
Sun Flowers and Moon Powers: Princesses and Magical Agency in *Tangled* and *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*

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The princess is a figure who has featured prominently in fairy tales for centuries, but has been popularised in fairy tale animation through the films of the Walt Disney Animated Studio. Despite being framed through fantastic tales, the princess is more often placed as adjacent to magical power or simply as girls in a magical world. In the last decade, there has been an increasing trend in princesses who have wieldable magical power in popular fairy tale films, most notably Elsa from Disney's *Frozen* (Buck and Lee, 2013). In this paper, I concentrate on magical power in relation to the figure of the princess through what I call *magical agency*, which I define as agency provided to a person through their own use of magic, particularly wieldable magical power. While there has been some work on magical objects and the use of portals as agents of transformation in relation to fairy tale and literary fantasy heroines, there is more limited study on their use of innate, wieldable magical power as tools of agency.[\[1\]](#)

I combine scholarship on girlhood and the magical *shōjo* genre to examine the trend of princesses with magical power in popular contemporary animated fairy tale films, using Walt Disney Animated Studio's *Tangled* (Greno and Howard, 2010) and Studio Ghibli's *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (Takahata, 2013) as case studies. By looking at both an American and a Japanese fairy tale film, I aim to provide two examples of how girlhood and citizenship are constructed through the figure of the magical princess in the fairy tale films of popular animation studios from different national contexts. *Tangled* and *Kaguya* are both contemporary animated film adaptations of folkloric stories, drawing from the Germanic Rapunzel tale and the 10th century Japanese *Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* (*Taketori monogatari*) respectively. Both were the first films by each studio to centre princess characters who demonstrate the activation of magical powers. Furthermore, both films were commercial and critical successes, suggesting that there is a market for not just fairy tale films, but ones centring magical *shōjo* princesses, thus highlighting their significance in popular culture. Ultimately, through this paper I hope to provide a frame of analysis by which the liberating and resistant potential of future princesses can be examined through their relationship to magical agency.

Fairy Tale Princesses

Fairy tales are significant stories with lasting power, featuring narratives and characters that have been traced back to centuries ago and are still being reproduced today. One of the definitive features of the fairy tale is its centring of transformation, both through narratives which are propelled by change and the constantly adapting nature of the genre itself. Fairy tale scholars frequently highlight the metamorphic properties of the tales, examining how their various editions and adaptations become reshaped by the cultural, historic and national contexts in which they are told. Maria Tatar argues that the tales “function as shape-shifters” that are “always doing new cultural work, mapping out different developmental paths, assimilating new anxieties and desires”. [2],[3] Marina Warner has also described them as “magical shape-shifters, dancing to the needs of their audience”, and to Cristina Bacchilega, fairy tale variations are “shaped by varying histories, ideologies, and material conditions”. [4],[5] Several scholars have analysed differently shaped variants of individual tales in depth, demonstrating that the meanings communicated by fairy tales and their variants can reveal insights into contextually specific identity construction practices.[6],[7],[8]

Because of this shape-shifting power, fairy tales can serve as a way to construct or reinforce ideas about categories of identity including roles surrounding the family, gender, class and the nation, which can be both challenged and legitimised through magical and fantastical ways. They do this through the use of familiar character tropes. The fairy tale princess is such a figure through which these shifting meanings of national and gendered identities are projected. Gender and nation are inherently linked, particularly with regards to the reproduction of the nation, and the princess provides a site through which we can examine constructions of aspirational national girlhood.[9] While many older and ‘original’ fairy tales do feature girls who are princesses either by blood or marriage, the positioning of almost all heroines or young female protagonists in contemporary fairy tales as princesses has been cemented in the Western public imagination. This idea is especially apparent in the Disney animated fairy tale films, to the point where even a character like Disney’s Mulan, who is neither born of nor marries into a royal or ruling family, is placed within the Disney Princess franchise. The privileging of the princess figure above other roles means that we must go beyond looking at princesses simply as fairy tale girls. Princesses are not just girls, or even girls with riches, but ones who have a special status within a kingdom; they combine girlhood with ideas of citizenship. As members of leading or ruling families, they become models for good girl citizenship and their very identities are tied to the ruling and reproducing projects of the kingdom.

