

Rapunzel by Marina Warner

The tale of 'Rapunzel' has inspired recurring motifs in Alice Anderson's work - the fall and swathes of blazing red hair; the tower; the scissors; the coveted child who is maltreated; the true mother and the false mother - have appeared in earlier works of hers as well as in this show. She brings to them her own fantasy identifications, but the frisson remains attuned to the fairytale original.

The Grimms' classic version opens with a woman and her husband who long to have a child, but have had no success; it then describes how the sad woman can see into the garden of the witch who lives next door, and noticing some herb or greenstuff growing there, conceives a craving for it: it is rampion, known in German as rapunzel, a kind of lettuce or spinach. Her cravings become so intense she appears to be dying of want, so her husband decides to steal into the garden and take some for her. The first time, he succeeds, but eating it only makes his wife want more, so she begs him to go back, and this time, he's caught in the act by the witch, who makes him swear that he will hand over to her the child who will be born. 'It will have a good life,' she says, 'I will take care of it like a mother.'

When the little girl is born, the witch appears, calls her Rapunzel after the herb she had craved, and takes her as her own. She is beautiful, we are told, and when she reaches the age of 12, the old woman locks her up in a tower with no door and no stairs and only a single window at the very top of the tower. Every day, when her witch mother calls up to her, the girl winds her long hair round a hook by the window (the story is clear about this important practicality) and hauls up her 'old mother' to bring her provisions - and company.

The Grimms then created one of the most memorable, weird, fairy tale refrains: 'Rapunzel, Rapunzel, Let down your hair.'

The story ends in a flurry of violence: when the witch discovers a prince has been climbing up to see Rapunzel, she flies into a fury, cuts off her hair, and throws her out into wilderness. The prince falls from the tower, is blinded by the thorns below, but one day later, much later, comes upon Rapunzel with the twins who have been born to her in the interval. Her tears, falling on his blinded eyes, cures his sight.

It is a savage story, filled with unexplained acts of abandonment, cruelty, and revenge, and Alice Anderson has been inspired to revisit its enigmatic motifs with powerful images of her own; it's not necessary to spell out what they mean, because they touch on the deepest mysteries, on mother love and infertility, on growing up and first sex.