



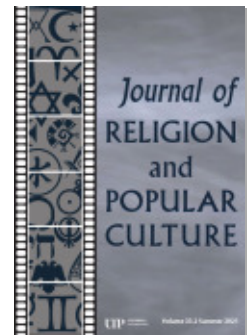
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Kierkegaard's Three Spheres and Cinematic Fairy Tale Pedagogy in *Frozen*, *Moana*, and *Tangled*

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*Abstract: Although Disney films are sometimes denigrated as popular or “low” art forms, this article argues that they often engage deeply with, and thereby communicate, significant moral truths. The capitalistic enterprise of contemporary modern cinema demands that cinematic moral pedagogy be sublimated into non-partisan forms, often by substituting secular proxies for otherwise divine or spiritual components. By adapting Søren Kierkegaard’s tripartite existential anthropology of the self, I analyze the subjective experiences of the protagonists in three recent animated fairy tales—Disney’s *Frozen*, *Moana*, and *Tangled*—to demonstrate how these princess movies bridge the imaginative gap between the mundane and the divine.*

Keywords: Disney, Disney movies, existentialism, family, fairy tales, faith, Kierkegaard, philosophy of religion, secular faith

In December 2010, film critic [Armond White \(2010\)](#), then chair of the New York Film Critics Circle, published a scathing review of Disney’s *Tangled* in the online magazine *First Things* ([Greno and Howard 2010](#)). In it, White lambasted the adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale “Rapunzel” as a “typically overactive Disney concoction” that reflects the “drastic change” of Western cultural standards Hollywood loves to “exploit.” According to White, “the once common moral lessons of fairy tales no longer get passed on the same way they used to,” because their contemporary presentations focus instead on “fashionable notions about girlhood, patriarchy, romance, and what is now the most suspicious of cultural tenets, faith.” Notably, White actually rails against the alleged absence of faith in Disney’s *Tangled* (compared to Andersen’s original story) and criticizes the film’s climactic resurrection of Rapunzel’s love interest as a “parlor trick [that] doesn’t emanate from some divine provenance; it’s simply a plot gimmick.”

The thesis of this article is twofold: first, Disney films do not, as a rule, “move away from profundity or . . . deny audiences the persuasiveness and the confirmation of epiphany,” as [White \(2010\)](#) claims; they sublimate their moral pedagogy within the capitalistic enterprise of contemporary popular cinema in a manner that satisfies wholly extant concerns even as it preserves their lessons’ transmission. Second, Disney’s engagement with matters of faith often takes the form of a sublated rapprochement with domestic family relationships; rather than demonstrating the power of religious faith to connect a believer to God, Disney movies—in particular, those in the Disney Princess Line—treat faith as a secularized matter of building harmonious relationships with oneself and others—in particular, with one’s parents. While this might naturalize Disney’s approach to matters of faith, it nevertheless preserves the profundity and importance of these fairy tales and their moral lessons.

To demonstrate this thesis, I will adopt and adapt a roughly Kierkegaardian framework that views the human condition as manifesting in various forms or “spheres” to illustrate how three recent Disney princess films exemplify each of Søren Kierkegaard’s three stages on life’s way, even though none of the movies are properly “religious” in a theological sense. I begin in the first section with a brief overview of Kierkegaard’s model, contextualizing it specifically within the sort of Disney scholarship I have in mind. In the second section, I present Elsa, the protagonist of the smash blockbuster movie *Frozen* (Buck and Lee 2013), as an example of Kierkegaard’s aesthetic individual grappling with anxiety and despair before showing in the third section how the titular character of *Moana* typifies Kierkegaard’s ethical or tragic hero who acts for the sake of others (Clements and Musker 2016). In the fourth section, I consider Rapunzel herself as a model of Kierkegaard’s religious hero or “knight of faith” and argue that, rather than being devoid of faith, the piety of *Tangled* is profound in its own way, which is a point I will illustrate further in the fifth section. I summarize and conclude in the sixth section.

Disney and Kierkegaard

Given that an omnipotent, omniscient creator God is not often found in the Disney corpus, the Danish Lutheran Søren Kierkegaard is an appropriate docent for the present analysis: in the annals of Christian history, few thinkers have grappled with the complexities of faith in the face of an absent God as strongly as he has. Furthermore, not only are Kierkegaard’s reflections on the nature and practice of faith relevant here, but the nature of his own work and its dialogical (and, furthermore, narrational) character offers a further precedent for considering the mythical power of stories (in particular, fairy tales) to communicate meaningful truths.

Raised in the state church of Denmark, Kierkegaard would come to be known for his critical stance against the cold and impersonal position into which a politicized congregation can fall. Rather than seeking out personal, subjective truths (of the sort for which they would be “willing to live and die”) that could motivate them to passionately pursue meaningful relationships with God, Kierkegaard (2010, 7) blamed his age of listless distraction for allowing many of his fellow Christians to find their “perilous delight in swimming in shallow waters” that, ultimately, would simply leave them dead. Defining faith as the opposite of such sin, Kierkegaard spent a great deal of ink calling for a heartfelt re-ignition of the passionless pew-sitters surrounding him on Sundays, reminding them of the need to continually and repetitively humble themselves before the Absolute God, ever submitting to even (and especially) the greatest of absurdities for the sake of approaching an authentic relationship with the Divine. As he describes in *Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric*, faith is like swimming in the ocean: although composed of a series of movements, each of which is itself analyzable, such analysis is not actually swimming (Kierkegaard 1983). Faith, to Kierkegaard, is “the highest passion in a man” and is, therefore, something that must be not only felt but also practised (121).

