

## ABSTRACT

“God’s Great Cooperator”: Motherhood and the Feminine Genius in Selected Fairy Tales

Emily Claire Archer

Director: Greg Garrett, Ph.D.

Within the past several decades, there has emerged a tendency among literary critics to denigrate fairy tales on the basis of their treatment of female characters. I argue, rather, that many fairy tales are rooted in deep and empowering theological truths about femininity and humanity in general. These truths are visible in some of the more traditional fairy tales – not despite the female characters’ roles, but precisely because of them. In my thesis, I explore ways in which a number of Grimm fairy tales shed light on what Pope John Paul II called “the feminine genius,” specifically as it manifests in motherhood. I consider fairy godmothers, wicked stepmothers, and heroines as different incarnations of the feminine nature. I use these fairy tale characters to illustrate what recent Catholic theologians have written about womanhood; by applying said writings, I also demonstrate how fairy tales can contribute positively to an understanding of motherhood and, more broadly, femininity.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

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Dr. Greg Garrett, Department of English

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM:

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Dr. Elizabeth Corey, Director

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

“GOD’S GREAT COOPERATOR”:  
MOTHERHOOD AND THE FEMININE GENIUS IN SELECTED FAIRY TALES

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By  
Emily Claire Archer

Waco, TX

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

*The mother is both the physical preserver of life and the moral provider of truth; she is nature's constant challenge to death, the bearer of cosmic plenitude, the herald of eternal realities, God's great cooperator.*

*(Sheen 58)*

Fairy tales, feminism, and the Catholic faith make an admittedly motley group. At the heart of each, however, is a message of justice tempered with great mercy and hope. A princess is condemned to death but instead receives one hundred years of sleep, and so is left with the promise of life. Women are denied suffrage for hundreds of years but finally achieve the right to vote, paving the way for their daughters to have a voice in the political sphere. Human beings deserve death, and yet God Himself comes down to earth and takes their place, rising from the dead on the third day. It is this framework that I find so compelling: the coexistence of a terrifyingly reasonable justice with a compassionate mercy and hope. We learn to embrace paradox, for the stories come out right – not as we expect them to, but as they should.

Recently, however, I began to question how feminism could coexist peacefully with Catholicism and fairy tales. I previously maintained that there needed to be no tension between them, and yet tension seemed unavoidable – even inherent – in their relationship. I abhorred the idea that two thousand years of Christianity could somehow be wrong about something so crucial. I was tired of fairy tale retellings that completely changed the stories to suit a feminist agenda. But it did often seem as though feminism

and tradition – of any kind – were incompatible. The writing of my thesis coincided fortuitously with this particular chapter of my faith journey. I began to read what several recent Catholic writers had to say about women, and I was transfixed. Where had this been my entire life? This was all I had wanted to know and more, and it was gloriously beautiful. Even now, having nearly finished this work, I find that I have nothing new to say. The moment I try to express myself, I find someone wiser and more eloquent has already said it – quite a refreshing feeling.

There has been a push in recent history to think of women as simply human beings, like men – nothing more, nothing less. This emphasis was certainly a driving force for many early successes in feminism. It is true, as Edith Stein says, that “no woman is only *woman*; like a man, each has her individual specialty and talent” (47). That being said, femininity is not tacked on as an afterthought to an otherwise complete individual. The reality of one’s femininity or masculinity is an integral part of the person.

Several notable twentieth-century Catholic theologians have proposed that the feminine nature is inherently maternal. I will here explore this link between motherhood and womanhood, specifically as may be seen in the portrayal of women in four prominent Grimm fairy tales: “Cinderella,” “Snow White,” “Rapunzel,” and “The Sleeping Beauty.” (“Cinderella” and “The Sleeping Beauty” have equivalents by Charles Perrault, whom I have chosen to consider as a supplementary source.) I must say from the outset that the women in these fairy tales are to be taken as two-dimensional models only. While they and their stories can shed light on certain aspects of the feminine nature, it would be a mistake to take these models too far and, say, set them up as ideal women. Human

beings are far too complex and multidimensional to be reduced to character tropes. Likewise, the specific characteristics categorized below as “feminine” should not be understood as narrowly defined or equally distributed traits. They are found in varying degrees and qualities among women – and are not unknown in men. However, if one may be permitted to make generalizations, the following chapters will delve into three general aspects of motherhood.

It is worth noting that there is in fairy tales rarely a traditional mother figure. Most often, the female characters fall into one of these three categories: the protagonist or heroine, the villain, and the fairy godmother. What might this mean? For one, we see in all of these characters something uniquely feminine. The heroine is often a young, beautiful, goodhearted maiden who ultimately marries a good man, often a prince. Alternately, the villain is a bitter and spiteful woman who neglects or actively abuses the heroine, often her stepdaughter. The fairy godmother is a kind, generous, and powerful presence, often appearing right when things seem most dire. Each of these women casts light on what John Paul II called “the feminine genius,” the special charism, or grace, that is unique to women (MD 31).

In the past, academics and laymen alike have pointed out many irritating, if charming, discrepancies in fairy tales. Why is it that Cinderella never leaves her abusive family? Why is it that Rapunzel’s prince never rescues her? Why is it that Snow White’s stepmother was jealous of her seven-year-old daughter’s beauty? And what kind of father allows his wife to treat his daughter so cruelly? These inconsistencies have provided and will continue to provide fodder for many literary theories and papers, and for good reason. However, my purpose in these pages is not to focus on what fairy tales

may have gotten wrong, but to focus on what they have gotten right. I explore what they can tell us about women and womanhood, specifically in a Catholic Christian context. Much has been written about the failings of fairy tales, especially when it comes to women and their roles. Without delving much into the distinctive genre of the fairy tale, which of necessity requires a unique reading of the text, I want to study several fairy tales with the assumption that they may have something valuable to illustrate about femininity. I do not deny that there are questionable and even disturbing details included in some fairy tales, but I want to open a discussion of the possibility that fairy tales may be quite relevant, perhaps especially in our current age, to a proper understanding of motherhood and, more broadly, womanhood.

My hope for the following pages is twofold. First, I wish to use fairy tales as an illustrative tool for better understanding the concepts put forth by these brilliant theologians. Second, I hope to provide some support for “traditional” fairy tales, whose female characters are often in danger of being rewritten without a proper understanding of their earlier—and continuing—significance.

According to Joseph Ratzinger, a Catholic theologian and now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, our understanding of what it means to be mother and father, feminine and masculine, affects our perspective of God. He once shared: “What happens is that the interchangeableness of the sexes, viewed as simple ‘roles’ determined more by history than by nature, and the trivialization of male and female extend to the very idea of God and from there spread out to the whole religious reality” (96). Human beings, being made in God’s image and likeness, are reflections of who God is. If we lose an

appreciation for masculinity and femininity, we lose a vital sense not only of who we are,  
but also who our God is.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Gift of Life

The most apparent difference between men and women is biological. Women have the unique ability to nurture and bring forth new life. Many Catholic theologians and philosophers have seen in this fact a greater reality about the feminine nature, and even about humanity more broadly. In his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (*On the Dignity and Vocation of Women*), Pope St. John Paul II states, “motherhood concerns the whole person, not just the body, nor even just human ‘nature’” (4). Edith Stein wrote more specifically, “Woman naturally seeks to embrace that which is *living, personal, and whole*. To cherish, guard, protect, nourish and advance growth is her natural, maternal yearning” (43). Shortly thereafter she clarifies that women’s spiritual maternity is not restricted to her relationships with her children. Her husband, and indeed everyone she meets, especially if she is unmarried, benefits from her maternal nurturing (44).

Nurturing is itself an expression of true love, which is self-giving and sacrificial. This is most evident in the expression of a mother’s love, in which a woman literally welcomes her child into her life, both spiritually and physically. Her maternal love compels her to share her whole self with this child, in a reflection of God’s love for humanity. Indeed, through our mothers we learn what it means to say that God’s love is maternal.

