

THE EXPERIENCE OF A WOMAN AS A PENTECOSTAL ACADEMIC

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The story of Rapunzel is a German folktale collected by the Brothers Grimm in the late nineteenth century as part of a drive to record folk traditions and myths. The story of Rapunzel begins with the long-awaited pregnancy of a poor couple who lived next door to the walled garden of an enchantress. The pregnant wife longed for the rare plant of "rapunzel" to the point of death. So her husband stole into the garden to take some of the plant for his wife. He was discovered by the enchantress and begged for mercy. So she required as payment that they surrender their child to her at birth. This they did. The child (named Rapunzel) grew in loveliness and was placed in an ivory tower, deep in the forest. Each day the enchantress would visit her and ask her to let down her golden hair so she could scale the tower to reach her, using the hair as a rope. One day a young prince was passing by the isolated tower and heard Rapunzel singing. He longed to meet the possessor of such a beautiful voice. Then he saw the enchantress visit Rapunzel, so after she left, he mimicked her commands. Rapunzel let down her golden hair but instead of the enchantress it was a young dashing prince. He went to visit her everyday after the enchantress had been and they planned to run away together. But the enchantress discovered the deceit of Rapunzel and cut her hair in anticipation of the prince's arrival. When the prince got to the top of the tower, he met the enchantress instead of Rapunzel. The enchantress threw down the rope of hair so that the prince fell from the tower and landed in a thicket of thorns. He was blinded and was left to wander the forest alone. However Rapunzel escaped and went to live in a little cottage. One day the prince heard her singing once again. The couple was reunited. As Rapunzel saw his damaged eyes, she wept. But as her tears delicately

dropped onto his eyelids they miraculously restored his sight. And of course, they lived happily ever after.

This story may seem to have little in common with the experience of a woman academic in the Pentecostal community however there are several analogies that can be drawn to highlight the reality of female scholars through an observation of both the form and content of the Rapunzel story. Such a tale can have direct application to our lives. In particular I would like to highlight some of the cultural challenges, myths and traditions within the world of academia that women encounter throughout their journey. Often it is not the theological challenge of women in ministry that we encounter, but the cultural and social forces that inhibit us. So using this story of Rapunzel, I would like to highlight several thoughts on my experience as a female academic.

Firstly, my experience is as a biblical scholar. As a student of the Old Testament, a common field of research is the analysis of the forms of literature or genres of writing. So within the field of form criticism, this narrative of Rapunzel is identified as a heroic folktale. These heroic folktales were analysed by Vladimir Propp in the early 20th Century to identify the plot, structure and functions of the characters (Propp 1978: 63). In his work, Propp noticed that there were common features across many of the stories. Although specific aspects such as name and location would vary, many of the key elements of the story (or functions) were constant. Propp identified a total of thirty-one different functions which a story may incorporate, which would always occur in the same sequence in all fairy tales (Milne 1986: 37). So there could be many different stories and variations of plot, but these were all based on the same functions that occur in the story with the same sequence. In describing the experience of a women academic within Pentecostalism, this analogy is helpful. It is a reminder that although these thoughts are reflective of my personal experience, it is not identical to the experience of all women. The plot varies from woman to woman. However despite the variances, there are many shared, common features that occur in our stories. The context and plot may vary, but many of the functions are the same. I have identified five functions, or key elements, that I would like to highlight from the Rapunzel story.

The first key element of the story, or function, is the “lack”. The couple lacked a child, and the arrival of the female child was highly anticipated. In the same way, my experience as a female academic is also one of lack. There is a lack of female peers to share the unique

challenges, to verbalise the reality, and to encourage one another in the journey. In a pathway where there are little or no women ahead of us, female academics struggle to carve a path in the Pentecostal community. Because of this lack, female academics can experience the surreal factor of feeling like an imposter. We can feel that somehow, the story is not quite right. We are the wrong hero – our gender is 'novel', and so we are not really meant to be in the story. This feeling is often reinforced by the language used of academics. Often, without realizing, academics and pastors are referred to in categories and language that are exclusively male. Although I am regularly, in group settings, invited to bring my wife to a function, I am sure that my teaching contract would be ended quite quickly if I did procure one for the event. So as an academic 'frauline' we can feel that we are not really meant to be there; frauline equals fraud. Yet, despite that experience, my personal story is one of continual encouragement by my male peers, who I am extremely grateful for. Yet this creates its own dilemma. This has meant that one of the challenges I have faced as a female academic is to function in a role where the examples and mentors are predominantly male, and yet to not lose my femaleness and femininity in the process. Then hopefully by the example of women who have carved a pathway as a Pentecostal academic – who function in their role with their own unique expression - we can encourage other woman and men behind us.

