Religious Rites and Female Spirituality in Cinematic Adaptations of Cinderella

ELISABETH S. WEAGEL

Abstract

Since the 1970s, fairy tales like Cinderella have been criticized for negatively acculturating women, but this reading fails to account for an inherent spirituality which is necessary to understanding the Cinderella tale. Reconnecting the story to its numinous roots reveals Cinderella as a subjective and active being who claims her own life. With the assistance of her fairy godmother (a representation of the feminine divine) and her deceased mother, Cinderella goes through a religious rite, which leads to her individuation and, ultimately, apotheosis.

Keywords: Cinderella; fairy tales; religious rites; female religious experience, Luce Irigaray

> Respect for the order of the universe, the question of our relation to the divine are not irrelevant and can help us in the task of seeking a personal and collective identity.
>
> -Luce Irigaray

1. Introduction

Cinderella may be the most well-known fairy tale in the world. It is a story that has been told across cultures for hundreds of years, and continues to be a ubiquitous subject for books, films, operas, ballets, and various other story-telling mediums. But despite its continued popularity, Cinderella also bears a negative stigma. Beginning in the 1970s with an article by Marcia R. Lieberman and continuing into the present, fairy tales have been criticized for negatively affecting women's acculturation (383-95). Heroines, such as Cinderella, are seen as passive creatures who wait for someone else to come and turn their lives into something better. If that someone is a prince, all the worse because of how it reflects on the female sex as incapable and reliant on men. Such a reading is understandable, but it is also problematic. In Cinderella specifically, it obscures the power and purpose of female relationships within the story. Where many have read Cinderella as a tale of a woman who is acted upon and turned into a princess through a prince who pulls her out of obscurity, I argue that Cinderella's marriage to the prince is made possible through a coming-of-age ritual which is assisted by her deceased mother and/or a magical helper who is representative of the feminine

divine. By ignoring these matrilineal relationships and their associated rituals, readers are effectively turning over female power to the male characters. Resurrecting the numinous implications of Cinderella and foregrounding the female element therein reveals Cinderella's subjectivity.

Disney's live-action *Cinderella* (2015) and MGM's *The Glass Slipper* (1955), which have commonalities and differences that create an interesting dialogue, constitute the principal texts of this analysis. Though a spiritual reading of Cinderella can be (and has been) grounded in socio-historical context, I instead take a more mythological approach, using the work of Luce Irigaray as a framework. For Irigaray, female identity is understood, preserved, and created through the organic union of body, spirit, and nature. Since the Cinderella tale exists at the crossroads of these three elements, Irigaray is particularly helpful in elucidating the significance of the tale, which is lost when they are ignored. Her thesis regarding the need for women to experience love of the same, or to have positive female-to-female relationships, and the paucity of such because of female competition is emblemized in the Cinderella tale.

This article foregrounds the Mother Goddess, matrilineal connectivity, and female spiritual progression, but it is not meant to suggest that the female supersedes the male. To the contrary, the goddess does not exist *instead* of a male god, but *in conjunction* with a male god. They are a pair: the Mother Goddess and the Father God. This story focusses on the Goddess and on matriarchy because it is a woman's story, but as will be seen, the female and male ultimately coalesce as they reach the apex of their spiritual development. This coalescence does not constitute a dissolving of individual identity in favor of a single identity, but rather a unified identity that is created through the combining of two fully developed subjects.

Contrary to the many readings that decry Cinderella as a model for female passivity, I argue that the Cinderella tale holds within it a message of female majesty. Where Armando Maggi proposes that "our contemporary clinging to 'classical' tales is also the product of a cultural conformity that struggles to free itself from a past narrative that doesn't concern us any longer," I counter that not only is it relevant, it is needed (159). Cinderella is the myth that elaborates the personal power that emerges through positive female-to-female relationships as well as demonstrating the harm caused by negative female-to-female relationships. It denotes the necessity for subjectivity to precede romantic union. After centuries of telling it and loving it, Cinderella has not lost its relevance, but we may have lost perspective in our reading of the tale. A return to its numinous and female core can reawaken our understanding, and help us in our own search for an individual and collective identity.

2. The Question of Agency

Many scholars criticize the help that Cinderella receives and her consequent transformation, saying that it evinces her objecthood. She has been categorized among folklorists as an "innocent persecuted heroine," someone who passively waits to have her poor circumstances changed for her (Bacchilega 1-12). Speaking more generally, Nancy L. Canepa says that "typical fairy-tale heroes often passively await the determination of their destiny by others, most commonly magical or supernatural beings.

As objects in a mysterious web of friendly or hostile transcendent forces, they do not construct their fate, but undergo it" (201).According to this understanding, Cinderella is not only passive, but has no power to affect the course of events in her life. Maggi argues that Cinderella's agency is problematic because her "responsibility in her own transformation is questionable," suggesting that she needs to carry out the transformation herself in order to be a subject (155). However even in Basile's "The Cinderella Cat," wherein Zezolla kills her stepmother and uses manipulation and cunning to win the prince, she still has a magical helper assisting her in her efforts. If the aid of a magical helper cancels a character's agency, as Maggi suggests, then no Cinderella can be redeemed as an agent because it would require a fundamental change to the story, after which it would no longer be Cinderella. But the proactive Zezolla indicates that a subjective Cinderella and a magical helper are not mutually exclusive.