*Fairy Godmother*

*‘The princess shall prick herself with a distaff in her fifteenth year and  
shall fall down dead’...*

*Everyone was terror-stricken, but the twelfth fairy, whose wish was  
still unspoken, stepped forward. She could not cancel the curse but could  
only soften it, so she said, ‘It shall not be death, but a deep sleep lasting a  
hundred years, into which your daughter shall fall.’*

*(Grimm 102)*

In order to properly examine the fairy godmother, it is necessary to first understand the role of a godmother. In the Christian tradition, godparents are meant to serve as spiritual mentors or parents to one being baptized. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: “For the grace of Baptism to unfold, the parents’ help is important. So too is the role of the *godfather* and *godmother*, who must be firm believers, able and ready to help the newly baptized—child or adult—on the road of Christian life” (CCC 1255). While parents are primarily responsible for the spiritual upbringing of their children, godparents are meant to help with the spiritual formation of their godchild, especially in the event that one or both parents are unable to raise the child. In the Catholic Church, Baptism “is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit (*vitae spiritualis ianua*), and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission” (CCC 1213). Baptism is a sacrament of initiation into the Church and of rebirth from the spiritual death of original sin. Therefore, while adult Baptism is practiced

(especially for converts to the faith), parents often baptize their children as infants. In this case, the parents choose their child's godmother and godfather, and both the parents and godparents promise to foster the gift of faith in the child (CCC 1253). Together they take responsibility for supporting and nurturing the spiritual life of the child.

A fairy godmother, then, might be expected to serve a similar purpose in the life of her godchild. In the Grimms' "The Sleeping Beauty," for instance, the princess has twelve fairy godmothers, the first eleven of whom grant her gifts: "One gave her virtue, another beauty, a third riches, and so on, with everything in the world that she could wish for" (Grimm 101). A thirteenth fairy appears, furious at her lack of an invitation, and curses the child to die at age fifteen, at which time the final fairy godmother appears. Her gift is one hundred years of sleep, rather than death (Grimm 101-102). The Perrault version of "The Sleeping Beauty" is quite similar,<sup>1</sup> with only minor differences in details. The fairies are seven, not twelve, and the occasion at which they bestow gifts is the princess's christening, or baptism (Perrault 1-3). In both tellings, the good fairies grant gifts that are meant to help bring the child to spiritual and physical perfection. The gift of the last fairy godmother is, quite simply, new life for the child, without which all other

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<sup>1</sup> Perrault's "The Sleeping Beauty" tale is nearly identical to the Grimms' version, at least in the beginning. What I found toward the end was surprising and rather disturbing. While the Grimms end their story with the wedding of the prince and princess, Perrault continues his tale, in which the prince and princess marry and have two children. The prince keeps his new family a secret, however, because his mother "came from a race of ogres," and he feared that she would eat his wife and children. When the prince becomes king, he unwisely brings his family home, where his mother does indeed try to eat them in his absence. He arrives in the nick of time to prevent this horror (10-14). I have not included this second half of the story in my analysis for two reasons. First, this part of the story is unlikely to be recognized or missed by the reader. Second, the Grimms completely omit this ending. As I am using the Perrault tales primarily as a supplement to the Grimm fairy tales, Perrault's ending – while it makes for an intriguing footnote – seems somewhat irrelevant.

gifts are useless. The fairy godmother bestows life on the child in a way that her parents could not, which is symbolic of the new life of grace that a Christian receives at Baptism.

While “The Sleeping Beauty” deals with a fairy godmother who literally gives life to her godchild, the fairy godmother of Cinderella grants life more figuratively. She appears, in the Perrault telling, after Cinderella has suffered neglect and abuse at the hands of her stepfamily. The fairy godmother appears as Cinderella is weeping and lamenting her misfortunes, the latest of which is being kept home from the royal ball. The fairy godmother tells her: ““promise to be a good girl and I will arrange for you to go”” (Perrault 61). There she meets the prince, whom she later marries. The fairy godmother here does two things. First, she emphasizes the importance of goodness and virtuousness, as is her duty as godmother. At the same time, she offers Cinderella a chance at a new life, a life free from drudgery and slavery and rather filled with love and joy. One does not have to look far to see the parallel to Baptism, which washes away the slavery to sin and introduces a new life in the love and grace of God. The Grimms’ Cinderella differs quite a bit in that she has no godmother at all. Rather, she begs beautiful dresses of the tree planted upon her mother’s grave, and a bird provides them for her. In this attire, she is able to go to the royal festival and meet the prince, whom she later marries. The bird and the tree, whose proximity to the grave suggests a connection to the deceased mother, play the role of the godmother. In a certain sense, Mother Nature has taken it upon herself to be godmother to the poor girl.

Having explored the fairy godmother’s role in relation to that of godmothers in general, we can look further. Might the fairy godmother mirror some truth or reality in our world? Indeed, fairy godmothers are, in one respect, the ideal to which every woman

might aspire. Pope John Paul II, in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, speaks of a “spiritual motherhood” to which all women, regardless of their situation in life, are called. Women who have no children themselves are called as well, or, one might say, especially, to be mothers to the world (MD 21). Similarly, Edith Stein writes, “Both spiritual companionship and spiritual motherliness are not limited to the physical spouse and mother relationships, but they extend to all people with whom woman comes into contact” (119). This spiritual motherhood is a specifically feminine nurturing: “With the woman there are capabilities of caring, protecting, and promoting that which is becoming and growing” (Stein 100-101). The fairy godmother, then, provides a supernatural element to this nurturing.

It would be nearly impossible to speak of Catholic teaching, much less to speak also of mothers, without referring to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. According to Catholic teaching, Jesus’s words to St. John at the crucifixion, “This is your mother” (Jn 19:26) are directed to all people: “Mary becomes the new Woman, given as a Mother to John, the beloved disciple, and given through him as a Mother to all of Jesus’ disciples” (Philippe 163-164). Therefore, if Mary is both our Mother and “‘figure’, ‘image’ and ‘model’ of the Church,” as Ratzinger declared (108), the Church herself takes on a special motherhood that can be understood, in the present context, as that of a fairy godmother. Why is Mary not a fairy godmother figure? On a spiritual level, Mary is our natural mother, and the Church is our supernatural (or “fairy”) godmother. The supernatural motherhood of godmothers means little without an understanding of natural motherhood. Mary is the natural mother of Jesus and the adopted mother of all Christians, meaning that she is a person who has gone before us in life, loves us, and can

help guide us to God. The Church serves a similar function, albeit in a more mystical sense. In fact, the Church takes her cue from Mary's example of motherhood:

“contemplating Mary’s mysterious sanctity, imitating her charity, and faithfully fulfilling the Father’s will, the Church *herself becomes a mother* by accepting God’s word in faith. For by her preaching and by baptism she brings forth to a new and immortal life children who are conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of God” (MD 22).

Without reducing or confining the role of the Church to that of a two-dimensional character, we can nevertheless draw parallels that may be helpful in understanding the Church better. The Church is like a fairy godmother in that she is a channel of blessings for her adopted children, providing supernatural gifts and graces. The Church encourages piety and offers help (in the form of the sacraments and teachings) in the struggle to live a good life, although one must be open to receiving her help. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: “The Church is both visible and spiritual, a hierarchical society and the Mystical Body of Christ. She is one, yet formed of two components, human and divine. That is her mystery, which only faith can accept” (779).

While there are rich theological truths present in the tradition of speaking of the Church in feminine terms (the Catholic Church is traditionally referred to as Holy Mother Church), she is not a person, and therefore quite literally lacks the personal and concrete elements of motherhood. One cannot touch “the Church.” One cannot speak to “the Church.” In a mystical sense, one may seek comfort from, learn from, submit to, respect, and love the Church, but the Church is not a physical being. This is as it should be, and is similarly true of a fairy godmother, whose very presence is mysterious and supernatural.

*Villain*

‘Queen, thou art of beauty rare,

But Snow-White living in the glen

With the seven little men

Is a thousand times more fair.’