Furthermore, Kierkegaard’s affinity for storytelling as a philosophical device is exemplified throughout his work, and his fondness for fairy tales, in particular, is well known, even provoking a rivalry with Hans Christian Andersen about the proper mode of their engagement.¹ According to Bartholomew Ryan (2013, 946–47), Kierkegaard saw fairy tales as a “bridge between poetic expression and philosophical discourse” that offer “a way to think in images when logical argument fails” and can even serve as “a form of spiritual guidance that predates Christianity”; in Kierkegaard’s (2007, DD 94, 241) own words: “When I am tired of everything and “full of days,” fairy tales are for me always the revitalizing bath that proves so refreshing. There all earthly, all finite cares vanish; joy, yes sorrow even, are infinite.”

It is telling that Kierkegaard began *Fear and Trembling* with the phrase “Once upon a time” before offering several iterations of Abraham’s story of wrestling with the experience of faith. To Kierkegaard, the “highest passion” of faith is a difficult result to achieve; by considering the story of Abraham and Isaac in the twenty-second chapter of Genesis, Kierkegaard wrestles with the difficulties faced by someone called to act based on faith (rather than on something materially concrete or scientifically provable) as well as the pitfalls that failure might bring. In the story, though the antinomy of God’s two expressions to Abraham (to both *prosper through* and *murder* Isaac) might negate the possibility of logical reasoning on Abraham’s behalf, the Bible nevertheless upholds Abraham as a model of a faithful man. Because of his willingness to sacrifice Isaac at God’s command, Kierkegaard ponders Abraham’s state of mind throughout the ordeal to understand what it means to be a “knight of faith” and genuinely believe in God; Kierkegaard explores these issues by and through repeated engagement with fairy-tale-like narrational structures. So, altogether, a strong precedent exists for welcoming a Kierkegaardian perspective on fairy-tale faith.

In the twenty-first century, fairy tales are often (and most famously) portrayed cinematically. Even though a variety of political, cultural, and commercial concerns often preclude their overt religiosity, secular fairy tales nevertheless offer the same kind of Kierkegaardian bridge that mythopoetically provides eucatastrophic meaning for an otherwise mundane plot.² I contend that, instead of a transcendent divine presence, secular fairy tales use parental figures as axiological grounds for their narratives, substituting familial love for God’s love—something prefigured biblically when God is depicted as “Father” (see, for example, Deut. 32:6, Jer. 3:19; Mark 14:36; Gal. 4:6). This approach is particularly poignant when a protagonist conflicts with their parental characters or must navigate the difficulty of losing a parent and thereby confront the sorts of religious choices that Kierkegaard describes.

Disney animated films—particularly those in the Princess Line—are uniquely well positioned to explore this terrain; not only are they intentionally crafted around domestic themes and specifically marketed to familial audiences,³ but they also frequently feature families that have experienced the loss of one or more parental figures. A comprehensive analysis of eighty-five Disney films (released between 1937 and 2018) discovered that only 25 percent of the animated library depicted stereotypical nuclear families with two heteronormative parents; single-parent households were the predominantly represented family structure at 41.3 percent (Zurcher, Webb, and Robinson 2018, 10).⁴ In many cases, this is unambiguously due to parental death, though the tragedy is often not depicted on screen or is simply left implied (Graham, Yugas, and Roman 2018, 8).⁵ Though theories abound regarding the possible psychological consequences of the death of Walt Disney’s mother upon the overall Disney ethos, long-time Disney executive producer Don Hahn has also identified parental death (in particular, maternal death) as a pragmatic narrational device:

The movies are 80 or 90 minutes long, and Disney films are about growing up. They’re about that day in your life when you have to accept responsibility. Simba ran away from home but had to come back. In shorthand, it’s much quicker to have characters grow up when you bump off their parents. Bambi’s mother gets killed, so he has to grow up. Belle only has a father, but he gets lost, so she has to step into that position. It’s a story shorthand. (Quoted in Radloff 2014)

And amongst the twelve characters who currently comprise the Disney Princess roster (as well as the two female protagonists of 2013’s *Frozen*), only six of them have a living mother at the end of their films, and only four of them actually speak with her at some point in their movie.⁶

In multiple works, Kierkegaard develops a tripartite model of faith revolving around three spheres of existential phenomenology; by focusing on three Disney princesses who each lose a

parental figure early in their stories, I aim to illuminate each of those three spheres in turn. Not only will this discussion demonstrate the sublated religiosity of these movies, which precipitates into a robust moral pedagogy, but it will also offer an opportunity for further analysis of Disney parental characters as immanent proxies for a God who transcends their narratives.⁷ First, Elsa in Disney's *Frozen* offers a picture of Kierkegaard's aesthetic individual (who focuses on her own desires and self-becoming) when she slowly accepts herself and her unique beauty as she overcomes the damaging programming of her overbearing parents (Buck and Lee 2013). Second, Moana embodies Kierkegaard's ethical or tragic hero (who patterns her life after universal rules) as she chooses to sacrifice herself in fulfilling her responsibilities to her community and her father (Clements and Musker 2016). Finally and uniquely, Rapunzel from Disney's *Tangled* portrays a Kierkegaardian knight of faith (who paradoxically elevates herself above universal rules and, in so doing, genuinely meets God) when she intentionally breaks the rules laid out by one parental figure for the sake of, in the end, coming into an authentic relationship with her actual parents (Greno and Howard 2010).