In *The Glass Slipper*, though Ella is outspoken and at times aggressive, she is not the ruthless character that Zezolla is. Preceding her ritual transformation, Ella holds a personal invitation to the ball in her hand and a prophecy that she will live in the palace in her heart, but she makes no attempt to go. Unlike other iterations, she does not lament that the reason is lack of something to wear. She does not lament at all, convincing herself that she is happy to be alone. This is a change from the opening scene where she so determinedly attempts to force her way into the group. Though this may seem like a regression into a more passive person, I suggest instead that it is part of her becoming a virgin in the Irigarayan sense, becoming aware of her spiritual and gendered identity (*Key Writings* 151-52). Her frequent visits to the woods take her out of the masculine space of the village and into the feminine space of nature, beginning her process of personal discovery. Irigaray stipulates that

> the whole universe of relations—to oneself, to the other gender, to others, to the world—is expressed in various ways by woman and man. *She* lives much more in an interweaving of relations with other subjects or with nature; *he*, in contrast, builds himself his own world: with tools, objects, laws, gods, and he bends others to an order created by him. (*Key Writings* 151)

Ella's hesitation to go to the ball reflects a shift from the masculinity of trying to control her social situation toward the female fluidity of interweaving relations. But she has swung a little too far in the opposite direction, and her fairy godmother steps in to help her navigate (Figure 1).

In *Cinderella*, Ella seeks to undergo the transformation on her own terms. She resurrects her mother's dress and refits it so she can wear it to the ball. Brief mention is made of the help she receives from the mice, who roll spools of thread towards her. This might be compared to the birds in *Three Wishes for Cinderella* (and other versions) who assist Cinderella in picking out the lentils so that she can attend the ball, but it seems more about satisfying devoted Disney fans who expect as much because the mice make the dress in the 1950 animation than about Ella's connection to nature. It is, nevertheless, an improvement on her character's degree of agency since the animated

Cinderella is not involved in the dressmaking at all, while the live-action Ella heads the project. Ultimately, though, her own efforts are not enough, but this is not

necessarily proof of objecthood. The aid Cinderella receives is not a mark of her passivity, rather it is an essential rite of female-to-female communion that propels Cinderella in her spiritual development. Her mother and magical helper do not overrule her, but assist her in he individuation, which is to say the maximization of her own subjectivity.

3. The Question of Predestination

The assistance of a magical helper is not the only thing that calls Cinderella's agency into question. In the Grimms' version, Cinderella loses her slipper because it gets stuck in the pitch that the prince scatters on the stairs, but other tellings have no such explanation for Cinderella losing her slipper, which is described by Perrault as "fitting her as if it had been made of wax" (Ashliman). It seems unlikely that a shoe so well fitted would slip off her foot so effortlessly. *Cinderella* accounts for it by having her lose her shoe earlier on in the night, and having the prince place it back on her foot, indicating a loose fit. In every case, the shoe is the only thing to remain after the magic ends without any explanation as to why that is. In *The Glass Slipper*, Ella is under the impression that she is wearing borrowed (even stolen) clothing; nevertheless, when everything else is "returned," she keeps the shoes. The persistence of the shoes past midnight in combination with one falling off implies an intentionality—not on the part of Cinderella, but on the part of her fairy godmother, making the shoe a symbol of divine intervention.

The question then becomes, is this a tale of Calvinistic predestination? Would Cinderella live in the palace no matter what choices she made because it is the path that some higher power has elected for her? Heidi Göttner-Abendroth argues in favor of this view, calling Cinderella a tale of classical ultimogeniture (142-43). However, the fact that the great majority of tellings emphasize Cinderella's goodness seems to suggest that such is not the case. *Cinderella*, for example,insists that her move to the palace and marriage to the prince is the result of her courage and kindness. The correlation between these attributes, and even her being assisted by a magical helper at all, is emphasized by the test presented by her fairy godmother, who first appears as an old woman in rags. A similar test is given by the fairy godmother in *Cinderella* (1914). In this version, she first approaches the stepfamily begging for food. When they spurn her, she turns to Cinderella, who procures some for her. This speaks against a case of ultimogeniture since all the women in the family were given equal opportunity to assist the disguised fairy godmother and thereby earn her assistance.

Though other films do not include a test, the goodness by which Cinderella is so often characterized seems to speak toward that being a prerequisite for her positive development. The Grimms emphasize this in their literary version through retribution inflicted on the stepsisters by birds pecking out their eyes, but this scene is almost never found in screen adaptations. Much more common in cinematic tellings is a general forgetting of the stepmother and stepsisters. They are neither punished, as in Grimms, nor are they forgiven and brought to the palace, as in Perrault. A notable exception is found in *Ever After*, wherein penance is paid by the more malicious stepsister, Marguerite, as well as the stepmother, who are both sentenced to being

palace servants, while the nicer stepsister, Jacqueline, marries a worker in the palace and presumably lives a happy life. This is a unique reworking of both the Grimms' divine punishment of the wicked and Perrault's redemptive forgiveness.