*When she heard the looking glass speak thus she trembled and shook with  
anger.*

*‘Snow-White shall die,’ cried she, ‘though it should cost me my own life!’*

*(Grimm 173)*

Many fairy tales feature a woman as the villain, often a wicked stepmother or an evil fairy (godmother). The wicked woman blatantly inverts the role of the mother, for she dedicates her life to manipulation, murder, and destruction. Stepmothers especially are notorious in fairy tales for their wickedness and treachery, and especially for their murderous jealousy. Certainly any attempt to enslave, abandon, or murder one’s daughter (see the Grimms’ “Cinderella,” “Hansel and Gretel,” and “Snow White,” respectively) contradicts the most fundamental instincts of any good parent, but particularly a mother. Archbishop Fulton Sheen spoke at length about the wonderful beauty and holiness of maternal love, saying:

When a mother carries the young life within her through a free act of love, she has a different kind of love from what any man has for a neighbor. Most of us love a non-self, or something extrinsic and apart from our inner life; but a mother’s love during the time she is a flesh-and-blood ciborium is not for a non-self but for one that is her very self, a perfect example of charity and love which hardly perceives a separation. Motherhood then becomes a kind of priesthood. She brings God to man by preparing the flesh in which the soul will be implanted; she brings man to God in offering the child back again to the Creator. (54)

These grave crimes, then, are all the more shocking because they are committed by the one to whom the child's very life and being is entrusted: her "mother."

Evil "mother" figures abound in fairy tales – to an alarming extent. Alice von Hildebrand's interpretation of the story of the Fall in the Garden of Eden is quite relevant. She sees in the story of the Fall a more universal implication of the great goodness inherent in woman's ability to give life, and the reason the devil might go to such lengths to corrupt her. She notes that "Eve is the enemy par excellence because being the mother of the living, she is Satan's arch enemy for he was 'a murderer from the beginning' and hates life" (von Hildebrand x). Of course, the Grimm brothers and Monsieur Perrault do include stories with male villains, but it is interesting that many of the more well-known fairy tales have women as villains.

In the Grimm "Cinderella," we know little of the girl's deceased biological mother except that she had been pious and encouraged her child to love and serve God and others (155). We know even less of her in Perrault's story except that she "had been the nicest person in the world" and had passed this trait on to her daughter before dying (58). By contrast, the stepmother treats her stepdaughter cruelly, making her work for her family and refusing to share their wealth with her (Grimm 155-156, Perrault 58). In the Grimm's version, not only does she require Cinderella to do the work around the house and dismiss her as a member of the family, but she also teases the girl spitefully. She creates unnecessary tasks and taunts her with false promises to bring her to the royal festival: "'If you can pick out two whole dishes of lentils from the ashes in an hour, you shall go with us.' And she thought, 'She will never be able to do that'" (Grimm 158). Instead of valuing Cinderella as a unique person to be cherished and nurtured, the

stepmother uses and abuses her; in so doing, she stultifies and restricts her stepdaughter's life. In the words of Fulton Sheen:

A mother must love each offspring as if it were the only one in all the world. This means recognizing that human beings are not just individuals, but persons... The difference between an individual and a person is this: individuals are replaceable, and persons are not... This, incidentally, is why every mother gives to the child a name which implies dignity, uniqueness, and apartness. (55)

Cinderella's stepmother, however, treats her stepdaughter as a slave and refuses to acknowledge her personhood. The girl's stepfamily does give her a name, but the cruel nickname only reinforces her degradation: "In the evening, when she was worn out with work, she had no bed to go to but had to lie on the hearth among the cinders. And because, on account of that, she always looked dusty and dirty, they called her Cinderella" (Grimm 156).

The witch in "Rapunzel" is also an unconventional mother, albeit much less violent than the previously mentioned stepmothers. She catches her neighbor stealing a lamb from her garden to satisfy the cravings of his pregnant wife. Moved to (a semblance of) pity, she offers him a deal: she will give him access to her garden in exchange for his child. "In his fear the man consented to everything. And when the baby was born, the witch appeared, gave it the name of Rapunzel (rampion), and took it away with her" (Grimm 131). It is important to notice that the witch names the child after the plants she gave up: Rapunzel. She does not actively mistreat her adopted "daughter"; in fact, she tells the child's father that she "will care for it like a mother, and all will be well with it" (Grimm 131). The witch is nevertheless intent on restricting and controlling the girl's life, for "[w]hen she was twelve years old, the witch shut her up in a tower which stood in a wood" (Grimm 131). The "care" she shows the girl is a selfish, possessive love that stunts the girl's life rather than nourishing it. The witch loves and cares for

Rapunzel as though she is another plant in her garden, not a human being with her own life to live.

On the other hand, Snow White's stepmother quite literally attempts to destroy her stepdaughter's life. Four times, she tries to murder the young girl, at first by force and then by trickery. First she orders a huntsman to execute the girl in the forest, but when he fails, she takes matters into her own hands: "She painted her face and dressed herself like an old peddler woman, so that no one would have known her. In this disguise she went across the seven mountains, until she came to the house of the seven little dwarfs" (Grimm 171). Unrecognized by her stepdaughter, the evil queen sells the girl lace and "laced [Snow White's bodice] so quickly and tightly that it took Snow White's breath away, and she fell down as dead" (171). The dwarves return in time to save her, but the queen comes back, this time with a poisoned comb for Snow White's hair. The dwarves again return in time to save her. Finally the queen, intent on her stepdaughter's death, returns to the dwarves' house with a poisoned apple, which she tricks Snow White into eating (171-174).

The wicked fairy in "The Sleeping Beauty" is less subtle, but no less evil in her designs on the life of the princess. At a celebration soon after the child's birth, the wicked fairy appears, infuriated – either at her subpar place setting for the meal (Perrault) or at her lack of invitation in the first place, while all other fairies had been invited to be godmother to the young princess (Grimm). The details are apparently not terribly important. Both sources agree, however, that she curses the child to die after pricking her finger on a spindle (Perrault 2, Grimm 102). Spinning wheels and spindles are "women's tools," as spinning wool has traditionally been the domain of women. The spindle is

therefore strongly associated with wives and womanhood. Here the evil fairy, almost an evil fairy godmother, is one who aims to ruin not only the princess's life but also to destroy her femininity. This adds another devious facet to her crime. Alice von Hildebrand wrote in her book *The Privilege of Being a Woman*: "Femininity is a linchpin of human life; once it is uprooted, the consequences are disastrous" (10). This ties back into Ratzinger's earlier statements on the importance of femininity, which is not a side note in the story of humanity, but an element essential to a proper understanding of men and women.

There is a curious theme throughout these stories: the evil woman is at once a mother and not a mother. She may be the child's mother by marriage – but also, if we are to take John Paul II's definition, by virtue of her femininity. At the same time, she is the "other" mother, the "second" mother – a replacement for the true mother. Such a designation seems particularly harsh for stepmothers in general; indeed, this view of stepmothers must not be taken as the rule – or even a common exception to the rule – in "the real world." However, fairy tale logic is not always linear. Her status as "stepmother" is confirmed by the way she treats her stepchild. The woman is a stepmother because she does not love and care for her child – she is not a "true" mother to the child. She is wicked because she refuses to be a mother to his – and now her own – child. Additionally, the stepmother is chosen second – both as wife and mother. One might even argue that, in a perfect world – in an unfallen Eden, without sin or death – there would be no stepmothers, for children would not lose their parents. In that sense, stepmothers are unique to the fallen world that we inhabit, as well as the fallen fairy tale worlds we imagine.

All of these “conclusions” that one draws from tales of wicked stepmothers must yet be taken for what they are: stories that tell of deeper truths than historical fact. It may or may not be true that many stepmothers are cruel to their stepchildren. These fairy tales, however, are not a warning against stepmothers. They are a warning that rejecting one’s inherent gifts and calling is to embark upon a path of falsehood and destruction. These women are evil because they reject their vocation as women and as human beings.