Elsa the Aesthete

As one of the most profitable animated films of all time,⁸ Disney's 2013 blockbuster *Frozen* has captivated audiences with its stylized re-telling of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen* as a contemporary analysis of the nature of love and acceptance (Buck and Lee 2013).⁹ With a pair of princesses to add to Disney's pantheon, *Frozen* paints a picture of two sisters initially unequipped to authentically experience a relationship with another person, but who both, in their own ways, come to understand the nature of true love—particularly, the transformed Snow Queen, Elsa. Traumatized by her unwieldy magical abilities, Elsa spends most of her young life locked away in a room of her castle for the sake of keeping other people—in particular, her sister Anna—safe. Whereas the movie opens with a glimpse of the two sisters revelling in their mutual love, Elsa is quickly forced away from her sister and repeatedly shamed by her father for her abilities in a manner that only ingrains her fear and self-hatred deeper into her own psyche. For much of the film, Elsa is plagued with this shroud of doubt that prevents her from experiencing both her sister and herself in a manner that exemplifies Kierkegaard's aesthetic individual.

To Kierkegaard, who considered religious phenomenology as the paramount form of existential self-definition, non-religious aesthetic experiences offer a way for individuals to find temporary or partial satisfaction through any manner of non-transcendent substitutes; as he explains in *Stages on Life's Way*, someone could, for a time, distract themselves from the realities of life “by staring himself into the esthetic dizziness,” such that he “disappears from himself, like an atom, like a speck of dust, something thrown into the bargain along with what is the common lot of all human beings, of all humanity,” until he “disappears like an infinitely brief fractional consonance in the harmony of the spheres of life” (Kierkegaard 1988, 462). There are many potential candidates for such a distracting perspective on life; Kierkegaard (1983, 85) jokes about how “aesthetics is a courteous and sentimental branch of knowledge that knows more ways out than any pawnshop manager”—the key is that the aesthete remains pleased but confused about their own “disappearing” subjectivity. George Pattison (1991, 140) compares this concept to later existential mainstays like “inauthenticity” and “bad faith”; similarly, Kierkegaard's (1983, 47) concept of the aesthetic is an insufficient form of satisfaction because it is merely “the spontaneous inclination of the heart” and not the “far higher ... paradox of existence.”

Until the film's climax when Elsa tries to save her sister, she demonstrates not only the incompleteness of an inauthentic life (shut away from the world) but also the anxiety that such a life produces. Whether or not [Christopher Kowalski and Ruchi Bhalla \(2018, 146\)](#) are correct in their psychodramatic interpretation of Elsa's journey as reflective of the process of puberty, her struggle is precisely internal as she fights to come to grips with the monstrosity she believes herself to be. When Elsa seizes the desires of her heart and flees into the wilderness to embrace her dangerous magic, she is initially pleased but ultimately unhappy—an experience of despair that Kierkegaard explores in multiple works.¹⁰ Only by making a leap away from the sort of egotism trumpeted by the immensely popular song “Let It Go” and venturing into the storm to find her sister does Elsa ultimately find true satisfaction.

Given the overbearing pressure laid on Elsa by her parents, her twisted misunderstanding of both life and herself is unsurprising. Though only in the movie for roughly seven minutes, echoes of the King of Arendelle are felt throughout much of the film as Elsa repeatedly parrots his rules and expectations with little thought to their validity (or lack thereof). Of his twelve lines in the movie, Elsa's father never once speaks to her with anything other than an angry question or a command (her mother has but a single line directed at the king that went uncredited to her voice actress)—in particular, the infamous order that Elsa try to bury her feelings and pretend that she has no special abilities. Given Elsa's later uncontrollable freezing of her kingdom, it was an approach that clearly turned out to be a royal failure.

Indeed, her first adult line in the film—“Be the good girl you always have to be”—and her near-pathological fascination with her gloves (until she accepts the aesthetic position of “no right, no wrong, no rules for me” in “Let It Go”), Elsa grows up exemplifying her faithful devotion to her father's rules—thereby, underlining their ineffectiveness at promoting a good life. Notably, the only scene where Elsa and her father share even a moment of tenderness comes when Elsa receives the very gloves wherein she hides as the two characters together recite the “Conceal it / Don't feel it / Don't let it show” order.¹¹ When Elsa triumphantly removes her gloves and sings “that perfect girl is gone,” she is rejecting the remnants of her father's memory and living purely for herself, but this action ultimately results only in loneliness and exile from her sister and other people. It is only after Elsa, as herself, turns to consider the interests of others (specifically, Anna) that she is able to master her abilities, return to Arendelle, and become a great queen.

This rejection of her parental figure, however, means that Elsa never reaches any sort of relationship with the God figure of the film. Instead, her father's domineering attitude, however well-intentioned, led to years of psychological pain that Elsa had to repetitively surpass so as to come into a true relationship with herself. This process mirrors the experience of Kierkegaard's (1987, 192, 235) aesthete who is necessarily “in despair whether he knows it or not” because “every life-view that has a condition outside itself is despair.” By placing her faith first in her father's rules and then in her magical abilities to allow her to live a fulfilling life, Elsa was not placing her faith in anything that could truly satisfy her. Only when she comes to pursue her family does she attain some measure of true happiness. In this way, the majority of Elsa's character arc in *Frozen* exemplifies Kierkegaard's self-contained aesthetic sphere of existence.