When the stepsisters and stepmother appear in court and have charges laid against them, Marguerite and the Baroness are immediately condemned to slavery in the Americas, "unless," as the queen says, "someone will speak for you." As the Baroness looks around, the first insert shot is of da Vinci, who has served as a Christ figure throughout the film, and would therefore be an obvious intercessor. But he neither moves nor speaks. In this scene, the Savior role shifts from da Vinci to Danielle. Her voice is heard first (as if coming from the Heavens) and all the people in the room bow as the camera reveals her figure. In this moment, Danielle becomes her stepfamily's advocate with the *mother*, deferring to the golden rule as her system for judgement: "Your majesty, all I ask is that you show the same courtesy to them that they have bestowed upon me" (1 John 2:1, see also Matt. 7:12). The hierarchy herein presented again speaks to the conclusion of the tale being a reward for goodness, rather than the fulfilment of an inevitable destiny.

This model receives some opposition in *The Glass Slipper* wherein Ella is impetuous and feisty. The archetype of Cinderella as meek, long-suffering, and kind is challenged by this incarnation, who insists that she will one day live in the palace, and who responds to unkindness with name-calling and even physical aggression, rather than turning the other cheek. The combination of the prophecy and Ella's bad temper initially suggests that merit is not a factor in the course her life takes—it is predetermined. Were that the case, community and ritual would have little meaning in this version of the tale. But nuances in the film reveal that Ella's tempestuous spirit is incompatible with her truest self and as her identity is revealed, so is her capacity for kindness. Whereas Disney's Ella seems unable to be anything but kind, MGM's Ella chooses and develops kindness over time. This is made possible as she develops meaningful relationships.

Of course it is an imperfect metaphor. Within the story there is only one prince, which means only one woman becomes a princess. However, Cinderella is not a symbol of the one lucky enough to be noticed or chosen, as is so often thought. She is everywoman. Just as with her, it is within the power of each woman to create a positive female-to-female community, seek out the divine, and thereby become divine herself.

4. Women-Amongst-Themselves

Many fairy tales with a female protagonist also have a female antagonist, and many scholars have argued that the result is a polarized view of women, in a manner similar to the way women have been historically associated with either Mary (the pure and virtuous woman) or Eve (the vile seductress). But adhering to such a rigid reading has a trapping effect, disallowing the tale to work its magic. The story is neither a description of what women are, nor a prescription of what they should be. Instead, it is a demonstration of the possibilities inherent within certain socialities. Irigaray suggests that when women meet they "look for the secret of their identity in one another," but rather than finding it, they often "merge into one another or become rivals" because

they cannot perceive their personal status ("Women-Amongst-Themselves" 192). The failure to find one's own identity through interactions with another woman and the subsequent enmity is a common theme in fairy tales with a female protagonist. Kay Stone notes that the sense of competition begins when girls reach puberty and thereby become opponents in the search for a mate. This, she says, is when "Rapunzel is locked in the tower, Snow White is sent out to be murdered, and Sleeping Beauty is put to sleep" (46-47). Cinderella is unique in this respect because while on the one hand it exemplifies female rivalry through the stepmother and stepsisters, on the other it demonstrates the opposite—women successfully finding the "secret of their identity" through their association with one another—what Irigaray calls "women-amongst-themselves."

Though the stepmother and stepsisters have a female-to-female sociality, Cinderella is the only one who succeeds in discovering her truest identity. Through her positive association with other women, Cinderella not only extricates herself from oppression, but secures a life that far exceeds her expectations. By contrast, the stepmother and stepsisters are in a kind of frozen state, unable to move forward in their own process of becoming, because, as a result of their rivalry, they are a hindrance to one another. What happens instead is women-*against*-themselves, a deterioration of both the group and the individual, resulting in the mutual destruction that Irigaray says is the outcome of rivalry among women.

Cinderella is sympathetic to the challenges of forming positive female-to-female relationships. In this telling, the stepsisters are left as single-dimensional archetypes, but the character of the stepmother is given shape. Where Cinderella responds to hardship with kindness and courage, the stepmother responds with bitterness, which drives her sense of competition. Very little is known of the stepmother's life before she marries Cinderella's father. She is never referred to by name in the film, but, it is worth noting, both the name and occupation of her late husband are stated. Thus even before her second marriage there is a sense that she is in a shadow. This shadow is made darker within the new family context, where she learns that her place is secondary to both Ella and the deceased wife that preceded her. She thus appears in the film as a forgotten woman. Marie von Franz identifies the forgotten goddess as a common fairy tale archetype (28). Though the stepmother does not have magical powers, she exhibits a similar behavior to that observed by von Franz. According to her, the forgotten goddess is epitomized by a fairy who is marginalized, such as the thirteenth fairy in "Briar Rose." In response to being left out, the fairy places a curse on the baby princess. In like manner, the stepmother becomes more pointedly cruel to Cinderella after overhearing her new husband express his love and longing for his departed wife to his daughter. Since Cinderella and her mother draw the father/husband's attention away from the stepmother, she views them as rivals.

The stepmother's story in *Cinderella* is nicely contrasted with the opening of *The Glass Slipper.* In this film, Ella is also a kind of forgotten woman. Ella is alienated from her community. In the opening scene, the camera moves through the village as people in brightly colored clothing prepare for the return of the prince (Figure 2).