### *Heroine*

*Rapunzel was the most beautiful child under the sun. When she was twelve years old, the witch shut her up in a tower which stood in a wood. It had neither staircase nor doors, but only a little window quite high up in the wall.*

*When the witch wanted to enter the tower, she stood at the foot of it and cried:*

*‘Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair!’*

*(Grimm 131)*

The heroine of many fairy tales is a young girl, often a princess, who encounters and overcomes difficulties, frequently with outside help. We may well ask, then, what this young girl adds to our current consideration of the life-giving aspect of femininity. When we consider that the entire story hinges on the heroine’s life, we begin to see another facet of the life-giving attribute. Life is a precious gift that women are privileged to bear to the world, and the value of each life stems from his/her being uniquely and

lovingly created in God's image and likeness. Women (and men), then, are valuable just as are the children they bring into the world.

In the heroine we see a young woman, the protagonist of her own story, who often brings people together for a common purpose. Eventually she marries and becomes a mother, but most of the story focuses on her life as an unmarried girl and/or woman. Perhaps this is meant to redirect our own focus and to keep us from considering the concept of the "feminine genius" too rigidly. Women must not be pigeonholed by their roles as wives and mothers. Women are persons in their own right and therefore have value outside of what they can accomplish and what they can offer to others.

In the story of "Cinderella," we meet a young woman who wants to go to a dance. She wants a chance to enjoy life, a brief reprieve from patiently putting up with her family's endless neglect and abuse. Perrault tells us only that "the king's son gave a ball, and he invited all persons of high degree" (60). The Grimms are more specific: "the king proclaimed a festival which was to last three days, and to which all the beautiful maidens in the country were invited, in order that his son might choose a bride" (157). Possibly Cinderella is hoping to meet the prince, and possibly she sees him as a way out of her present servitude; however, she already possesses a magical tree, planted upon her mother's grave: "She wept and prayed there, and every time she went a little white bird came and perched upon the tree. And when she uttered a wish, the little bird threw down to her what she had wished for" (156). If she truly wanted only to escape her stepfamily, she could easily do so in an instant. The chance to go to the royal festival then provides something escape cannot: joy (and the possibility of love).

We find Snow White in exile, having very early in her life excited her stepmother's jealousy: "... when she was seven years old she was as beautiful as day, far more so than the Queen herself" (Grimm 167). Her exile presumably lasts for years, although the timing of the queen's attempts on her life is not given. Certainly (hopefully) many years have passed from when she is seven years old and when the prince appears – and marries her soon afterwards. In the meantime, she finds a family with seven dwarves, far away from her stepmother, and they take care of each other (169-175).

Rapunzel grows up sheltered and hidden from the world and is punished for having any contact with others. The girl's adoptive mother received her in a bargain – plants in exchange for a baby – and so believes she has a right to her child's life, which she enforces jealously. She keeps Rapunzel in a tower far from any human society or friendship (Grimm 131). Whenever the witch visited Rapunzel, she greeted her daughter with, "'Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair!' ... she unfastened her plaits and twisted them round a hook by the window. They fell twenty ells downwards, and the witch climbed up by them" (Grimm 131). Several years later, when Rapunzel meets a prince, she is frightened, "... for she had never set eyes on a man before" (Grimm 131-132). However, his sweet words soon win her over, and "... when he asked if she would have him for her husband, and she saw that he was young and handsome, she thought, 'He will love me better than old Mother Gothel'" (Grimm 132). Clearly, the mother and daughter have an unhealthy relationship. Later, upon discovering Rapunzel's trysts with the prince, the witch grows furious. If she cannot be the sole admirer and keeper of Rapunzel and her beauty, then no one else shall be: "In her rage she seized Rapunzel's beautiful hair, twisted it twice round her left hand, snatched up a pair of shears, and cut off the

plaits, which fell to the ground. She was so merciless that she took poor Rapunzel away into a wilderness, where she forced her to live in the greatest grief and misery” (Grimm 134). By trying possessively to keep Rapunzel close to herself and no one else, the witch literally ends up pushing her away. Rapunzel, like every person, is made for true love, and she rejects the witch’s phony substitute, even when it leads to suffering.

Although the princess in “The Sleeping Beauty” is cursed as an infant, the curse only manifests when she begins to reach womanhood. Both Grimm and Perrault tell very similar stories. Her parents do what they can to avoid the imminent disaster, even going so far as to outlaw spinning wheels (Grimm 102, Perrault 3). (Where the kingdom found all of its cloth for the following decade and a half is not mentioned.) “The Princess grew up so beautiful, modest, kind, and clever that everyone who saw her could not but love her” (Grimm 102), and her parents grew less concerned for their daughter’s life: “At the end of the fifteen or sixteen years the king and queen happened one day to be away, on pleasure bent” (Perrault 3). On this day, the young princess finds an old woman spinning on a spinning wheel. (Clearly not everyone adhered to the law about spinning wheels, which lessens the mystery of how an entire kingdom without spinning wheels still had access to clothes.) Having never seen a spinning wheel or a spindle before, the girl is intrigued and reaches out, eager to learn to spin. “Partly because she was too hasty, partly because she was a little heedless, but also because the fairy decree had ordained it, no sooner had she seized the spindle than she pricked her hand and fell down in a swoon” (Perrault 3).

The calling of both men and women in Christianity is to imitate God’s gift of love, which is Himself, by giving of ourselves. “The human being is a person, a subject

who decides for himself. At the same time, man ‘cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self’” (MD 18). Mothers, and in a spiritual sense all women, offer their lives and love to others in a unique manifestation of divine love. Fulton Sheen said of mothers: “Nature had to prepare for them through millions of years by begetting a love that would freely desire children, a love that would educate them, and a love that would sacrifice for them because of their sovereign worth as persons endowed with immortal souls. Such love could not come from the beast, for that kind of love is a gift of God” (56).

In this light, it becomes even more evident how Mary is the perfect heroine. Mary is a mother, yes, but she is only a mother because she is first a person: “there could never be a human mother until love came into the world... If a mother is to be made, then what is begotten must come from a free act of the will” (Sheen 53). John Paul II similarly wrote, “through her response of faith Mary exercises her free will and thus fully shares with her personal and feminine ‘I’ in the event of the Incarnation. With her ‘fiat,’ Mary becomes the authentic subject of that union with God which was realized in the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word” (MD 4). He also saw in Mary’s deep relationship with God and her acceptance of His will a teaching moment for every person:

Thus the ‘fullness of time’ manifests the extraordinary dignity of the ‘woman.’ On the one hand, this dignity consists in the supernatural elevation to union with God in Jesus Christ, which determines the ultimate finality of the existence of every person both on earth and in eternity. From this point of view, the ‘woman’ is the representative and the archetype of the whole human race: she represents the humanity which belongs to all human beings, both men and women. On the other hand, however, the event at Nazareth highlights a form of union with the living God which can only belong to the “woman,” Mary: the union between mother and son. (MD 4)

He notes that women and men alike are called to communion with God, while at the same time acknowledging that, like every mother, Mary is privileged to commune with her Child in a way no one else can.

Like Mary, the heroine is both virgin and mother, albeit at different stages in her life. Her physical motherhood is usually only hinted at in the “happily ever after.” The relationship between her and her children, however, will be a constant reminder of God’s tender maternal love for each person. Those around her will come to better understand God’s love through her maternity, and she herself will begin to discover in her own motherhood how much God can love His children.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Sensitivity

The previous chapter dealt with the life-giving characteristic of motherhood. This second characteristic is more difficult to name. The English language has almost exclusively negative or frivolous terms to describe what is not rational. By “not rational,” I do not mean “irrational”; rather, I am referring to a certain aspect of humanity that cannot be measured or calculated scientifically or even logically. I have settled on the term “sensitivity” to refer to a range of qualities that are so often associated with the feminine nature. Sensitivity encompasses empathy, compassion, a perceptive or discerning mind when regarding other people (what one might call intuition), and being in touch with one’s own emotions. Indeed, Edith Stein said that a woman may further growth in others by means of her “active sympathy for those who fall within her ken” (44). She also holds that “The strength of woman lies in the emotional life” (96). This particular strength protects against a purely rationalistic view of the world.