Moana the Tragic Hero

Inspired by Polynesian history and legend, Disney's *Moana* tells the story of a young girl who confronts monsters, demigods, and the sea itself in her quest to save her family ([Clements and Musker 2016](#)). As the daughter of the chief, Moana carries an inherent responsibility to guide

her people, but her dissatisfaction with a life confined to her island leads her to seek adventure beyond the protective reef after a creeping darkness threatens her family. Led by the spirit of her grandmother and protected by the waves, Moana partners with the reluctant hero Maui to restore the goddess Te Fiti and bring peace to the ocean. Ultimately, it is this devotion to her family that leads Moana to surpass the self-focused aesthetic stage and embody Kierkegaard's ethical or tragic hero.

To Kierkegaard (1983, 68), the second sphere of human existence sees an individual devoted to universal rules for life, making decisions that might even lead to self-harm but that are considered the "right" thing to do; as he says, ethics defines the nature of human behaviour for "[t]he whole existence of the human race rounds itself off as a perfect, self-contained sphere, and then the ethical is that which limits and fills at one and the same time." The tragic hero is the individual who is willing to sacrifice himself and his own best interests—to even sacrifice his opportunity to be with that which he loves in the movement called the Infinite Resignation—for the sake of upholding or fulfilling those ethical rules, much like Moana does when she "renounces [her]self in order to express the universal," choosing to place the interests of her family above her own safety and face the demonic Te Ka alone. To Kierkegaard, this kind of sacrificial decision also christens Moana, "the Knight of Infinite Resignation."

Moana's ability to be a Kierkegaardian ethical hero is motivated primarily by her relationship with her grandmother, Tala, who instilled in her a respect for the old myths of heroes like Maui. It is from Tala that Moana learns of her quest to deliver Maui across the ocean, because of Tala that she discovers her vessel, and through Tala's distraction that she is able to escape the reef. Particularly in contrast to Moana's father, Tala personifies the responsive and attentive parent who interacts respectfully with her child; whereas Tui, her father, is concerned for Moana's safety and forbids her from venturing out into the ocean, Tala trusts Moana's abilities (and the ocean's supernatural providence) enough to encourage her along her way. This faith provokes Moana to accept a new role of her own devising that satisfies her personal desires such that she can further confront Te Ka like a proper ethical hero, even after Maui abandons her. This willingness to sacrifice herself for the protection of Motonui brings Moana to affirm the basic ethical rule of her father (family protection) but now in her personally modulated way.

However, despite her reincarnation as a manta ray, Tala remains dead at the end of the film;¹² Moana manages to come into a deeper relationship with her parents, her people, and the ocean, but her foundational parental figure remains absent, an experience paralleled in the character of Maui. Introduced as a mythical hero gifted with a magical fishhook, Maui later reveals his humble origins as a simple human on whom the gods took pity after his parents abandoned him, explaining: "They took one look and decided that they did not want me." By the end of the film, Maui has come to appreciate his friendship with Moana and his identity as an ethical hero such that he returns to fight Te Ka at Moana's side, but this decision similarly fails to reunite him with his long-dead parents.

Consequently, both Moana and Maui become heroes in their own right, but only because they uphold universal principles like family protection and love.¹³ In this sphere, those principles hide God in order to motivate action on the part of God's creatures, but this action, to Kierkegaard, is simply a dutiful form of sacrifice—not true faith. In fact, because the ethical hero is often focused on divine commands, she risks growing satisfied with her pursuit of universal principles, thereby forgetting about the God they shield, as Kierkegaard (1983, 68) explains, "duty becomes duty by being traced back to God, but in the duty itself I do not enter into relation to God." *Moana* ends with a manta ray swimming alongside Moana's boat, thereby suggesting that echoes of Tala's spirit remain with her granddaughter in some fashion,

but this Kierkegaardian tragic hero can only ever taste such hints of God's presence and does not enter into a renewed relationship with her parental figure. Only by surpassing the ethical stage can one truly attain a passionate, Kierkegaardian faith; Moana might be a knight of infinite resignation, but she stops short of what Kierkegaard dubs the "absurd" movement, which means that she embodies Kierkegaard's ethical stage of existence.

Rapunzel the Knight of Faith

For a model of true Kierkegaardian faith, we need to look instead to Disney's 2010 fairy tale *Tangled* and its long-haired princess, Rapunzel ([Greno and Howard 2010](#)). Kidnapped as an infant and raised unknowingly by her captor, Rapunzel's relationships with her parental figures are more complicated than either of the previous two cases: on the one hand, she trusts the deceitful Mother Gothel who is simply interested in her magical, rejuvenating hair; on the other hand, she is captivated by the appearance of the "Floating Lights" in the sky on her birthday that, unbeknownst to her, are released by her real parents in memoriam of their lost daughter. When fate brings Flynn Rider to her tower, Rapunzel seizes the opportunity to seek out the lights, even at the expense of lying to her Mother Gothel. Eventually, this brings Rapunzel face to face with the truth of her birth, at which point she is forced to choose—to move herself—in a momentous way. Like Moana, Rapunzel sacrifices something dear to her (thereby making the infinite resignation), but she furthermore continues onwards into the absurd belief that she will somehow retain what she gives up; consequently, of the three characters considered here, only Rapunzel succeeds in making the absurd movement and becoming a Kierkegaardian knight of faith.