Even if she is placed in an aspirational position, the fairy tale princess has been received with varied reputations. There is an ambivalent perception of the fairy tale princess as both “a dangerous threat to gender equality” and a figure who “displays admirable assertiveness and authority”, complicating the earlier perception of the fairy tale princess as “a totally powerless prisoner” by identifying in late Victorian writing an “emancipated fairy-tale princess”. [10],[11],[12] Disney princesses in particular have been criticised for the damsel-in-distress characterisations of their early princesses. However, contemporary Western princesses have evolved, often in self-referential ways, to be icons of girl power media whose narratives borrow neoliberal, postfeminist language to encourage free choice and self-definition as strategies for empowerment. At the same time, they are surrounded by sparkle, the bright and glittering aesthetic trend which Mary Celeste Kearney poses as “the primary visual signifier” of postfeminist girls’ media culture, which is commodified as a “marketplace [choice] in the neoliberal, post-feminist subject’s construction of her individual feminine identity” that can allow her to signify capability.[13][14] Contemporary fairy tale princesses are a demonstrative example of Emilie Zaslow’s model of girl power media culture which combines elements of conventional (usually physical) femininity with counter-representations of traditionally feminine characteristics. The feminine aspects that are retained, and even highlighted, are physical traits such as beauty and sexiness, while behavioural stereotypes like passivity and dependency are discarded in favour of representations of agentic and active girls.

Magical *Shōjo*

While fairy tale princesses are often located within magical worlds or able to interact with magical creatures, rarely do they wield magical power themselves. As such, there is limited scholarship on magical fairy tale princesses. To develop an analytical framework to explore the relationship between wieldable magical power and agency in fairy tale princesses, I turn to pre-existing work on magical girls. Research on magical girls is often framed around the context of Japanese *shōjo* media culture, in which the magical girl genre is prevalent. *Shōjo*, the Japanese term for girl, is “a shorthand for a certain kind of liminal identity between child and adult”. [15] *Shōjo* theory, like Western theory on girls and girlhood, often focusses on the socially resistant or liberating opportunities for girls who do not have a firm social role. The idea of liminality recurs in key studies on *shōjo* culture, with Honda Masuko’s seminal work using the imagery of fluttering ribbons, frills and swaying clothing (expressed using the onomatopoeic term *hirahira*) to describe the *shōjo* aesthetic as one that can cross borders and boundaries.[16] The *shōjo* is also characterised by her “social, cultural and sexual ambiguity and liminality; arrogance and strong yearning for freedom; and

subversion and resistance to the structures imposed by the adult male” and her desire to “escape the restraints of tradition, family, and male control”, defying confinement to the structure of the modern family and bound to the guiding value of “good wife, wise mother”. [17],[18],[19] Like the fairy tale girl, who is often of marriageable age but not yet married at the start of the tale, the youth of the *shōjo* provides the potential for escape from, or even resistance to, patriarchal social structures, since girls, who have “still-amorphous identities” and are not yet women, have yet to be inducted into the processes of social womanhood, which include those that contribute to the production and fortification of the nation such as biological and cultural reproduction.[20]

Kumiko Saito’s mapping of the uses of wieldable magical power in magical girl anime reveals that there is a relationship between magical girl power and the pre-adult, pre-domesticated *shōjo* identity. She argues that the magical girl genre in Japanese television programming “has been an active site of contesting ideas surrounding gender roles and identities”, demonstrating how changing ideas of gender in Japanese society can be understood through analysing different constructions of magical girls and how their power is used.[21] Likewise, Susan Napier asserts that through the figure of the magical girl, Japanese audiences “are able to project issues of identity construction onto the attractive and unthreatening figure of the *shōjo*”, noting that the magical girl – like the fairy tale princess – is a site of contestation for complex gender identities.[22] Another component of the magical girl and the *shōjo* is its temporariness, which, as Saito argues, “endorses the premise that the magical power is condoned as far as it is merely an interim period for enjoying *shōjo*-ness before undertaking female duties” such as domestic and reproductive labour.[23]

Furthermore, *shōjo* culture, like fairy tales, draws on imagination and fantasy. For example, Honda’s *hirahira* aesthetic involves “dreaming of fantasy and alternative worlds”. [24] Helen Kilpatrick combines Honda’s work with Takahara Eiri’s concept of “girl consciousness,” explaining that the liminality of the *shōjo* allows her a position in which “her imaginative aspirations render the space between girlhood and adulthood as a place of liminality in which to dream freely and resist her societal confines”. [25] For these reasons, *shōjo* theory readings of the magical girl that highlight the liberating potential of liminality are particularly appropriate for examining fairy tale princesses, particularly those who possess magical agency through their wielding of magical power, in relation to girlhood and national citizenship.