Rationality is a gift from God. Human beings are rational creatures (MD 7). However, Ratzinger warns against overvaluing pure reason to the detriment of the relational aspect of humanity. He explained how the idolatry of masculine traits – no matter how well intentioned – leads to a devaluing of all that is naturally feminine:

But what is the woman to do when the roles inscribed in her own biology have been denied and perhaps even ridiculed? If her wonderful capacity to give love, help, solace, warmth, solidarity has been replaced by the economic and trade-union mentality of the ‘profession’, by this typical masculine concern? What can the woman do when all that is most particularly hers is swept away and declared irrelevant and deviant? (Ratzinger 103)

These two tendencies – the active masculine and the relational feminine – complement each other. Because both men and women are made in the image of God, both men and women bring inherently good and unique qualities to the world; yet, to consider, because of these differences, either the male or female person superior is to neglect the gifts of the other. In a world that has historically been dominated by men, women, particularly in their capacity as mothers, provide the necessary personal, feminine complement to the more masculine drive for ambition and material success.

This relational faculty of woman is most clearly seen in her role as wife and mother. Indeed, John Paul II and Edith Stein see a particularly spousal quality in the feminine nature (MD 20, Stein 44). At the same time, Stein talks about bringing this gift to the workplace as well: “The singular mission of the working woman is to fuse her feminine calling with her vocational calling and, by means of that fusion, to give a feminine quality to her vocational calling” (Stein 128). The “feminine calling” is the spiritual motherhood we introduced earlier, and any discussion of women’s spiritual motherhood presupposes the existence of relational ties and a natural sensitivity. In short, the feminine sensitivity, which is by no means held in monopoly by women but is nevertheless a feminine quality, is a capacity and affinity for relationship.

### *Fairy Godmother*

*Her godmother found her in tears, and asked what was troubling*

*her.*

*‘I should like—I should like—’*

*She was crying so bitterly that she could not finish the sentence.*

*Said her godmother, who was a fairy:*  
*'You would like to go to the ball, would you not?'*  
*'Ah, yes,' said Cinderella, sighing.*  
*'Well, well,' said her godmother, 'promise to be a good girl and I*  
*will arrange for you to go.'*  
*(Perrault 61)*

Fairy godmothers are characters found exclusively within the fairy tale genre, and even then not often. While fairy godmothers themselves are rather uncommon, they remain a staple of fairy tale imagination, perhaps because they are in fact part of a larger class of character. Vladimir Propp, in his *Morphology of the Folktale*, writes of a common character type known as the *helper*<sup>1</sup> or *donor*. The donor's role varies by tale, but Propp generalizes "the first function of the donor" as "the hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, etc., which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper." In addition, the donor often provides the hero or heroine with an object or method of overcoming the climactic trial(s) (39). This classification would include benevolent fairy godmothers but also characters such as Rumpelstiltskin, who offers help only to demand an unthinkable price (Grimm 127).

The fairy godmother is clearly one of the more beneficent donors that Propp had in mind. Indeed, the fairy godmother's role, more so perhaps than that of other donors, is to reward the goodness of the protagonist, who is the heroine because of her virtues. As Fulton Sheen said, "The mother is both the physical preserver of life and the moral

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<sup>1</sup> The term helper in this case is particularly interesting, considering the Biblical story of Creation in which Eve, "the mother of all those who live," was created as Adam's "helpmate" (Gen 3:20, 2:18).

provider of truth; she is nature's constant challenge to death, the bearer of cosmic plenitude, the herald of eternal realities, God's great cooperator" (58). This is true as well for fairy godmothers, who are spiritual mothers. To some extent, the fairy godmother is actually responsible for upholding morality in the fairy tale realm.

In the Grimms' "Cinderella," the birds who fill the role of fairy godmother not only reward Cinderella's goodness, but they also punish her stepsisters' cruelty. At one point, Cinderella's stepmother tells her she must clean up a spilled bowl of lentils within two hours, or she may not go to the ball, a seemingly impossible task. The birds come at Cinderella's call, however: "And the doves gave a nod with their little heads, peck, peck, peck. And then the rest began also, peck, peck, peck, and collected all the good beans into the dish" (Grimm 157). Her stepmother later reneges on her promise, so Cinderella goes to the tree she has planted upon her mother's grave, and the bird there furnishes her with attire for the ball: "the bird threw down to her a gold and silver robe and a pair of slippers embroidered with silk and silver. With all speed she put on the robe and went to the feast" (158-59). At Cinderella's wedding to the prince, the birds go so far as to peck out the stepsisters' eyes in punishment: "And so for their wickedness and falseness they were punished with blindness for the rest of their days" (165). In Perrault's "Cinderella," the fairy godmother also rewards Cinderella's kindness and patience, at the same time encouraging her to continue being kindhearted: "'promise to be a good girl and I will arrange for you to go'" to the ball (61). However, the fairy godmother's gifts come with stipulations: "Her godmother bade her not to stay beyond midnight whatever happened, warning her that if she remained at the ball a moment longer, her coach would again become a pumpkin" (63).

G.K. Chesterton, a prolific journalist of the twentieth century and Catholic apologist, touches on this exact phenomenon in his essay “The Ethics of Elfland,” albeit with a different focus. Chesterton’s essay is included in his book *Orthodoxy*, in which he recounts the thought processes which brought him to admire and ultimately to embrace orthodox Christianity. He writes of how ludicrous rules in a fairy tale can become, while no character will ever question them, and he sees in this a parallel to morality in our own world:

In the fairy tale an incomprehensible happiness rests upon an incomprehensible condition. A box is opened, and all evils fly out. A word is forgotten, and cities perish. A lamp is lit, and love flies away. A flower is plucked, and human lives are forfeited. An apple is eaten, and the hope of God is gone. This is the tone of fairy tales, and it is certainly not lawlessness or even liberty, though men under a mean modern tyranny may think it liberty by comparison... Fairy godmothers seem at least as strict as other godmothers. Cinderella received a coach out of Wonderland and a coachman out of nowhere, but she received a command—which might have come out of Brixton—that she should be back by twelve... Such, it seemed, was the joy of man, either in elfland or on earth; the happiness depended on not doing something which you could at any moment do and which, very often, it was not obvious why you should not do... If Cinderella says, “How is it that I must leave the ball at twelve?” her godmother might answer, “How is it that you are going there till twelve?”... [I]t seemed to me that existence was itself so very eccentric a legacy that I could not complain of not understanding the limitations of the vision when I did not understand the vision they limited. (148-150)

He appropriately calls this idea “the Doctrine of Conditional Joy” – or, later on, “the fairy godmother philosophy” (147, 151). His argument is that life (like so many fairy tales), being such an extraordinary and bizarre gift, could only come with equally extraordinary and bizarre limitations. The fairy godmother is the enforcer of those limitations.

The fairy godmother’s primary role is that of a loving mother figure and “donor.” She is sympathetic and intuitive to the needs of those in her care. The fairy godmothers in “The Sleeping Beauty” give the young princess many gifts: “The youngest ordained that she should be the most beautiful person in the world; the next, that she should have

the temper of an angel; the third, that she should do everything with wonderful grace; the fourth, that she should dance to perfection” (Perrault 2). The last fairy godmother, however, waits until the curse has been cast until she gives her gift (apparently there is a one-gift-per-godmother limit), correctly assuming that the uninvited fairy would take revenge. ““My power, it is true, is not enough to undo all that my aged kinswoman has decreed: the princess will indeed prick her hand with a spindle. But instead of dying she shall merely fall into a profound slumber that will last a hundred years”” (2-3). The Grimm fairy godmother likewise “could not cancel the curse but could only soften it” (102). In these cases the fairy godmother is seemingly unable to fully overturn the curse, but she still does what she can to help her godchild.