A second feature of the Rapunzel story is the "uneven bargain". The leafy vegetable of Rapunzel is traded for a child. The bargain is uneven as the power is all on the side of the enchantress. One of the challenges that I have faced as a female academic, is the uncomfortable topic of salary negotiation. There seems to be reluctance and inexperience among women to negotiate and bargain for higher packages. This often means that women receive less remuneration than their male counterparts. Although they may be valued the same, this may not be reflected in their pay-packet. Because women hesitate from aggressively bargaining their entry salary package, they tend to always remain behind their male counterparts.

The third feature in the Rapunzel story is a "second lack". Rapunzel is alone in the ivory tower. As we have already identified, she lacks peers and mentors. However this lack of female colleagues can become expected. As female academics, we can become used to being alone in the ivory tower and hearing our own solitary voice. We become used to being the prized, applauded woman. However this can lead to what I call 'princess disease'. We enjoy the attention and

exclusive domain. In fact we enjoy this privileged position so much that if another woman comes along to inhabit the ivory tower with us we can become jealous. In our 'princess condition', we can view her as a competitor for attention rather than a colleague in the song. Then we become like the enchantress and imprison other women. My experience has been one of continual self-examination. As a female doctor, I need to self-examine and self-medicate a healthy dose of community to ensure that that I am not affected by this 'princess disease'. Although I have not always been successful in this endeavour, I recognise it as a priority. By focusing upon my ongoing relationship and community with God I keep my identity secure. By focusing upon the development of others within my local academic community I keep my role in perspective.

Once this lack is observed and an antidote presented, then comes the "struggle". While I have identified my anti-dote as the divine and local communities, in Rapunzel the anti-dote is represented by the prince. In each story, the struggle resolves around the woman leaving the ivory tower. There is an experience of Life to be found outside the tower. It is easy for academics and scholars to exist only in their research and work. There is a challenge for women academics to prove themselves committed and dedicated to their role and thereby become imbalanced in their public work and private lives. This is further complicated by the fact that women require a more flexible workplace during their child-bearing years. Can women find a balance in both the cottage and the tower? This will become an increasing issue for the Pentecostal academic community. Because of the development of academic life in Pentecostalism, women and men are starting their academic careers earlier. It is no longer the pattern to just obtain a doctorate after many years of pastoral ministry. Many women and men are beginning their post-graduate studies to reach academic milestones (such as PhD) early in their careers. This means that their career planning must coincide with broader life planning, such as marriage and having children. Is the Pentecostal academic community ready for the implications of younger career academics? Will they incorporate increased flexibility of the work place? Will they incorporate paid maternity leave to allow their younger female academic staff the capacity to exist in both the cottage and the tower? It is my experience that the Pentecostal academic community is still young in its policies and procedures and yet to apply the implications of younger career academics into their culture. This is a struggle we must face and work together to overcome.

Yet from the struggle comes transformation and "reward". Through Rapunzel's tears healing could come. The story concludes with the couple forming a new community and a new life hope. One of the rewarding aspects of my role that I have discovered as an academic is being able to produce creative solutions within administrative roles and innovative research. This ability is not gender-specific. The reward and goal of the story is to escape the single category of gender so that the priority is not on being female but on being an academic. This reward requires imagination and hope. To imagine a world not limited to gender stereotypes requires a willing suspension of disbelief – just like reading a fairy story. Folktales and fairy stories emerge from the life of the community to imagine an alternative reality. In this alternative reality the reward represents a cultural ideal and social harmony. It is my vision that an alternative reality can be achieved in which it is not 'novel' to be a female academic, but instead our theological ideal of spirit-empowerment and gifting is upheld as the ideal. In this way we look forward, like Rapunzel, to a new community.

REFERENCES

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