To Kierkegaard, this third, "religious" sphere goes beyond concerns centred either on the self or on others (as in the other two spheres) to instead truly centre on God. Externally, the ethical and religious spheres appear similar, and a knight of infinite resignation will often make choices that appear similar to those of a knight of faith, but the internal intentions of the agent and the ensuing phenomenological experience of those choices carries the crucial distinction. Instead of acting for the sake of universal principles or rules, the knight of faith shifts her focus to what Kierkegaard calls "the Absolute" state of being (that is, to God) from which the universal itself stems. It then becomes possible that the knight of faith could be called by God to break some universal rule in order to move beyond it towards the Absolute; this leap towards faith paradoxically repositions the individual into a new relationship with both the universal principles and the absolute, as [Kierkegaard \(1983, 70\)](#) describes:

The paradox of faith, then, is this: that the single individual is higher than the universal, that the single individual ... determines his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute by his relation to the universal. The paradox may also be expressed in this way: that there is an absolute duty to God, for in this relationship of duty the individual relates himself as the single individual absolutely to the absolute.

No one and nothing can assist the individual with this leap to faith that raises the knight above ethical principles; the knight is a knight precisely because she has herself achieved this religious mode of existence and is now able to live an unfettered life within the subjective freedom of a relationship with God. It is far easier to live in the ethical sphere when one is surrounded and supported by others, but the religious stage is far more meaningful for, despite its social loneliness, it is where the "highest passion in a man" can truly be found (121).

To illustrate the relationship of the ethical stage with the religious stage, [Kierkegaard \(1983, 43\)](#) tells a story of a knight in love with a princess who chooses to suppress that love, thereby converting it phenomenologically from erotic love for an individual to "the expression

for an eternal love . . . a love for the Eternal Being.” By sacrificing the most treasured element of his life for the sake of generating deeper love for others and for God (that is, obeying or achieving the universal), the knight becomes a knight of infinite resignation; the knight becomes the person he is by resigning the identity (as a lover) he had previously held. A knight of faith, however, goes one step further to resign himself from the princess’s love while paradoxically still believing that this love will remain in his life. In virtue of the absurd—the fact that with God all things are possible—the knight of faith will genuinely make the infinite movement (as Abraham did when he was ready to sacrifice Isaac) while still maintaining confidence that the target of that resignation will remain within reach (as, again, Abraham exemplified in his confidence that Isaac would return with him to Eliezar). Externally, the actions of both knights may look identical, but the intention of their actions differs fundamentally; the knight of infinite resignation acts on behalf of the universal rule, the knight of faith acts on behalf of God regardless of the universal rule.

For Rapunzel, the tension of the religious sphere becomes clear in the film’s climax when the deceit of the murderous Mother Gothel has been revealed and, because of her, Flynn Rider lies dying on the floor. By making her deal with Gothel to obediently leave behind her life with Flynn if only she could save Flynn’s life, Rapunzel makes the infinite movement by authentically resigning herself to live apart from that which she cares for most. But Flynn unexpectedly cuts Rapunzel’s hair, breaking the spell that could save him while freeing her from Gothel’s enslavement. As Flynn dies, Rapunzel makes one final choice: despite knowing that she has lost her magic, despite Flynn’s extensive wounds, and despite lacking any evidence to reasonably think that she could save him, Rapunzel sings over Flynn’s body one last time. Absurdly, this act is the ultimate demonstration of faith—that the knight will retain her prince in this life. And, eucatastrophically, Rapunzel’s leap to faith is efficacious not only to bring Flynn back to health but also to set the stage for Rapunzel’s reunification with her true parents.

The actions of Mother Gothel have little positive effect on Rapunzel’s eventual movement to become a knight of faith. Scheming and manipulating nearly every character she meets, Gothel’s interaction with Rapunzel is consistently dripping with passive aggressive manipulation;¹⁴ if she were the only parental figure in the movie, then *Tangled* would finish no differently than *Moana*, but the silent presence of Rapunzel’s biological parents makes all the difference. Though they never once speak throughout the film, Rapunzel still feels her parents’ love enough to venture out against every ethical rule she knows (much like Abraham raising the knife above Isaac) for the sake of understanding the person(s) doing the calling. Somehow, Rapunzel has an innate confidence that the floating lights that appear annually on her birthday are connected to her; as she tells Mother Gothel early in the film, “I can’t help but feel like they’re meant for me. I have to see them, Mother, and not just from my window—in person. I have to know what they are.” When Rapunzel chooses to teleologically suspend the ethical rules laid out by Mother Gothel, she does so on the basis of her connection to her parents’ floating lights and her desire to come into an absolute relation with them. Paradoxically, Rapunzel is able to eventually become the princess she was born to be in virtue of her absurd, but accurate, notion that the lights were for her all along.

