quest and his quest will succeed. Eugene is saved only because Rapunzel's tear, somehow, retains magical properties. It's just blind luck that restores his life in a last-minute resurrection (much like *Bolt*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Jungle Book*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Lady and the Tramp*, *Pinocchio*, and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*; and, three-quarters of the way through, *Peter Pan* and *The Fox and the Hound*). Since she didn't know she could save him (no woman wants to rescue the man), the effect is such that he retains his robust masculinity—he is still handsome and strong, and whatever he's lost in attractiveness (by being more predictable), he's gained in dependability. Rapunzel can be strong without compromising her femininity since her partner is stronger—but only physically. She matches him in spiritual strength.

So Eugene tries to rescue Rapunzel, finally succeeds in freeing her from the glamour-hag, and is saved by Rapunzel. The reunion with the parents, the point of the whole story, is strangely anti-climactic. The father is a cipher, the queen a non-entity.

But the kingdom's greatest enemy has become the heir apparent.

Finally, at long last, the pair kiss for the first time, just like *Aladdin*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Cinderella*.

Eugene Flynn Ryder is a "bad boy," like thieving Aladdin, Beast, Eric (since Ariel is forbidden him in *The Little Mermaid*), the mongrel Tramp, and flying delinquent Peter Pan, so he appeals to a woman's rebellious desire for strength spiced with danger. But attraction like this proves fleeting. A man who is kind and dependable may not be exciting, but he makes for a better partner. Most important to Rapunzel (and the female audience), Eugene inspires trust; he makes you feel safe, without being bored.

Rapunzel is beautiful...and strong, tough, and brave—she is designed this way to forestall any criticism that she's just another damsel in distress. But in order to make Eugene desirable he has got to be stronger, tougher, braver, and just as beautiful.

So that's what they made him. Indeed, Eugene is too good to be true. But so is a magic shrub that grants eternal youth! The disbeliefs we have to suspend may have changed, but the wonders of a good Disney fairy tale endure.