Sun Flower Girl Power in *Tangled*

Disney Princesses are the fairy tale princesses in film that are most often studied and discussed, perhaps due to their widespread presence and impact. These princesses, particularly those from Disney's Golden and Silver Eras (1937-1970) such as Snow White, Cinderella and Aurora, are most often labelled as passive and conforming to gendered stereotypes of women as submissive and powerless. The princess characters from the Disney Renaissance films (1989-1999) such as Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Mulan and Pocahontas are seen as more assertive and rebellious; Alexandra Heatwole proposes that this is in response to third-wave feminism and Girl Power trends in which the girl became "a point of convergence for conflicting debates about risk and empowerment" and that Disney's response "appears to have drawn on the public imaginary, constructing an image of girlhood appropriate to its time".[\[26\]](#) Dawn England et al.'s content analysis of Disney Princess films argues that Disney's latest film at that time (and the first film in the new wave of Disney animated films known as the Disney Revival), *The Princess and the Frog* (Clements and Musker, 2009), conveys mixed gendered messages, although their study relies on essentialised and uncontested gender stereotypes.[\[27\]](#) Rather than responding to third-wave feminism, Caroline Leader determines that from the Renaissance onwards, Disney draws on post-feminism, explaining that "the company structures the Princess brand story and its products around post-feminist girl power popular culture starting in the 1980s and 1990s - allowing girl audiences to indulge in hyper-feminine glamorous bodies onscreen with the assurance that these characters are also strong female role models for modern girls" but also that "these progressive agendas conflict with overriding masculine ideologies".[\[28\]](#) More recently, the studio has been reimagining their princess figures, co-opting popular discourses about girlhood and highlighting their girl power attitudes and independence from men. *Tangled* is one such film in which the princess protagonist is characterised by her girl power abilities and hyper-feminine visual design, but ultimately does not stray far from conservative ideologies.

Tangled is Disney's version of the Rapunzel tale. One day, a drop of sunlight falls to the earth and sprouts a magical sundrop flower which has the ability to heal any sickness and restore a person to youth. A woman, Gothel, finds the flower and regularly performs a ritual to utilise the flower's power to renew her youth and life. When the queen of the kingdom falls ill, the king sends his guards to find the flower to heal her. Rapunzel is born with hair that holds the same power as the flower. Gothel kidnaps her to use for her life-restoring ritual and keeps her contained in a tower, raising Rapunzel as the daughter to her "Mother" Gothel, although Rapunzel yearns to leave at least for one day to see the floating lanterns that are released in the kingdom every year on her birthday. She escapes with a thief, Flynn Ryder, but Gothel finds out and hunts them down. Ryder and Rapunzel go on a turbulent adventure,

evading both Gothel and Ryder's enemies, and fall in love. Gothel lays out the condition that she will let Rapunzel heal the stabbed and dying Ryder if she remains in the tower forever, but rather than letting Rapunzel be trapped in the tower again, Ryder cuts her hair himself, destroying the healing and restorative powers of her hair and reducing Gothel to dust as she is no longer kept alive by the flower's magic. Rapunzel cries over Ryder's seemingly dead body, and that last tear contains what is implied to be the last remnants of the flower's healing magic and it brings Ryder back to life. They return to the kingdom and reunite with the king and queen, becoming a family once again.

Tangled, the second film of the Disney Revival, is the first Disney fairy tale film in which girl power is invoked through the central princess figure demonstrating magical agency by the use of seemingly innate magical powers. The magical agency of earlier Disney princesses is limited to interaction with magical worlds and creatures, such as the ability to communicate with animals; they do not have the ability to activate magical power. Rather, wieldable magical power is afforded to parental characters, as in Cinderella's Fairy Godmother and King Triton, or villainous characters such as Ursula and Maleficent. Thus, the use of magical power in Disney fairy tale films is used only as an initial catalyst for change, cast by an external source, and/or is loaded with danger. *Tangled* begins a new wave in the Revival of princesses that can be seen as having magical agency with *Frozen* continuing the trend, although Elsa's relationship with power is fraught with anxiety. Even though this anxiety appears to be appeased in *Frozen*, the trailer for *Frozen 2* (Buck and Lee, 2019) shows the troll Grand Pabbie warning Anna of Elsa's magic, saying "Magic is very alluring. Without you, she may lose herself to it." [29] Elsa's magical power and power ballads are used to highlight her status as a girl power role model, but the tension surrounding the activation of her wild power communicates that girls cannot have full agentic control of their magical abilities and they must be contained within appropriate guidelines of femininity. In *Frozen*, this tension is only resolved when Elsa's magical power becomes contained and controlled through the expression of love, a typically feminised emotion. Rapunzel's relationship with her magical power is also one that is riddled with tension, indicating that Disney's fairy tales still operate on a contradiction of reliance on glittering hyper-feminine fantasy worlds and girl power narratives while also treating magical power and its resistant potential for girls with caution.