Fairy Tale Religiosity in Disney’s *Tangled*

Thus, far from a mere “plot gimmick,” the resurrection of Flynn Rider is the linchpin around which the faith-based message of *Tangled* operates, provided we remember the secularized form of faith with which Disney is apt to employ. A morass of cultural and market-based pressures precludes overt displays of partisan religiosity in Disney products, but Western

filmmakers cannot escape their reliance on at least some of the religiously mythopoetic roots of their traditions. So, rather than invoke a particular faith tradition or creed (and thereby risk alienating other potential customers as a consequence),¹⁵ Disney repackages tropes commonly associated with popular religions (primarily Christianity) by transmuted their structures into concepts popular with both the religious and non-religious: concepts like family.¹⁶ This is not necessarily, as [Armond White \(2010\)](#) supposes, a “muddling” of our human impulses¹⁷ but is, rather, a pragmatic approach to preserving the time-honoured function of fairy tales within the heavily commercialized twenty-first century.¹⁸

Consider again how *Tangled* demonstrates not only a surface-level story of Rapunzel and Flynn learning how to make ethical decisions, but also a deeply rooted engagement with the power of faith and hope, even in the face of utter despair. Although the princess never prays to her parents or to God, her mournful, prayerful serenade resonates with the same tenor of hope. [Kierkegaard \(1992b, 47\)](#) famously considered prayer as a practice designed to change the person “striving to achieve the true inwardness of prayer” and considered repetitious creeds and canonical, memorizable prayers as a vital element of such self-definition (and, in the best of cases, self-definition as a religious individual): Rapunzel’s familiar song, designed to affect her and those close to her, seems not wholly unlike this Kierkegaardian perspective.

But it is inarguable that *Tangled* lacks a transcendent, divine figure with whom the characters could attain an absolute relation; instead, the entirety of the plot is unwittingly driven by Rapunzel’s parents seeking reunified relationship with their stolen daughter. It is important to note that (unlike many other Disney films as explained earlier) *both* of Rapunzel’s parents are consistently depicted throughout the film: though they only appear in a handful of scenes, the king and queen are always shown *together*. This not only breaks one of the most common Disney trends of representing parental relationships through starkly traditional gender roles but also allows for the King and Queen of Corona to comprehensively represent a fully fledged divine proxy.

Consider the study from [Litsa Tanner and colleagues \(2003\)](#) which determined that maternal Disney characters (when they are not dead) are primarily portrayed as: (1) primary caregivers and (2) protectors. Paternal characters, on the other hand, are typically depicted as either: (3) controlling, aggressive disciplinarians; (4) nurturing and affectionate; or (5) self-sacrificing, with some possibility for character growth to turn (3) into either (4) or (5).¹⁹ [Jeanne Holcomb, Kenzie Latham, and Daniel Fernandez-Baca \(2014, 1961\)](#) have pointed out that, since the rise of “nurturing” models of fatherhood in the 1970s, Disney’s depictions of caregiving have similarly broadened to include a more diverse range of attitudinal options, but two points deserve to be made. First, *Tangled* bucks the trend wherein a “majority of the [Disney] films that present fathers as nurturing either have completely left out mothers with little or no explanation, or the films marginalize mothers from the story” ([Tanner et al. 2003, 368](#)). Although this treatment has its roots in cultural analysis at least as old as [Vladimir Propp’s \(1968\)](#) morphology of folktales, the “Daddy’s Little Girl” phenomenon is a well-documented, favoured feature of Disney animated films ([Do Rozario 2004, 38, 53](#)). As [Anna Davis \(2007, 103–4\)](#) puts it,

when the mother is alive and present, she is as good a mother as she possibly can be. However, she is powerless, for whatever reason, to really help her child, thus forcing the child to save him- or herself. Most often, however, she is not only dead, she is never even mentioned. Fathers are a little luckier in Disney. They are rarely killed, and whereas only a handful of Disney characters have mothers, many more ... have fathers. Granted, where there are fathers, they are often just as incapable of protecting their offspring as are the mothers. . . . But they

nonetheless have an important presence in the films, and are there to offer advice, love, and support to their children.

In contrast, though they are both silent characters, *Tangled* treats Rapunzel's parents as full equals, never depicting one without the other. It might even be argued that the princess most directly interacts with her mother instead of her father, initially embracing the queen upon their reunification at the film's end, though this premise is admittedly thin.²⁰

Second, all five characteristics of Disney parents listed above are traits commonly associated with the sort of God most familiar to Kierkegaard and western Christianity as a whole. The idea that paternal characteristics are attributable to a theistic worldview often described as patriarchal is unsurprising; numerous theological traditions and scriptural passages bespeak the Christian God's proclivity for discipline and protection, and the atoning death of Christ for the sins of the world is a paradigmatic episode of narratival self-sacrifice. However, Disney's maternal roles of compassionate caregiver and devoted sustainer are also fully attributable to God; as contemporary feminist theologians like Sallie McFague (1988, 255) emphasize, we should focus on the non-gendered language of parental love for "God as the giver of life, as the power of being in all being, can be imaged through the metaphor of mother—and of father."²¹ If Disney parents indeed function as stand-ins for a divine figure, then *Tangled*, by presenting the King and Queen of Corona as a persistent unit, manages to inclusively present a more robustly gendered picture of God.