When the camera settles on a large fountain, Ella emerges from behind it, effectively separated from the group by this stone obstacle, and isolated in her own frame. As she watches a group helping a man hang a garland, she responds by smiling, nodding, and pointing her finger, as if she is a part of the interaction, but no one notices her. She eventually decides to walk around the fountain, and try to merge herself with the group. Though she finally shares the frame, she is still separated by her dull and dirty clothing. In response to the question "what do you want?" She replies, "I only want to help." She is willing to do anything, even clean up. But the group turns away, keeping her out of their circle. Once fully rejected by the group, she stops vying for admittance and begins to retaliate. Like the stepmother in *Cinderella*, Ella acts badly in response to being forgotten.

The stepmother exemplifies a woman who has become her own obstacle in her self-actualization, whereas MGM's Ella shows how she is able to overcome hindrances to that process. The latter never rejects the inner impulse to be a part of a community. Even in her bad temperament, Ella continues to strive to become part of the group. By contrast, the stepmother chooses instead to isolate herself. In *The Glass Slipper*, after the prince comes through the town, Ella lies to her stepsisters about having seen him pass. Her lie is not motivated by a sense of competition, but by a desire to feel comradery. She wants to be included, but instead her stepsisters (who *are* motivated by competition) call her bluff and laugh at her. Again she acts out. But when, in the woods, she meets Mrs. Toquet and is treated kindly, she softens. This is what she has been looking for. The stepmother, however, is not moved by Cinderella's kindness toward her. She becomes more cruel as time goes on, to the point that Cinderella's spirit breaks, and she, too, no longer feels that she can engage positively with the women around her.

5. The Communion of Saints

In *Cinderella*, her religious rite is incited by her own action. When, as her stepmother and stepsisters depart for the ball, she falls to her knees in front of the large trellis in her front garden. There, bent as if in prayer, she weeps and tells her mother that she can no longer keep her promise because she no longer believes. The manner in which she approaches this place indicates that it has been used for such purposes before. It has already been defined as one connected to Ella's parents. It is where she sat when her father gave her a paper *papillon*, and her mother watched as she and her father danced up the walk. It is the place where Ella and her mother would come to greet her father when he returned from his trips. As a result, it is associated with, and representative of, the familial unity that Cinderella experienced as a young child. But when she approaches this place on the night of the ball there are no bright colors, no smiling faces, no parents. She kneels alone and in the dark.

The low-key lighting in this scene has a religious quality (Figure 3). There is a sense of godliness in the pure and focused light that illuminates Ella's back and part of her face. The effect is similar to that within an old cathedral, which is dim except for shafts of light coming through the windows. It exhibits both the glass seen through darkly and the clarity on the other side of it, Ella's limited vision contrasted with the

eternal vista available to her mother and fairy godmother (see 1 Cor. 13:12). This garden is Ella's tabernacle, and the pre-determined way in which she approaches the trellis suggests that it has functioned as such for a long time. It is noteworthy that, though she has a strong relationship with each parent, when she kneels before this altar, she speaks specifically to her mother. This is not a case of favoring one parent over the other, but rather a circumstance to fit the moment of life that Ella is in. She appeals to her mother because it was a promise to her, specifically, that Ella felt she could no longer keep.

This critical moment for Cinderella recalls the Grimms' Cinderella, who goes to her mother's grave each day to pray. In both versions, the grave is a site of growth. In the Grimms' tale, Cinderella plants a hazel branch, which grows into a beautiful tree. And in the film, the trellis-turned-altar is covered with flowered vines. As each of these Cinderellas kneels in communion, the flora becomes a bridge between living and dead. In an analysis of the Grimms' tale, G. Ronald Murphey calls this experience the "communion of saints," drawing from the *Mirae Caritatis* which defines the communion of saints as "nothing else but a mutual sharing in help, satisfaction, prayer and other good works, a mutual communication among all the faithful, whether those who have reached heaven…, or who are still pilgrims on the way in this world" (100). In the Grimms' tale, a bird perched in the tree responds to Cinderella's supplications by bestowing her with gifts. But the utterance of the film's Cinderella seems at first to be met with silence. Having expressed her doubt, Cinderella leaves the sacred site, and it is in this moment, as she reaches the back garden, that the response comes. Her fairy godmother appears, as if by the mother's direction.

6. The Fairy Godmother as Goddess

The role of the fairy godmother in helping Cinderella through her spiritual development is established early on in *Cinderella*, though its religious significance is somewhat masked. Where the Brothers Grimm wrote that the parting wisdom of Cinderella's mother to her daughter was to "be pious and good," Ella's mother leaves her with the theologically neutral advice to "have courage and be kind" (qtd. in Maggi 155). And when Cinderella asks her mother "who looks after us?" the response is not "God" but "fairy godmothers." Thus an initial reading may yield an interpretation of the film as areligious, stripped of the spiritual and mythic grandeur so integral to the fairy-tale genre. However, closer analysis reveals threads of spirituality woven into the fabric of the film, through the mother-godmother-daughter triad.