Despite Rapunzel being the first Disney Princess who can be seen to control and wield magical power, I suggest that rather than having innate magical power, Rapunzel uses magical objects, one of which happens to be connected to, or embedded in, her body. Since Rapunzel's magic draws from the sundrop flower whose power is manifest in her hair, it is

not inherently part of her, as indicated by the loss of power when her hair is cut - what the foreign status of the flower means for Rapunzel's princess identity will be examined in later in the paper. However, while not necessarily her own innate magical power, this object does provide her with magical agency: she uses it to escape her tower and throughout her adventures, making use of its magical resilience in addition to its healing and glowing powers. What is notable is that the objects that provide Rapunzel agency are conventionally feminine: her hair is perhaps even *hyper*-feminine. Leader positions princess hair as an embodiment of Zaslow's girl power in which girls are both "traditionally feminine objects and ... powerful feminist agents", arguing that it acts as "an extension of this implicitly sexual, powerful, and feminine body". [30],[31] Even the non-magical object that Rapunzel uses on her adventures relies on this post-feminist position between the traditionally feminine and the empowered and confident agent. She uses a frying pan, not for any domestic purposes, but rather to bash the heads of her pursuers.

Although long hair itself is already a symbol of femininity, magical power provides Rapunzel's hair with a *hyper*-feminised treatment. Her magical hair is evocative of Kearney's sparkling aesthetic, the shining visual trend that is characteristic of post-feminist girls' media. In fact, Kearney even singles out Disney in her discussion, noting that "virtually every female-centred product distributed by The Walt Disney Company in the last decade is resplendent with sparkle".[32] Of particular interest to note is that in merchandise and other intertextual material, Rapunzel's hair is restored to its long, blonde state, even though it is cut into a messy brunette bob at the end of the film. Leader points out, in her work on princess hair, that *Tangled's* senior software engineer's preoccupation with ensuring Rapunzel's hair was, first and foremost, beautiful. Long, blonde and glowing, Rapunzel's hair is definitively the means by which she becomes "sparklefied", which involves the way in which "embodying or surrounded by light, young female characters are stylistically highlighted in ways that make them visually superior to virtually all else in the frame".[33] Rapunzel's blonde hair is the visual focus throughout most of the film, literally taking up most of the frame with its shining mass (figs. 1 and 2).

Figure 2: *Tangled* (Byron Howard & Nathan Greno, 2010)

As the object through which her magical agency is invoked, this hair is also instrumental in furthering Rapunzel's adventure narrative and escape from Gothel's containment. Even when it has been cut, the magic is still tied to her hair. This is most evident when she wields her power for the last time; although the magic is activated through her tear, tendrils of the last of the healing and resurrecting luminous golden magic of the sundrop flower curl up and around her like hair (figs. 3 and 4).

Figure 3: *Tangled* (Byron Howard & Nathan Greno, 2010)

Furthermore, Rapunzel's hair also demonstrates some of the fluttering properties of Honda's *hirahira* aesthetic, the visual symbolisation of the liminality of the *shōjo* and her resistance to containment within social roles. It is the case that even more than its healing power, Rapunzel uses her hair as a gag or other form of binding, and devises pulley systems for her hair to operate as a rope for herself, Gothel or Ryder to climb. However, although arguably the use of her hair highlights its resilience and strength more than its flexibility or "flutteriness," Rapunzel's perpetually silky and never-tangled hair, always moving, shifting and slithering, is what grants her the girlish liminal potential of crossing borders and boundaries, and escaping the grasps of kingdom guards, Gothel and her other adversaries.

Although the sparkling and *hirahira* properties of Rapunzel's hair are tied to her magical agency, the film does not allow for Rapunzel to explore the socially resistant potential of girls' creative agency that Kearney and Honda hope for in their discussions of girl/*shōjo* cultures' aesthetics. Rapunzel's magical agency is curbed through the loss of her power when her hair is cut. Moreover, it is significant that Rapunzel loses her hair and subsequently her magical agency not by self-sacrifice but rather by Ryder making the decision for her. Rather than being allowed to explore the selfish, liminal and perhaps even disruptive potential of the magical agency provided by her hair, her power is contained and taken from her by the primary male character of the film. The loss of power is legitimised through the strategy of heterosexual romance, endorsing Saito's identification of romance as a "reward after a bittersweet farewell to *shōjo*-hood".[\[34\]](#) In cutting her hair, Ryder is positioned as *saving* Rapunzel from Gothel's grasp at the cost of his own life due to his love for her, thereby both overshadowing Rapunzel's disempowering loss of magical agency and situating it as a worthy exchange for Ryder's love.