This apparent lack of power may be a blessing in disguise. It is interesting to consider both Cinderella’s and the Sleeping Beauty’s fairy godmothers’ actions with some perspective. In none of these stories does the fairy godmother provide a simple solution to the heroine’s problems. She takes a more holistic view of her goddaughter’s dilemma and situation. Edith Stein once spoke of “a particular kind of perception of the good, different from rational perception in being an inherent spiritual function and a singularly feminine one.” She continues, “Evidently, this quality is related to woman’s mission as a mother which involves an understanding of the total being and of specific values. It enables her to understand and foster organic development, the special, individual destiny of every living being” (73). Fulton Sheen elaborates:

Mothers in the animal kingdom care only for a body; mothers in the spiritual kingdom must care also for a soul, a mind, and a heart. The soul comes from God and must go back again to Him... Motherhood then turns into mother craft, as biology hands the work over to ethics... A tiny ball of unconsciousness needs much mother care to become all that God destined it to be. (54-55)

A more “rational” approach might have seen Cinderella whisked away from her relatives to a house of her own and a job by which she could support herself. A more “efficient” solution might have completely undone the Sleeping Beauty’s curse, rather than just ameliorating it. What, then, is gained by the fairy godmothers’ solutions? There is nothing wrong with alternate endings such as those above, but they certainly lack the original stories’ relational aspect. The fairy godmother takes the “whole person” of the heroine into account when offering her aid. As a mother, she knows that there is value to be found in patience, in waiting, and even in suffering. She knows that Cinderella needs to flourish emotionally and spiritually as well as physically. There is a great potential for personal growth and love when we relate to people as individuals and not variables in an equation. Relationships and personal growth take time and effort, and the fairy godmother knows this, and facilitates both personal and interpersonal growth. For this reason, the godmother does not immediately rescue the heroine. She leads the heroine toward experiences that enrich and fulfill her own life and those of others.

### *Villain*

*The feast was held with all splendor, and when it came to an end  
the fairies all presented the child with a magic gift. One gave her virtue,  
another beauty, a third riches, and so on, with everything in the world that  
she could wish for.*

*When eleven of the fairies had said their say, the thirteenth  
suddenly appeared. She wanted to revenge herself for not having been  
invited.*

Femininity includes a unique proclivity to understand and navigate what is relational or personal—in other words, to focus on “the self.” Edith Stein tells us that “the specifically feminine attitude is oriented towards the concrete and whole person” (113). The villain is no less oriented toward the self, and yet she concentrates on her own self. Her selfishness differentiates her from the heroine and the fairy godmother. All of her emotions are selfish as well, directed as they are to her evil and self-centered desires. Her emotions are not guided by what is right or by a truly sacrificial love. We have already examined the villain as one who destroys life. She is also a woman who allows her feminine nature to be corrupted. She is a slave to her passions, too much driven by feelings that have no limitations placed upon them.

Alice von Hildebrand dedicates an entire chapter in her short book *The Privilege of Being a Woman* to feelings. She begins by acknowledging that people should be wary of certain types of feelings, but that the word *feeling* may have any number of definitions. Then she clarifies: “‘spiritual feelings’... cannot possibly arise in man’s soul unless he has an awareness of what *motivates* these feelings. One cannot love without knowing what or whom one loves, without realizing that this love is a response to a lovable object” (68). Therefore our “spiritual feelings” can be very good, and can even lead us to virtue. However, “Emotional stirrings need the control of reason and the direction of the will” (Stein 97).

The witch in Rapunzel selfishly hides Rapunzel away from the world in order to keep her for herself, essentially condemning the young woman to a life of solitary confinement (Grimm 131-132). Meanwhile, the evil fairy in “The Sleeping Beauty”

lashes out, taking petty revenge for an imagined slight (Grimm 101, Perrault 2). They both place their emotional comfort and egotism above the wellbeing of another.

The Grimm brothers spotlight Cinderella's stepsisters as the villains at least as much as, if not more than, their mother. They force their new sister to work as a servant, ridicule her, and make her sleep on the hearth (Grimm 155-156). On the other hand, the stepmother also mocks the girl with the name "Cinderella" and stands by while her daughters treat their sister abominably. Additionally, she refuses to allow Cinderella to attend the royal ball, saying, "'You can't go with us, for you've got no clothes and you can't dance. We should be quite ashamed of you'" (158). Perrault does not reveal much more about Cinderella's stepmother except that she was "the haughtiest, proudest woman that had ever been seen" (58). Cinderella's stepsisters likewise "possessed their mother's temper and resembled her in everything" (58). Like every mother, the stepmother passed on her own values to her children; unfortunately, she used her influence to corrupt her daughters and to teach them to be cruel.

Snow White's stepmother also is described as a "proud and overbearing" woman, whom "envy left... no rest" (Grimm 166, 171). She orders the death of her stepdaughter rather than concede that the child is more beautiful than she is. When her initial attempt to kill the girl fails, she tempts Snow White, trying to kill her with ordinary, everyday objects—objects that are symbolically significant instruments of corruption. She approaches Snow White in disguise, selling her a lace bodice and tying it so tightly that the girl cannot draw breath. When Snow White survives, the stepmother returns to sell her a poisoned comb, and she leaves when she is confident that Snow White is dead. When the comb fails to kill Snow White as well, the stepmother returns with a poisoned

apple, which sends Snow White into a deathlike sleep (Grimm 167-175). These three murder attempts shed light on the stepmother's own vices.

The lace bodice and the comb are the first two trials Snow White faces. The lace bodice indicates the sexualizing and ultimately objectifying influence of the stepmother on her young stepdaughter. The stepmother refuses to see people as individuals to be respected and loved, and rather treats people – especially her stepdaughter – as means to an end. The poisoned comb represents her competitive vanity, which incites all of her evil deeds and is similarly based in her inability to see others as persons with inherent worth. Her faults are in direct defiance of her vocation as a mother. Fulton Sheen once spoke of the depersonalizing effects of Communism as a stark contradiction to motherhood. He was speaking at a time when the threat of Soviet Communism loomed over the United States, but his words are still relevant: “There is no greater refutation of Communism in the world than a mother. Because Communism denies the value of persons, it affirms that we are like grapes who have no other destiny than to have our life ground out of us for the sake of the collective wine of the state” (55-56). He saw in motherhood, due to its highly personal aspect, a natural remedy to all forms of utilitarianism and dehumanization. The villain therefore is not a true mother because she fails to properly relate to others, most especially to her child.

The poisoned apple is the stepmother's final attempt to kill her daughter, and she almost succeeds. The apple hearkens back to the first sin of Adam and Eve, which was pride (von Hildebrand 21). Snow White's stepmother selfishly prioritizes not only her own self, but her own beauty, above that of her stepdaughter's life, and Snow White does not emerge from the trials unscathed – that is, not immediately. She succumbs almost to

death each time she allows herself to trust her stepmother's "gifts." She survives only thanks to the care and vigilance of the seven dwarves.<sup>2</sup> Even so, the apple, the symbol of pride, is so deeply lodged in Snow White's throat that the dwarves are unable even to discover what is wrong with her. The apple is only displaced when the prince's servants, who are carrying the coffin in which she lies, trip and fall (Grimm 171-176). Pride can only be remedied by humility, which must sometimes be forced upon us. Fulton Sheen says as much in a chapter on humility: "[Pride] is rarely cured when the person himself is vertical—*i.e.*, healthy and prosperous; but it can be cured when the patient is horizontal—sick and disillusioned. That is why catastrophes are necessary in an era of pride to bring men back again to God and the salvation of their souls" (46).