In general, Disney movies—and Western fairy tales more broadly—fail to do this and, moreover, fail to present the female protagonist as truly independent from the parental figure at all. Propp's (1968, 79; emphasis added) seminal framework for analyzing folktales famously included "the princess *and her father*" together as a single archetypal *dramatis personae*—the only pluralistic identity amongst his seven categories. Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario (2004) has argued that this grouping is often subverted in Disney films by introducing the princess via some conflict with her father that must be overcome by the story's end,²² which is a trend that continues through *Frozen*, *Moana*, and *Tangled*, though with an important distinction. In *Frozen*, Elsa's introductory scene is focused on her accidental magical attack of Anna and the reaction of her parents, the precipitating event for the entirety of Elsa's personal demons (Buck and Lee 2013). The first scene of *Moana* shows her father, Tui, interrupting her grandmother's story about the movie's mythological background before physically separating her from the ocean she loves (Clements and Musker 2016). But the discord between Rapunzel and her parents that is evident in her introduction is notably different, for it is imposed externally by "Mother" Gothel's kidnapping and not by a choice on the part of any family member.

This forced separation of parent from child further buttresses the Kierkegaardian Christianity latent in *Tangled*. Rapunzel's position in her tower is comparable to the primal Adam's position in the Garden of Eden: both are innocent because both are ignorant of their situations and, as Kierkegaard (1980a, 41) says, "this is the profound secret of innocence, that it is at the same time anxiety." As he goes on to explain, it is from anxiety that all manner of individual sins stem, for the freedom with which anxiety is coupled entails the possibility of contradicting the divine will; however, Kierkegaard also emphasizes that it is within the risk of anxiety that we might seek reunification with the God against whom we sin. Nevertheless, "the anxiety that is posited in innocence is in the first place no guilt, and in the second place it is no troublesome burden, no suffering that cannot be brought into harmony with the blessedness of innocence. In observing children, one will discover this anxiety intimated more particularly as a seeking for the adventurous, the monstrous, and the enigmatic" (43). This is indeed descriptive of Rapunzel's desires at the start of the film, provoked especially by the silent beckoning of her

real parents via their annual release of the floating lights and her entire quest to seek parental reunification.

Of course, if Rapunzel grew satisfied with the floating lights themselves and did not surpass them, make the absurd movement of faith, and thereby come into a real relationship with her parents once more, then she would stagnate at Kierkegaard's secondary tragic stage. In [Kierkegaard's \(1983, 119\)](#) words, "a vacillator like that, however, is merely a parody of the knight of faith." Only by coming into an absolute, direct relationship with "the Absolute" (God) does Kierkegaard think that real faith is instantiated. And, indeed, this is precisely how the story of *Tangled* finishes.

The "Trick" of Fairy Tale Faith

So, with its songful pastiche of prayer, its parental divine proxy, and its presentation of a protagonist thrust into hopeless anxiety, *Tangled* is playing with powerful tropes that are as deep as they are familiar to any student of religion. While Kierkegaard was clear that true faith can only be such if the believer has her heart set towards God, immersing such religious hopes within a fully immanentized narrative allows contemporary fairy tales to furtively engage similarly religious and existential concepts on a more subtle level (in a manner that will not explicitly disrupt their success in the secular marketplace). Pedagogically, such work is important, for as [Ryan Preston-Roedder \(2018, 174\)](#) has argued, "whether or not theism holds, certain types of faith are centrally important virtues, that is, character traits that are morally admirable, or admirable from some broader perspective of human flourishing"; faith in oneself, one's friends, and in humanity as a whole are moral virtues that both Kierkegaard and Disney movies can speak towards. And, furthermore, the bridging function of fairy tales that Kierkegaard highlighted offers the paradoxical opportunity for sacred and secular forms of faith to engage in mutually beneficial conversations.

To be clear, I am not suggesting, nor have I here attempted, a broad re-envisioning of Kierkegaardian scholarship about faith or existential anthropology (and I do not mean to suggest that Kierkegaard himself would be fully amenable to my application of his work in the way I have described). But, given the exigencies of popular culture, it seems not only appropriate, but also necessary, to forge and adapt conceptual heuristics to analyze and understand the role of religion in contemporary fairy-tale media.²³ The roughly Kierkegaardian framework that I have employed is but one potential example of how this project could proceed; I have faith that many potential others exist.

What I have instead argued is that the moral pedagogy of Disney movies is a subject deserving careful consideration. Given their position as both commercial blockbusters and contemporary fairy tales, Disney Princess films, in particular, are poised to disseminate fresh spiritual and moral messages about the human condition non-explicitly, much like how [Kierkegaard \(1992a, 275n; emphasis in original\)](#) comments on his own work in *Concluding Scientific Postscript*:

The book is written for people in the know, whose trouble is that they know too much. Because everyone knows the Christian truth, it has gradually become such a triviality that a primitive impression of it is acquired only with difficulty. When this is the case, the art of being able to *communicate* eventually becomes the art of being able to *take away* or to trick something away from someone.²⁴

Disney movies accomplish a similar trickery, implicitly discussing complex matters of faith via the simple, imaginative bridge of the fairy tale. [Armond White \(2010\)](#), then, is simply wrong to say that, in Disney cinema, pop culture "abandons its most important social function,

confusing rather than uniting our humanity”; instead, it engages our imaginations with tastes of the divine, wrapped in the mundane. When St. Paul says in the first letter to the Corinthians that “now I know only in part,” he could have well imagined this same sort of fairy-tale lesson; nevertheless, “faith, hope, and love, abide” ever after.