Magical power in *Tangled* is used as a device that relies on hyper-femininity but is still used to contain the figure of the girl. Rapunzel's hair provides her with agency but is something that must ultimately be discarded in order for her to re-join collective society. She becomes contained within the system of the kingdom almost immediately after the loss of her power; the film cuts from Ryder's resurrection and the final invocation of Rapunzel's magical power directly to the couple returning to the kingdom's castle for Rapunzel to be reunited with the king and queen. As such, a direct consequential effect is drawn between Rapunzel's loss of power and her reinstatement as not just a citizen of the kingdom but its princess and heir, the position through which she can now finally contribute to and reproduce the nation and its royal lineage. As is typical of a Disney fairy tale film, marriage is part of the glittery and rewarding package of the Happily Ever After ending in *Tangled*. The final seconds of voiceover narration imply that Rapunzel and Ryder are now engaged, soon to be - or already - married, thus cementing the loss of

Rapunzel's position as a *shōjo* and placing her firmly within the containment system of the kingdom.

The loss of Rapunzel's magical agency and re-acquisition of her "princesshood" also serve to communicate biologically essentialist ideas about her citizen identity. Throughout the film, the sundrop flower (and, subsequently, Rapunzel's hair) is treated as a colonial object. The image of the king's guards hunting down and tearing the sundrop flower out of the ground by its roots to bring back to the kingdom for the queen's exclusive use is reminiscent of colonisers pillaging indigenous land for personal use. Moreover, the sundrop flower is used to protect the future of the kingdom, and the birth of the crown princess Rapunzel after the queen's consumption of the flower signifies that the monarchic structure of the nation will be maintained successfully; the queen has carried out her reproductive duty to the kingdom. It is also important to note that while Gothel uses the flower for her own individual longevity, she leaves it in the ground. On the other hand, when the flower is brought to the kingdom for the queen's use, it is dissolved into tea, never to be used by anyone else ever again.

The magical power granted by this alien source is something that is positioned as both beautiful and useful but also dangerous in the "wrong" hands, reminiscent of colonial Othering and appropriation strategies. Consider the difference in the representation of power when it is held by Gothel versus Rapunzel: in Gothel's hands, the power is positioned as selfish and dangerous as she is using it outside of the borders of the sovereign kingdom, but in Rapunzel's, it is seen as selfless and good (although still ultimately must be contained). This is most evident in the song used to activate the power. When Gothel sings, it is in a more sombre G minor key, while the first time we hear child Rapunzel singing it, she sings it in a friendlier and more innocent-sounding C major.

Finally, the colonial treatment of magical power is most evident through the embedding and removal of the sundrop flower's magic within Rapunzel's body. Even though the magical agency provided by her hair is the driving force for most of the film's plot, it ultimately must leave her very DNA before Rapunzel's princess citizenship can be re-acquired. The sundrop flower has served its limited purpose for allowing Rapunzel to play with power and reinstate her princesshood but it becomes discarded when she is re-introduced into the kingdom. The cutting of her hair is not enough; the very last remnants of the flower's foreign substance are wrenched out of her body before she is able to become her true brunette self and reclaim her citizenship. *Tangled* ultimately shies away from the powerful potential of princesses with magical agency, continuing to position magic as alien and dangerous and instead privileging a symbol of post-feminist girl power: it is telling that the hair and magical power no

longer serve a purpose after the climax of the film, but the royal guard's swords are replaced with replicas of Rapunzel's cast iron frying pan.

Borrowing the Moonlight in *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*

While Studio Ghibli's films, like Disney's, are known for their young heroines, they tend to focus on a variety of girls in different roles rather than the princess figure specifically. Kaguya is one of few princesses within the Ghibli body of work, alongside *Laputa: Castle in the Sky's* (Miyazaki, 1986) Sheeta and arguably *Princess Mononoke's* (Miyazaki, 1997) San, although San is positioned as a princess only by the film's title.[\[35\]](#) In addition, despite often being associated with magical girls, Ghibli's films too mostly position girls as adjacent to magic or mostly interacting with magical worlds rather than in control of, or activating, magical power. The exceptions here are the eponymous girls from *Kiki's Delivery Service* (Miyazaki, 1989), *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* (Miyazaki, 2006) and, of course, *Kaguya*. Magical agency in Ghibli films is also a site through which contested ideas about girl identity are played out: Kiki struggles with her magical powers as they are limited by her affective state and feeling of self-worth, and Ponyo's own transformative powers are temporary and only initially kickstarted by the blood of a human boy and her father's chemical magic. Similarly, Kaguya's agentic magical potential is tied to her identity as princess – both *shōjo* and citizen. Her power both grants her with liminal *shōjo* potential and leaves her as an indebted citizen to her kingdom.