The villains of these fairy tales are eaten up with pride. They have no moral compass with which to direct their passions and emotions, and so their emotions are guided – or rather, let loose – by their love of self, rather than by what is right and by selfless love. Edith Stein once said, "the feminine disposition suffers from the joint flaw which human nature retains from original sin, which impedes her pure development, and which, if not opposed, leads to typical perversion" (45). She elaborates,

[T]he *personal outlook* appears to be exaggerated unwholesomely; in the first place, her inclination to center both her activities and those of others about her own person is expressed by vanity, desire for praise and recognition...; on the other hand, it is seen in an excessive interest in others as in curiosity, gossip, and an indiscreet need to penetrate into the intimate life of others. (45)

We can easily see this perversion of the feminine nature in each of the villains mentioned above. Rapunzel's adopted mother does display "an indiscreet need to penetrate into the intimate life of" her daughter, to the point of cutting off any contact between Rapunzel

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<sup>2</sup> The seven dwarves, whom we may compare here to the seven virtues, are able to save Snow White from the first two vices she encounters. Pride, however, proves a trickier adversary.

and other human beings (Grimm 131). The wicked fairy in “The Sleeping Beauty” lays a curse on an infant because her “desire for praise and recognition” has not been met (Grimm 101). Cinderella’s vain stepmother refuses to allow her stepdaughter to attend the king’s ball because, she says, Cinderella would embarrass the family (Grimm 158). Snow White’s stepmother goes further and attempts to murder her stepdaughter out of hatred, borne of her pride and vanity (Grimm 167). “Without... guidance or grace,” writes Alice von Hildebrand, “woman may be weak enough to misuse one of her great gifts... to her own destruction and that of others” (39). The villains certainly use any means possible – beauty, intelligence, magic, power – to inflict their schemes on the people around them. The inability to (or perhaps decision not to) rightly order her emotions only contributes to the dysfunctional nature of the villain’s relationships with other people.

### *Heroine*

*The prince was beside himself with grief, and in his despair he sprang out of the window. He was not killed, but his eyes were scratched out by the thorns among which he fell. He wandered about blind in the wood and had nothing but roots and berries to eat. He did nothing but weep and lament over the loss of his beloved wife Rapunzel. In this way he wandered about for some years, till at last he reached the wilderness where Rapunzel had been living in great poverty. He heard a voice which seemed very familiar to him and he went towards it. Rapunzel knew him at once and fell weeping upon his neck. Two of her tears fell upon his*

*eyes, and they immediately grew quite clear and he could see as well as  
ever.*

*(Grimm 134)*

In contrast to the villain, the heroine's sensitivity is expressed primarily through motherly compassion. Her emotions are rightly ordered and so inspire her to true virtue. Sometimes, her emotional tenderness even provides the means for her to overcome her trials. In each of these stories, the heroine opens herself up to others and loves them. In receiving those she loves into her heart, she allows herself to share the burdens of others and thereby alleviates their suffering. At times, her suffering heart is understandably engaged in her own dire situation, although she never descends into excessive self-pity. Paradoxically, by acknowledging painful situations and feelings, the heroines find the means to overcome the dilemmas that face them and their loved ones.

In the Grimm tale, Cinderella's emotions are a powerful catalyst for the events that begin to change her life. Cinderella's father asks his three daughters what gifts they would like from his travels. While her sisters demand dresses and jewelry, Cinderella asks her father, "break off for me the first twig which brushes against your hat on your way home" (156). Her father returns with the branch, and she plants the twig over her mother's grave, watering it with her tears until it grows into a tree. The Grimms give no explanation for Cinderella's curious request. Perhaps she experiences a particularly sentimental moment regarding her father. (Such sentimentality would seem to be rather misplaced, considering her father calls her by her rude nickname and allows his new wife and daughters to mistreat her.) Maybe she hopes to awaken her father's love for her by expressing her own affection, or perhaps she had intended all along to grow a tree upon

the grave of her dear mother. Whatever the reason, thrice a day, “She wept and prayed there, and every time she went a little white bird came and perched upon the tree. And when she uttered a wish, the little bird threw down to her what she had wished for” (156). At this tree, she obtains the dresses in which she appears at the ball, the first step in her journey to a new life. Her sentimentality thus proves to have extraordinarily beneficial, if entirely unforeseen, consequences.

Regarding Cinderella’s personal interactions, the Grimms say very little, especially as to her behavior towards her stepsisters, although Cinderella is said to be a pious and prayerful young woman, and she obeys her stepfamily’s orders unconditionally. Certainly, the stepsisters await a more gruesome fate in the Grimm tale. In order to fit into the magical shoe, the one stepsister cuts off her toe and the other her heel, for, as their mother sagely, if pitilessly, tells them, ““When you are Queen you won’t have to walk anymore”” (Grimm 163). At Cinderella’s wedding to the prince, the stepsisters arrive only to have two doves peck out the girls’ eyes: “And so for their wickedness and falseness they were punished with blindness for the rest of their days” (Grimm 165). We can at the very least credit Cinderella for the fact that she is not responsible for their misfortunes.

Perrault’s Cinderella suffers abuse and ridicule at the hands of her stepsisters. However, she serves them patiently and kindly until her marriage to the prince, at which point she has already forgiven them. In a way, Cinderella has now taken up the role of fairy godmother to her sisters. She has now been blessed with power, fortune, and love, and she shares her gifts ungrudgingly. Her only request is that of a fairy godmother

teaching her godchild how to attain virtue: “Cinderella... declaring as she embraced them that she pardoned them with all her heart, bade them to love her well in future” (68).

The heroines of fairy tales often express their pain and suffering through tears. The tears of Cinderella, Snow White, and Rapunzel all have healing or salvific effects. Cinderella, as mentioned above, frequently visits her mother’s grave and cries there, shedding enough tears that the twig her father gave her matures into a tree. This tree provides her with a chance to live and thrive in a new life. Snow White, upon being taken to the forest by her stepmother’s huntsman, begins to weep when she realizes he means to kill her. She begs him to spare her, promising not to return, “[a]nd as she was so lovely the huntsman had pity on her” (Grimm 167). Rapunzel, after the witch banishes her to the wilderness, spends years in “grief and misery” before she finally meets her prince again. When she does find him, thorns have blinded the prince, and he has been weeping and lamenting the loss of his beloved as well. Rapunzel’s tears fall on his eyes and immediately restore his sight, something his own tears had never succeeded in doing. The tears of these three women are representative of the deep emotional connection and sharing of feminine love.

Each of these fairy tales involves suffering that the heroine must endure. She overcomes these travails not because she stoically resists sorrow and anguish, but indeed because she accepts the natural feelings that her trials evoke. Alice von Hildebrand writes that while “Usually women grieve more than men... women – more than men – grasp intuitively the meaning and value of suffering” (40-41). While this reality may not seem very heroic, it is a testament to the lives of virtuous women (and men) throughout

time. It is not often that one is confronted with an actual battle to be fought. Rather, Christ asks each of His disciples to “take up his cross every day” (Lk 9:23).

We can clearly see suffering in the life of the Mother of God, who watched her own Son endure torture and crucifixion. John Paul II sees in Mary’s suffering a reflection of the sufferings of every woman: “As we contemplate this Mother, whose heart “a sword has pierced” (cf. Lk 2:35), our thoughts go to all the suffering women in the world, suffering either physically or morally. In this suffering a woman’s sensitivity plays a role, even though she often succeeds in resisting suffering better than a man” (MD 19). The unique capacity of women to open their hearts to others and share the pain of those around them reflects the profound love of God. God, who took our sins and afflictions upon Himself for love of us, teaches us to do the same for one another. In this way suffering can be redemptive, as it first was on the cross.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Weakness and Humility

We come now to the characteristic that is hardest to accept and understand: weakness. “‘Weak’ can refer to what is fragile, delicate, breakable, vulnerable, sensitive. Women are more vulnerable than men and this vulnerability can render them helpless and irritable. They are usually less capable than men to fend for themselves...” (von Hildebrand 36). At the same time, states von Hildebrand, “Women are more geared to piety because they have a keener awareness of their weakness. This is their true strength” (66). As it is more difficult for the rich to enter heaven (Lk 18:24-25), does it not also make sense that it may be more difficult for one who is strong and powerful to enter the kingdom of heaven? Certainly there is a temptation for one who is strong to feel self-sufficient, when in reality all of his/her power is a gift from God. An understanding and acceptance of our dependence upon God is critical in developing Christian humility. Additionally, “... the ‘weakness’ of the female sex, as far as accomplishments and productivity are concerned, can be more than compensated by her moral strength when she lives up to her calling. That is, when she loves...” (von Hildebrand 28-29). Due to the effects of original sin, however, love and humility are not properly considered. Instead, success, power, and glory are prized above all else: “The denigration of women is clearly a sad consequence of original sin *which has subverted the hierarchy of values...* The hierarchy of values being upset, *male accomplishments became overvalued*. Physical strength became glorified and weakness was looked down upon as a proof of inferiority” (von Hildebrand 21, 24).