The mother has a spiritual presence in Ella's home, but the fairy godmother manifests physically—not in place of the mother, but in addition to her. As Murphey notes, the godmother is traditionally a secondary mother who cares for the child when the mother is unable to. Within a Christian context (from which the concept of the fairy godmother in Cinderella would have emerged), she is also the overseer of the child's religious instruction and guidance (Murphey 93). Accordingly, in *Cinderella*, the fairy godmother comes when Ella is experiencing her moral crisis to give her guidance and renew her faith. She thus fulfills the role of the Christian godmother, but her role is much grander than what is stipulated by that human assignment. If this story is to be

read allegorically, then the fairy godmother is more than a person (or fairy) acting as proxy for the mother. She is the *god* mother, which is to say the Mother Goddess, who descends and uses the powers of Heaven to assist Cinderella.

The relation of the fairy godmother with a title and role as noble as that of the Mother Goddess may at times seem counterintuitive, both because of the manner in which she engages with nature and because of her frequent onscreen representation as a foolish woman. Irigaray maintains that "the feminine divine never separates itself from nature, but transforms it, transubstantiates it without ruining it" (*Key Writings* 167). According to this idea, the fairy godmother's use of natural elements to provide Cinderella with a carriage and footmen is within the sphere of the feminine divine. Yet Maggi argues that the fairy godmother's "intervention is a clear deformation in the natural order of things" because she has to "compel nature to collaborate in her plan" and she converts natural species into something else (Maggi 153). Additionally, in *Cinderella*, the fairy godmother is posed as a ridiculous figure. She is absent-minded and not completely competent in her magical abilities. In *The Slipper and the Rose*(1976), she is a skilled enchantress, but her powers are limited, thereby stifling the Mother Goddess's omnipotence. Such representations exacerbate the sense that she is manipulating nature. Yet in the films of Méliès and Kirkwood, as well as in the 1947 USSR production, *Zolushka*, the fairy godmother is serene and elegant. Kirkwood's fairy godmother even wears Grecian-style clothing, which gives her a goddess-like presence. In these films, she does not have to wrestle with nature. The animals and vegetation obey her command, and their limited time in an altered state (they will change back at midnight) suggests that they are lending themselves to the ritual. As such, it truly is a case of transubstantiation that does not ruin the genuine article, and not a deformation of the natural order. Ultimately, regardless of whether she is portrayed as silly or majestic, she fulfills her mission of assisting in the ritual, and it is in that act that her core essence is evinced.

7. Ritual and Transformation

Before Ella comes down the steps in her mother's dress, the fairy godmother is already in the garden, waiting. She does not announce herself until after Ella's prayer, and then she does not reveal herself until Ella has passed a test. Though Ella has just told her mother that she cannot continue to have courage and be kind, she immediately sets aside her sorrows and responds to the needs of this stranger, thereby exhibiting both courage and kindness. Beginning with this moment, Ella's identity is clarified through this divine interaction. Such revelation is the purpose of the rite. The pinnacle of the Cinderella moment.

The moment of transformation takes place in the middle of the film, so not only is it thematically the fulcrum, but formally as well. Everything that comes before leads up to this moment, and everything that follows is a result of it. The film takes advantage of the liberties offered by CGI to relish in Ella's transformation (Figure 4). Jack Zipes says there is a tendency in fairy-tale films to turn the tale into "melodramatic spectacle for spectacle's sake," but here the spectacle is used in support of the story and its themes (185). Just before the fairy godmother waves her wand to incite the

transformation, Ella asks her not to make a wholly new dress. Instead she wants her mother's dress to remain intact so she can feel her mother with her. The fairy godmother concedes, but she does more than simply repair it. The changing of the dress from the mother's pink to Ella's blue, signifies Ella's individuation. But just as each of the other transformed objects maintains a glimmer of their former selves, the dress remembers the old in its new construction. In like manner, Ella, though coming into her own personal identity, is still a vestige of her parents. Butterflies fly around Cinderella as she experiences her becoming, finally settling on her dress and slippers. As creatures who begin as one thing and end as another, their presence intimates that this moment in the garden with her fairy godmother is more than a make-over. She is transforming into her truest self. It is not simply a matter of an already-present internal goodness being reflected visually, but of the changes and development that begin at her very center expanding outward to reveal themselves externally. Though Maggi argues that there is no real "Cinderella moment," I argue that this is it (155).

After the Cinderella moment, Ella learns to stand up to her stepmother, and equally importantly she learns that doing so is in keeping with the promise she made to her mother. In some ways, Cinderella's promise led to her submitting to mistreatment. In seeking to be kind, she unconsciously follows the adage "if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." She perceives her choice as consisting of two options: silent submission, or a form of retaliation that would sever her promise, thus weakening this tie that binds her to her deceased mother. But after she has gone through her ritual transformation, she becomes individuated, distinct from her mother. Irigaray stipulates that "the bond between mother and daughter, daughter and mother, has to be broken for the daughter to become a woman" (92). In Cinderella's case, this break does not come with her mother's death, but with her transformation and the consequential re-interpretation of the promise. Afterward, she stands up to her stepmother, learning a kind of courage that she lacked before, which carries kindness in her honesty and her willingness and power to forgive her trespassers. This reconnects her to her mother, which is the necessary follow-up to the initial break since "without a vertical dimension [female genealogy]…a loving ethical order cannot take place among women" (92).