Kaguya is based on the oldest extant Japanese written tale, *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*, and is about a girl who is found by a bamboo cutter, Sanuki no Miyatsuko, in a bamboo shoot. She grows up to become a renowned beauty and is moved by her father to the city to be courted by numerous suitors, including the emperor, but rejects them all. She escapes to the hometown in the countryside in which she grew up and reunites with her childhood friend and love interest Sutemaru and they share a day together flying in the sky. It is revealed that she is actually from the moon and deliberately became exiled in order to experience mortality but is reclaimed by the moon, and a magical coat is placed on her to wipe her memories of the earth.

Kaguya's innate magic attempts to pull her into womanhood: she grows magically quickly from a baby to a girl, with the film invoking traditions tying femininity with nature, drawing on what Napier calls "the myth of Japanese as living in harmony with nature, often expressed through a union of the feminine with the natural".[\[36\]](#) For instance, her father figure Miyatsuko comments at the beginning of the film that the plum blossoms have not yet bloomed; however, they bloom in the presence of the baby Kaguya. Developments in nature such as flowers blooming or

birds leaving the nest are often used as transitional cutaways between scenes showing Kaguya's rapid growth from baby to girl. The bamboo shoot from which Kaguya was found and "birthed" provides Miyatsuko with resplendent fabrics and gold that he uses to build Kaguya a palace in the city and dress her like a royal. It is in this palace and social position as a princess on earth that the magic of her birthing place and body lead her to, but it is in this social space and position from which Kaguya's magical agency is used to escape.

Where Rapunzel's powers are healing, glowing and resilient, the power that Kaguya chooses to activate allows her to phase through physical space, disappearing and reappearing at will, moving through space at a supernatural pace and flying through the sky. Where the resiliency granted by the magical properties of Rapunzel's hair is used to provide her agency through active means, such as an escape rope or a gag, Kaguya's magical powers are passive and evasive. Where Rapunzel's magical agency is used to bring her towards her goal of re-joining her family and ultimately her social roles as woman and citizen, Kaguya uses her magical agency to evade these social roles within the patriarchal society of feudal Japan.

The liminality of Kaguya's girlhood is certainly expressed through Honda's *hirahira* aesthetic. She is often dressed or surrounded by floating fabrics. The exception is when she is draped in heavy kimono layers, figuratively and literally weighed down by the responsibility demanded of her as a girl transitioning to maturity and the role demanded of a woman. When Kaguya first escapes to the countryside, she flings off all her heavy layers until she is left in her (relatively) casual red and white outfit. Of course, this outfit is loose-fitting with a flowing silhouette. More importantly, Kaguya activates the resistant and liminal potential of the *shōjo* through *magical* liminality. The liminal properties of Kaguya's girlhood are best seen when the emperor attempts to capture her. He embraces her from behind and demands that she allow herself to be taken back to his palace to marry him. As he tries to carry her away, the colouring of the frame turns a ghostly blue tone and Kaguya slips from the emperor's grasp, sliding away and disappearing, leaving him holding her outermost robe (fig. 5). Here, Kaguya literally turns translucent in a ghostlike manner, as though moving through an entirely different plane, and places herself back into physical space at her own will. She activates the fluttering *hirahira* capabilities provided by girlhood to escape being forced into a confined position within the patriarchal social structure.

In another scene where Kaguya flees her naming banquet and, in a moment of magical realism, sprints all the way from the city to her home village, the visual style also changes, reflecting the liminality of her power and her girlhood. The lines lose the previous delicacy and hair-thin

precision and become jagged and charcoal-like, and Kaguya's figure warps out of shape as she tears across the landscape and the frame (fig. 6). Again, she is invoking magical agency, escaping the boundaries of her physical body as well as the realistic constraints of the space in order to resist societal confinement.

Not only does she resist her own confinement, Kaguya's magical agency allows her to disrupt Sutemaru's family unit, tearing him away from his wife and newborn child for their magical flight. Napier identifies the significance of flight in Ghibli films: "it is in images of flying that the possibilities of escape (from the past, from tradition) are most clearly realized".[\[37\]](#) Kaguya and Sutemaru's flight is a joyous escape from both of their social roles, realised by Kaguya's selfish activation of her liberating magical powers.