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Notes

1. For a contemporary account of this rivalry, see Weitzman (2007, 1105). For Kierkegaard’s (1990) perspective in his own words, see “From the Papers of One Still Living.”
2. For more on the nature of “eucatastrophe,” see Tolkien (2014, 75).
3. Jeanne Holcomb, Kenzie Latham, and Daniel Fernandez-Baca (2014, 1959) collect several helpful examples of how “the Disney brand is synonymous with family entertainment,” including the significant figure that greater than 80 percent of Americans polled use the phrase “family” to describe it.
4. This recapitulated the results of Litsa Tanner and colleagues’ (2003, 359) more modest survey of twenty-six Disney movies that found “alternative” family structures evidenced in 79.9 percent of the data set.
5. Though the data set encompassed an array of Disney properties beyond its traditional animated fare, at least one analysis determined that 56 out of 104 Disney films have a primary character with a dead, missing, or single parent (Morris 2015).
6. Tiana, Moana, Mulan, and Merida all have at least one conversation with their mothers; Rapunzel’s and Aurora’s mothers are silent, but they survive until the end credits; the mothers of Belle, Ariel, Cinderella, Pocahontas, Jasmine, Snow White, and Elsa/Anna are either definitively deceased or are simply ignored entirely by the film.
7. In this way, these Disney movies function within Tolkien’s (2014, 67) category of “Recovery” insofar as it allows for the “regaining of a clear view. I do not say ‘seeing things as they are’ and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say ‘seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them.’”
8. As of June 2021, *Frozen* has grossed roughly \$1.28 billion worldwide; the only animated film larger is its sequel (according to *Box Office Mojo*, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/>).
9. *Frozen II* goes on to explore Elsa’s self-understanding and her relationship with her parents—particularly, her mother—even further, but concerns about analytical parity (with the other films here considered) and space constraints will restrict this article to focus exclusively on the first movie in the franchise.
10. Most famously, perhaps, in *The Sickness Unto Death* (Kierkegaard 1980b).
11. It should be noted that Anna is similarly damaged by her parents’ actions, leading her swindling fiancé to remark that her desperation for love made her willing to “marry me, just like that,” regardless of any potential consequences.
12. James Graham, Hope Yuhas, and Jessica Roman (2018, 9) point out that *Moana* is unique amongst the films they looked at as “the one and the only film where there is any reversible death in the Disney Film Analysis (2003–2016), which is a reversible altered form of death.”

13. It should be noted here that the characterization of particular values as “universal” is still socio-culturally determined. Though Kierkegaard was not concerned with a relativistic sense of cultural value (emphasizing instead the importance of an individual’s perspective), his understanding of an ethical/tragic hero’s motivation is simply that said hero is moved by whatever their society generally takes to be important. In fact, some of the cross-cultural conflict and concerns about *Moana*’s alleged representation of Pacific stereotypes may stem from its presentation of more than one set of culturally defined “universal” values. For more on this and the history of *Moana*’s cultural distinctiveness in general, see [Tamaira and Fonoti \(2018\)](#).
14. For example, consider how Gothel frequently lobs off-handed insults at Rapunzel before trying to excuse them with a simple “I’m only joking” refrain. For more on this sort of antagonism, see [Del-rosso \(2015, 525–26\)](#).
15. Notably, Disney has not shied away from thinly veiled political commentary in the same way ([Chidester 2005, 143](#)).
16. Put differently, Disney is, for example, portraying God as a literal “father figure.”
17. I suspect that at least some of the hesitation to a considered treatment of Disney films as bearers of moral truths is rooted in old biases against so-called “low” art, as discussed by [John Fisher \(2013\)](#). Because space constraints prevent more extended engagement with such prejudices, I will simply voice my considered disagreement with such a preference and (based on the discussion earlier in this article and elsewhere) reiterate that I suspect Kierkegaard would do so as well.
18. For more on how Disney’s religion is closely tied to commercialization, see [Mazur and Koda \(2001, 312\)](#).
19. For example, Ariel’s father, Triton, in *The Little Mermaid* begins at (3), but eventually learns to accept his daughters eccentricities, moving him to (4); Tarzan’s adopted father, Kerchak, similarly begins at (3), but eventually displays his love by sacrificing himself (5) to save his family from Clayton near the end of *Tarzan*. See also [Holcomb, Latham, and Fernandez-Baca \(2014, 1966–67\)](#); [Towbin et al. \(2004, 28–31\)](#).
20. This is not to say that *Tangled* is a perfectly feminist film; indeed, as [Do Rozario \(2004\)](#) has argued, it still recapitulates the villainized femme fatale as well as demonstrating a problematic lack of concern for consent in Flynn Rider’s decision to cut Rapunzel’s hair—in the words of [Lisa Rowe Fraustino \(2015, 141\)](#), a true “rape of the lock.”
21. This is not to say that feminine presentations of God are simply a contemporary innovation (see [Dell’Olio 1998](#); [Pagels 1976](#); [McNamer 1989](#)).
22. [Do Rozario \(2004, 53\)](#) cites the absence of Ariel and Pocahontas from their fathers’ parties at the beginning of their respective films as examples of this conflict as well as the violent reaction of Jasmine’s pet tiger to one of her father’s chosen suitors.
23. “If religion is about human identity and difference, human formation and orientation, then Disney animation during the 1990s was definitely engaged in a kind of religious work” ([Chidester 2005, 145](#)).
24. For more on Kierkegaard’s paradoxical routes to understanding, see [Nowachek \(2012\)](#).

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