8. The Veiled Goddess

In *Cinderella*, the feminine divine manifests as a woman with magical powers. She announces herself as the person of whom Ella's mother had spoken—her fairy godmother—not a figure talked about as a story for children, but an actual being who has been Ella's steward. In a grand display she transforms from a haggard beggar to a glorious enchantress. But like the Divine Mother herself, the presence of the feminine divine in Cinderella tales is sometimes much more understated. In *The Glass Slipper*, there is no majestic apparition, no "here am I." Instead the fairy godmother appears to Ella as an ordinary woman—Mrs. Toquet.

Mrs. Toquet's choice to keep her identity veiled is never explained, and for a portion of the film, the audience is led to believe, like Ella, that Mrs. Toquet possesses

no magical power. All through the film, the audience is made to understand that Mrs. Toquet is "borrowing" the dress, the coach, the slippers. Not only does she not try to prevent this belief, she encourages it. She tells Cinderella that she has to leave at midnight so the coachman can return to the palace on time to pick up his clients at one. But in a short and simple shot, that paradigm is unraveled. On the last stroke of midnight, the coach tips. Cinderella lies unconscious in the hay, back in her rags, and the camera pans left to reveal a pumpkin and mice next to her. When Cinderella wakes up she is in her own bed, and Mrs. Toquet, who is sitting beside her, reinforces the "logical" explanation. Only she and the spectator know the truth.

At the end of the *The Glass Slipper*, without ever revealing her divine identity, the fairy godmother goes back to where she came from. Through a dissolve, her body disappears into the macrocosm. The audience is never told where her place of origin is, only that she was a temporary visitor. She came to assist Cinderella in her ritual, and once her task was accomplished, she moved on. A detail from the film *Aschenputtel* helps to illuminate this moment in *The Glass Slipper*. In *Aschenputtel*, the fairy godmother uses magic to put Aschnputtel's dress on the first time, but the second time, Aschenputtel puts it on herself. This subtle difference evinces that as Cinderella grows in prominence, the goddess retreats. This is not a case of one being made more important than the other—the goddess does not lose any of her glory in this process. What is happening instead, is that Cinderella is developing as an agent and increasing in glory—becoming a goddess in her own right.

9. The Revealed Goddess

In G. Ronald Murphey's Christian reading of the Grimms' *Cinderella*, he understands the tale to be an allegory in which the prince represents Christ as the bridegroom (111). Consequently, Cinderella's marriage to him and move into the palace become a symbol of her entrance into Heaven. *The Glass Slipper* emphasizes that the palace is a place she is destined for, and Ella clings to the prophecy. However, her vision does not extend beyond the palace. She knows she is meant to live there one day, but as her day-dream sequences suggest, she does not know to what end she is going there. This is another point where the tale diverges from orthodox Christianity, wherein entrance into Heaven *is* the end. It is significant that Ella considered the palace as an end also, until her fairy godmother, Mrs. Toquet, plants in Ella's mind the question of what she will do when she gets to the palace. She imagines herself seated on a large throne. The mise-en-scéne is sparse. The walls are blank, and there is nothing and no one around the throne. Suddenly to be there is not enough. She needs a purpose, a role (Figure 5).

The rite experienced during the Cinderella moment is propelling Cinderella forward to something much more grand and important. It is not just necessary in order to get her to the palace, but it is also a preparatory ritual for the crowning rite that comes with her marriage to the prince. Since both of the divinely powerful female figures hold the name "mother," and like begets like, there is an implication that what they are is what Cinderella, herself, both is and will become. Thus the communion of

saints that Murphey identifies is not simply a means of other-worldly aid in entering the Kingdom as he suggests, but, perhaps more importantly, it is a pattern of women helping one another in a process of divine becoming. As Cinderella's true identity is revealed, first through the Cinderella moment, and later through her marriage, she experiences apotheosis.

Since one of the leading critiques of Cinderella is her perceived reliance on a man in order to ascend from obscurity, the circumstances of this latter transformation require some attention. The key here is to recognize that being assisted by or united with another individual does not necessarily diminish Cinderella's character or agency. To the contrary, the tale teaches that there is strength, not weakness, in community. As has been mentioned, many Cinderella films notably diffuse the tendency to look at women and men hierarchically. This is done both through revision of the father as well as through the development of the prince's character (particularly beginning with films made in the second half of the twentieth century). By giving more dimensionality to the prince, Cinderella also gains more dimension (and vice versa). Since this is not the prince's story, his own path to apotheosis is not as clear, and it may be tempting to assume that he is already in an exalted state. Some films, however, indicate that, though he lives in the palace (the allegorical Heaven), the prince is also still in a development process. The princes in *Three Wishes for Cinderella, The Slipper and the Rose,* and *Ever After*, in particular, are presented as overcoming their adolescence *through* their association with Cinderella. The result is that the prince and Cinderella become partners in assisting one another's progression. Irigaray stipulates that "man and woman must help one another in their spiritual development, without diminishing the singularity of each one" (*Key Writings* 157). So not only is such mutual beneficence possible, it is necessary and does not come at the expense of personal identity.

The pattern of Cinderella's progression beginning first within her female community, and then culminating in her matrimony, at which point she reaches the apex of her becoming, reflects the Irigarayan principle that love of the same precedes love of the other, and ultimately that love of the other propels both parties into divine transformation. Bruno Bettelheim compares Cinderella's years of servitude with the ancient honor of the Vestal Virgin, who looks over the hearth and serves the mother goddess. He observes that "with the change to a father god, the old maternal deities were degraded and devalued, as was a place close to the hearth. In this sense, Cinderella might also be viewed as the degraded mother goddess who at the end of the story is reborn out of the ashes, like the mythical bird phoenix" (255). He thus presents two readings of the text: Cinderella as Vestal Virgin serving the mother goddess *or* Cinderella as mother goddess herself. I propose that rather than reading the story as having two possible interpretations, it is better read as a progression. Cinderella begins as the virgin and later transforms into the goddess.