Figure 5: *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* (Isao Takahata, 2013)

However, like Rapunzel, Kaguya's power must be limited. Despite Kaguya's magical agency being used for liminal and liberating purposes, her power comes at a cost. Kaguya's use of magic is enabled by her requesting the moon for power, and ultimately the cost is her life on earth. Thus, while *Kaguya* does allow magical girlhood to explore its subversive and resistant potential, the transience of the magical girl that Saito recognises as characteristic of the genre is still a significant component of the film. During Kaguya's flight with Sutemaru, they approach the moon and as it looms large overhead, Kaguya begs it to give her more time on earth, but her power is taken from her and she plummets back to the earth. Saito argues that "the underlying theme that the heroine is foredoomed to say farewell to magic in the end ... transforms latent power of the amorphous girl into the re-appreciation of traditional gender norms by equating magic with *shōjo*-hood to be given up at a certain stage".[\[38\]](#) Rather than leading to gender expectations such as marriage, however, the expiration of Kaguya's magical agency is tied to her identity as a princess: more than becoming a married woman, Kaguya is contained by her citizenship and duty to her kingdom. In activating magical agency, Kaguya borrows power from the moon, her home kingdom, accruing a debt that must be paid back by her return. Essentially, Kaguya's magical agency is granted by contract of citizenship. It does not matter what potentially gendered role Kaguya has to fulfil when she returns to the moon, it only matters that her homecoming must happen.

Instead of focussing simply on the tense space between girl and woman, the film also places her in contention between her roles as girl and *princess*. Kaguya's agency, magical and otherwise, is rendered useless in the face of the debt and duty she owes to her kingdom. Like *Tangled's* Rapunzel, Kaguya demonstrates a final instance of agency through her tears. The film becomes increasingly grey as Kaguya forgets her memories of life on earth and rises towards the moon, but she enacts one last agentic act of defiance and turns back to look at the earth, resisting for a moment the memory-forgetting powers of the coat. Colour returns briefly before fading again when Kaguya turns back towards the moon, but Kaguya's magical agency is undermined as she succumbs to what appears to be unchangeable fate but is actually the fulfilment of her contract to her kingdom as citizen and princess. (figs. 7 and 8)

Figure 8: *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* (Isao Takahata, 2013)

Conclusion

In *Tangled* and *Kaguya*, magical agency is used by the princess protagonists to aide in their journeys. Kaguya's innate magic draws her to maturity, speeding up the time of her girlhood, but her agentic use of magic is evasive and liminal, granting her the agency to explore the liberating and resistant potential of girlhood and avoid the confinement of the gendered role of womanhood. She uses it to escape her social responsibilities within a patriarchal system, disappearing from the imprisonment of court life, banquets and the emperor's grasp, and disrupting Sutehmaru's family unit for her own desires. Romance is not a priority but rather a secondary reward enabled by Kaguya's selfish *shōjo*-hood.

On the other hand, Rapunzel's magic is a combination of the active physicality and resilience usually afforded to male protagonists and more feminine healing and restoring properties. Disney's brand of post-feminism is evident in *Tangled* in the positioning of Rapunzel as both a hyper-feminine object by the glamorisation of her hair and a spunky Girl Power idol. In the film, Rapunzel's magical agency is reliant on the hyper-feminine sparkly symbol of her glowing blonde hair, but the subversive potential of her girlhood must still be contained through her loss of power by Ryder's hand. However, this loss is disguised by romance, which is used both as a reward for the loss of girlhood as well as a way to situate Rapunzel firmly within her gendered role.

In both films, the magical princesses are ultimately contained and re-absorbed back into the kingdom. By losing their magical agency, Rapunzel and Kaguya lose their *shōjo*-ness and its accompanying potential for liminal resistance and freedom from social structures and re-instated into their roles as princesses whose lives are owed to the nation. Kaguya and Rapunzel do demonstrate magical agency to aid them in fulfilling their desires but ultimately the power does not belong to each of the girls. For Rapunzel, the power belongs to an alien object that is appropriated with colonial treatment and her citizenship and princess status are re-acquired almost immediately after, and arguably under the condition of, losing her magical agency. Only when she is stripped of her power and rid of the foreign-ness temporarily embodied within her can her wish to be re-instated as the kingdom's princess be fulfilled. For

Kaguya, the power is borrowed from the kingdom and thus owed back to the kingdom. Kaguya's position as a citizen of the moon is re-established contractually due to her activation of magical agency. Even though magical agency is used to resist gendered social roles, in the end her attempts at escaping the contract of citizenship are rendered futile and she is re-instated against her wishes as princess of the moon kingdom.

There appears to be a trend towards increasing numbers of contemporary princesses in fairy tale films demonstrating magical agency, which is both influencing and being informed by girl power trends in wider media spheres. My analysis of two such princesses demonstrates that even though they can wield agentic magical powers and appear to be models for powerful girlhood, they are still limited by containment strategies such as romantic love and contract of citizenship.

Notes

[1] Bronwyn Reddan, "Thinking Through Things: Magical Objects, Power, and Agency in French Fairy Tales" *Marvels & Tales* 30, no. 2 (2016): 191-209

[2] Maria Tatar, "Why Fairy Tales Matter: The Performative and the Transformative," *Western Folklore* 69, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 56.

[3] Maria Tatar, *Secrets Beyond the Door: The Story of Bluebeard and his Wives* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), 11.

[4] Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers* (London: Vintage, 1995), xix-xx.

[5] Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1997), 146.

[6] Lucy Fraser, *The Pleasures of Metamorphosis: Japanese and English Fairy Tale Translations of "The Little Mermaid"* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 2017).

[7] Catherine Orenstein, *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale* (New York: Basic Books 2002).

[8] Tatar, *Secrets*.

[9] Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: SAGE Publications 1997).

[10] Lori M. Campbell, *Portals of Power: Magical Agency and*

Transformation in Literary Fantasy (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2010), 46.

[11] Jennifer Waelti-Walters, "On princesses: fairy tales, sex roles and loss of self" *International Journal of Women's Studies* 2, no. 2 (1979): 180.

[12] Campbell, *Portals*, 47.

[13] Mary Celeste Kearney, "Sparkle: luminosity and power-girl power media" *Continuum* 29 (2015): 266.
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[14] Melanie Kennedy, "Come on, [...] let's go find your inner princess": (post-feminist generalisationism in tween fairy tales" *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no.3 (2018): 435.0020
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1367704>

[15] Susan Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 148.

[16] Honda Masuko, "The genealogy of *hirahira*: liminality and the girl" in *Girl Reading Girl in Japan*, eds. Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley (New York: Routledge, 2010), 19-37.

[17] Tomoko Aoyama, "The Girl, the Body, and the Nation in Japan and the Pacific Rim: Introduction" *Asian Studies Review* 32, no. 3 (September 2008): 286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357820802294149>.

[18] Kawasaki Kenko, trans. Lucy Fraser and Tomoko Aoyama, "Osaki Midori and the Role of the Girl in Shōwa Modernism" *Asian Studies Review* 32, no. 3 (September 2008): 298.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10357820802299684>.

[19] Kawasaki, "Osaki Midori", 297.

[20] Napier, *Anime*, 149.

[21] Kumiko Saito, "Magic, *Shōjo*, and Metamorphosis: Magical Girl Anime and the Challenges of Changing Gender Identities in Japanese Society" *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 1 (February 2014): 145.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911813001708>.

[22] Napier, *Anime*, 150.

[23] Saito, “Magic, *Shōjo*, and Metamorphosis”, 151.

[24] Kazumi Hasegawa, “Falling in Love with History: Japanese Girls’ Otome Sexuality and Queering Historical Imagination” in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, eds. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 138.

[25] Helen Kilpatrick, “Envisioning the *shōjo* Aesthetic in Miyazawa Kenji’s ‘The Twin Stars’ and ‘Night of the Milky Way Railway’” *PORTAL: journal of multidisciplinary international studies* 9, no. 3 (2012): 3.
<https://doi.org/10.5130/portal.v9i3.2136>.

[26] Alexandra Heatwole “Disney Girlhood: Princess Generations and *Once Upon a Time*” *Studies in the Humanities* 43, no. 1 (December 2016): 3.

[27] Dawn Elizabeth England, Lara Descartes, and Melissa A. Collier-Meek, “Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses” *Sex Roles* 64, no.7 (April 2011): 555-567. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-9930-7>.

[28] Caroline Ferris Leader, “Magical manes and untamable tresses: (en)coding computer-animated hair for the post-feminist Disney Princess” *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no.6 (December 2018): 1087.

[29] “Frozen 2 | Official Trailer 2,” Walt Disney Animated Studios, uploaded September 23, 2019, video, 1:43,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwzLiQZDw2I>.

[30] Emilie Zaslow, *Feminism Inc.: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 3.

[31] Leader, “Magical manes”, 1088.

[32] Kearney, “Sparkle”, 264.

[33] Kearney, “Sparkle”, 264-265.

[34] Saito, “Magic, *Shōjo*, and Metamorphosis”, 157.

[35] Although Ponyo is an adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen’s mermaid princess, she is never positioned or referred to as a princess (or a mermaid) within the diegesis of the film or its official marketing texts.

[36] Napier, *Anime*, 233.

[37] Napier, *Anime*, 156.

[38] Saito, "Magic, Shōjo, and Metamorphosis", 150.

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