The Glass Slipper appropriately ends in the forest glade, where Cinderella first met the Mother Goddess, and also where she met the prince. In this version, he does not search the whole Kingdom for a girl he does not know how to find. Instead, he

looks for her in a particular place—their shared forest glade, where they have equal footing. Here, her transformation is completed as royal robes are placed on her shoulders—a mantle of her divine glory.

10. Conclusion

Every Cinderella film but one ends with the shared apotheosis of Cinderella and the Prince. The anomaly is *Zolushka*, whichuniquely looks forward with a monologue by the old king, who tells the audience that Zolushka gives birth to a daughter, thus continuing the matrilineal line, and confirming that she has become a creatress of humanity both physically and spiritually. Divinity has been and will be passed from mother to daughter through the placement of the celestial crown by one generation onto the head of another.

Of course no Cinderella story is holistically representative of positive female-to-female relationships, the divine feminine, matrilineal connection, and female spiritual development. As is to be expected, each telling emphasizes different elements in different ways—some elements are excluded while others are included or new ones are added from version to version. And, like any story, this fairy tale is subject to human frailty, prejudice, and egocentrism. The imperfection of the storyteller is manifest in these tales. How does a mortal tell a story about what it means to become divine, especially if she does not see it as such? What is remarkable about Cinderella is that despite these varied influences, the themes of female power and spirituality emerging from female communities is largely consistent across classical tellings, particularly within cinema.

Choosing to focus on this common element over potentially contradictory minutia may be a form of what Maggi calls "contemporary readers of folk and fairy tales find[ing] in ancient versions what they wish to find—that is, the confirmation that 'our' Cinderella is an improved version of the ninth-century Chinese or seventeenth-century Neapoliton one—and discard the 'dross' of the tale" (160). He resists the impulse to turn Cinderella into something singular, and instead espouses an approach to fairy tales which welcomes the variety among tales of the same type. But while the variations are important, the elements that are most often repeated are more so. This is not referring to motifs of lost shoes or balls, but to relationships and personal development—the way the story draws together micro- and macrocosmic nature and foregrounds female spirituality.

Contrary to Maggi's skepticism, I argue that there *is* dross to be found amid the hundreds of versions of Cinderella. It is a natural consequence of the struggle of the finite mind to comprehend all that the story has to offer. In his novel *Perelandra*, C.S. Lewis says, "Our mythology is based on a solider reality than we dream: but it is also at an almost infinite distance from that base. [This is] why mythology [is] what it [is]—gleams of celestial strength and beauty falling on a jungle of filth and imbecility" (231-32). A woman's divine becoming is the celestial strength and beauty of the Cinderella tale. There is something about it that feels eternal, something in how long it has lasted, and the way that it keeps drawing us back.

Irigaray declares that "[w]ithout rites and myths to teach us to love other women, to live with them, mutual destruction is a permanent possibility" ("Women-Amongst-Themselves" 192). A numinous and female reading of Cinderella allows it to function as such a myth. But as forty years of scholarship demonstrate, this is not a given. Cinderella's potential as a myth that teaches women to love one another and help each other seek out the Mother Goddess and become "heirs of the kingdom," is dependent on a pro-female allegorical reading of the story (Jas. 2:5). Since the films are not overt in their spiritual declarations, it becomes the task of the audience to extract these messages and teach them to one another. In this way, the positive female-to-female community established in the film is transmitted to the viewer. The wand (so to speak) is passed to us and we become helpers and participants in one another's Cinderella moments.

FIGURES

Figure 1: (Left) Ella struggles to fit into the masculine city space. (Right) Ella finds community as she talks to Mrs. Toquet in the Forest (*The Glass Slipper*1955).

Figure 2:Ella is isolated from the group(*The Glass Slipper*1955).

Figure 3: Ella kneels at the trellis as she speaks to her deceased mother (*Cinderella*2015).

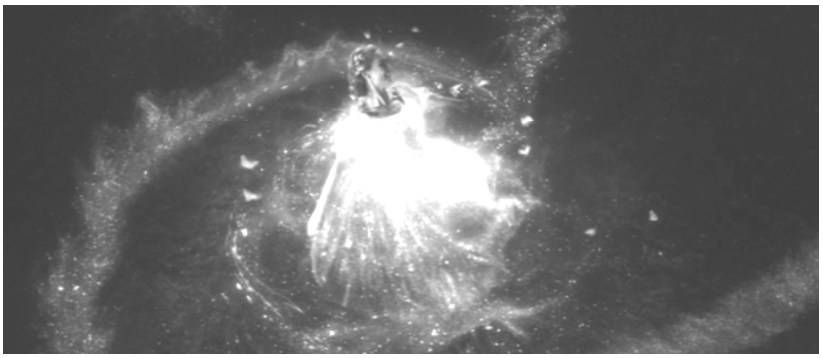

Figure4: Ella's dress changes from pink to blue(Cinderella2015)

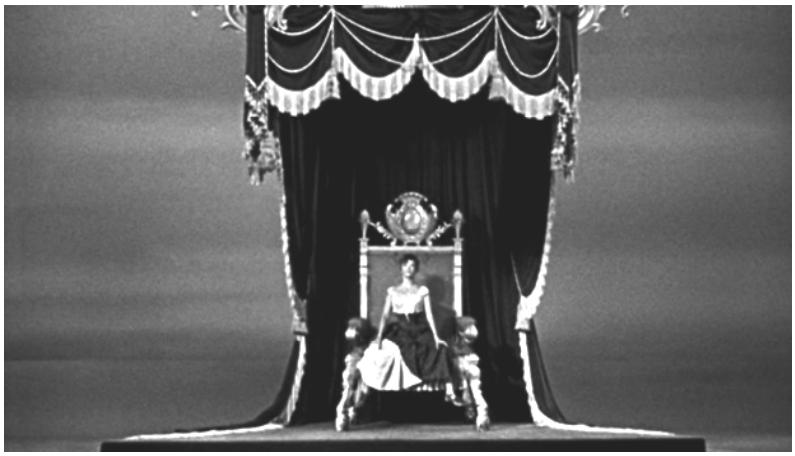

Figure 5: Ella imagines herself at the palace(The Glass Slipper2015).

Note

1. This is an abbreviation of the author's master's dissertation at King's College London entitled "Transformations on the Silver Screen: Re-Imagining Cinderella as a Numinous Myth that Advocates Female Individuation and Spiritual Development."

Filmography

Cendrillon (Georges Méliès, Star-Film,1899)

Cendrillon (Georges Méliès, Star-Film, 1912)

Cinderella (James Kirkwood, Famous Players Film Company, 1914)

Zolushka (Nadezhda Kosheverova and Mikhail Shapiro, Lenfilm Studio, 1947)

The Glass Slipper (Charles Walters, MGM, 1955)

Aschenputtel (Fritz Genschow, Fritz Genschow Films,1955)

Three Wishes for Cinderella (Václav Vorlícek, DEFA and Filmové Studio Barrandov, 1973)

The Slipper and the Rose (Bryan Forbes, Paradine Co-Productions, 1976)

Ever After (Andy Tennant, Twentieth Century Fox, 1997)

Into the Woods (Rob Marshall, Disney, 2014)

Cinderella (Kenneth Branagh, Disney, 2015)

References

Ashliman, D.L. "Cinderella." *University of Pittsburgh*. 22 March 2013. http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type0510a.html.

Bacchilega, Cristina. "An Introduction to the 'Innocent Persecuted Heroine' Fairy Tale," *Western Folklore* 52 (1): 1-12. 1993.

Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales.* London: Penguin Books, 1976.

Canepa, Nancy L. "Introduction to 'The Cinderella Cat,'" *Marvels & Tales* 13 (2): (1999).

Dundes, Alan. *Folklore Matters*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989.

Göttner-Abendroth, Heide. *The Goddess and Her Heros* [*sic*]. Translated by Lilian Friedberg. Stow: Anthony Publishing, 1995.

Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. London: Continuum, 2004.

_____. *Key Writings*, edited by Luce Irigaray. London: Continuum, 2004.

_____. "Women-Amongst-Themselves: Creating a Woman-to-Woman Sociality." In *The Irigaray Reader*, edited by Margaret Whitford. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991.

Lewis, C.S. *Perelandra*. London: The Bodley Head, 1970.

Lieberman, Marcia R. "'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale," *College English* 34, no. 3 (1972): 383-95.

Maggi, Armando. "The Creation of Cinderella from Basile to the Brothers Grimm." In *The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales*, edited by Maria Tatar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Moen, Kristian. *Film and Fairy Tales: The Birth of Modern Fantasy.* London: I.B. Tauris, 2013.

Philip, Neil. *The Cinderella Story: The Origins and Variations of the Story Known as 'Cinderella.'* London: Penguin Books, 1989.

Philpot, Mrs. J.H. *The Tree in Religion and Myth.* New York: MacMillan, 1897.

Murphey, G. Ronald. *The Owl, the Raven, and the Dove: The Religious Meaning of Grimms Fairy Tales.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Reuther, Rosemary Radford. *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History.* Berkeley: California University Press.

Stone, Kay "Things Walt Disney Never Told Us." *The Journal of American Folklore* 88, no. 347 (1975): 42-50.

von Franz, Marie-Louise. *The Feminine in Fairy Tales*. Revised Edition. Boston: Shambhala, 1993.

Williams, Christie. "The Shoe Still Fits: *Ever After* and the Pursuit of a Feminist Cinderella." In *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*, edited by Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Eve Matrix. Logan: Utah State University, 2010.

Zipes, Jack. *The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films*. New York: Routledge, 2011.

Elisabeth S. Weagel recently recieved a master's degree in Film Studies from King's College London.Her research is focused on the intersection of religion, film, and women's studies, particularly looking at how female religious experience is represented and elucidated in cinema. She has presented papers at the Oxford Symposium on Religious Studies, the Eastern Mediterranean Academic Research Center, and the Baylor Symposium on Faith and Film. Email: esweagel@gmail.com