In this respect, women are unique beacons for all of mankind. Both men and women are completely dependent on the mercy of God, and any strengths they may have are gifts from God. Human beings are in reality very weak, but women may find it easier to embrace the virtue of humility because they are often physically weaker than men. The weakness of women is also a constant reminder that people have value apart from their abilities, and is therefore a natural safeguard against the temptation to reduce people to the extent of their power and physical ability.

*Fairy Godmother*

*It is surely a great advantage  
To have spirit and courage,  
Good breeding and common sense,  
And other qualities of this sort,  
Which are the gifts of Heaven!  
You will do well to own these;  
But for success, they may well be in vain  
If, as a final gift, one has not  
The blessing of godfather or godmother.  
(Perrault 70)*

The fairy godmother is a prime example of a woman who appears weak but is spiritually strong, mature, and powerful. Women are on average physically weaker than men. This is a natural reminder that strength and power ought never to be considered a universal standard for worth. In addition, every form of strength carries with it a

potential for weakness. One whom God blesses with strength may neglect her other faculties. One whom God blesses with intelligence may be tempted to pride.

All women and men have in themselves aspects of both masculinity and femininity, but it is worthwhile to note that an overtly masculine outlook is pervasive in our utilitarian culture. Joseph Ratzinger explained quite eloquently how such a focus on material success and power can easily become disordered:

Activism, the will to be ‘productive’, ‘relevant’, come what may, is the constant temptation of the man, even of the male religious. And this is precisely the basic trend in the ecclesiologies... that present the Church as a ‘People of God’ committed to action, busily engaged in translating the Gospel into an action program with social, political and cultural objectives. But it is no accident if the word ‘Church’ is of feminine gender. In her, in fact, lives the mystery of motherhood, of gratitude, of contemplation, of beauty, of values in short that appear useless in the eyes of the profane world. Without perhaps being fully conscious of the reasons, the woman religious feels the deep disquiet of living in a Church where Christianity is reduced to an ideology of doing... it is the project of a Church in which there is no longer any room for mystical experience. (Ratzinger 103)

The “ideology of doing,” as he calls it, naturally favors the strong and efficient, but at the cost of “mystical experience.” In the philosophy of efficiency, there is no place for life and love, only for existence and production. It is true that God is Creator, but above all else, God is Love. If human beings forget the value of love on earth, how can we possibly accept the unfathomable Love in Heaven?

The fairy godmother has much in common with the woman religious of whom Ratzinger speaks. One can easily imagine that a fairy godmother is a consecrated spiritual mother, akin to a religious sister in our world. She does not seek to be a hero; in fact, the authors do not even give the fairy godmother a name. Yet without her, the heroine might not find her happy ending and the villain might not be vanquished.

The fairy godmother does not disdain her invisibility. She recognizes the beauty and nobility of her calling, and embraces it out of love for her adopted children. Our instinct, as sinful human beings, is to rebel against the reality of our lowly nature, which “inevitably leads to a denigration of women whose mission traditionally has been to serve – following thereby our Lord who said, ‘I have not come to be served but to serve’” (von Hildebrand 31). In this divine vocation, then, the fairy godmother witnesses to Christ-like humility. If I may misappropriate Edith Stein’s words about the working woman, we will see a striking resemblance between fairy godmothers and Stein’s vision for women in the workforce: “Let her be conscious of where there is a want and where help is needed, intervening and regulating as far as it is possible in her power in a discreet way. Then will she like a good spirit spread blessing everywhere” (49). The fairy godmother appears suddenly, not to fix what is broken, but to lift up those who have fallen and to empower them. She vanishes just as mysteriously, not wishing to draw attention to herself.

Through her humility, the fairy godmother overcomes her natural weakness. In a strange paradox, her acceptance of her own humble nature allows her to accept also the powerful grace God bestows on her. Edith Stein writes, “Christ embodies the ideal of human perfection: in Him all bias and defects are removed, and the masculine and feminine virtues are united and their weaknesses redeemed; therefore, His true followers will be progressively exalted over their natural limitations” (84). The fairy godmother, like all holy men and women, finds strength in God. For most people, this divine strength is a strength of will or of love, but for the fairy godmother this strength includes miraculous powers.

Cinderella's fairy godmother appears to her and gives her what she requires to go to the ball. The Sleeping Beauty's fairy godmother speaks up to mitigate the curse, only to fade away again. Characteristic of a mother, she spends her life in caring for others. She asks not for praise or recognition, often bearing the indignity of being reduced (in the eyes of strangers) to her relationship to her children. Her responsibility is to equip and prepare her children well before sending them on life's journey with her prayers.

### *Villain*

'Queen, you are full fair, 'tis true,

But Snow-White fairer is than you.'

*This gave the Queen a great shock, and she became yellow and green with envy, and from that hour her heart turned against Snow-White and she hated her. And envy and pride like ill weeds grew higher in her heart every day until she had no peace day or night.*

*(Grimm 167)*

Pope John Paul II stated in his apostolic letter *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women*, "The matrimonial union requires respect for and a perfecting of the true personal subjectivity of both of them. The woman cannot become the 'object' of 'domination' and male 'possession'" (MD 10). He was speaking specifically about the relationship of marriage, but his words hold true for any relationship – indeed, any interaction – between two human beings. Domination and objectification have no place in a relationship based on love.

While in the previous chapter we discussed the perversion of the feminine nature, as evidenced in these fairy tales, there is a certain sense in which the villain seems also to reject her femininity and to reach towards the opposite extreme, the perversion of masculinity. She craves power. Not only that, she misuses her power to achieve her own ends. She is also extraordinarily prideful. In doing all of this, the woman refuses to acknowledge and value her femininity. Her inability to accept her own weaknesses and failings means that she is also unable to properly utilize her strengths and power as a woman – her genius goes unrealized. Her overarching vice is ultimately a lack of humility.

The villain's lack of humility is a tragic consequence of a pervasive utilitarian mindset. The only things seen to be of any value are power, success, and being "the best." This perspective contributes to a view of reality in which life is a competition, which naturally favors the powerful. In such a setting, is it any wonder that a woman may be deceived into thinking that her femininity, her identity as one of "the weak sex," is wrong and must be disposed of as worth less... or indeed worthless?

The villain in these stories is the antithesis of the fairy godmother. Rather than embrace her femininity and the weaknesses and strengths that go along with it, she strikes out with selfish ambition to become the most powerful, the most beautiful, the most loved, etc. "Power, riches, fame, success, and dominance are idolized; humility, chastity, modesty, self-sacrifice, and service are looked down upon as signs of weakness..." (von Hildebrand 23). The villain takes this to heart, seeking above all else power over others. However, as von Hildebrand reminds us, a desire for power is at best misguided, and at worst entirely incompatible with Christianity: "there can be no reconciliation between an

ideology that advocates power and success and the one whose core demonstrates that the way to God is the humble acceptance of one's helplessness" (32). At the same time, one should be cautious not to devalue masculinity in the process of uplifting femininity. The feminine is the necessary complement to the masculine, and vice versa. The villains are not living out masculinity either; if anything, their lives are indicative of both the rejection of femininity and the overprizing – that is, a perversion – of masculinity.

Snow White's stepmother cannot stand having a rival of any kind, and so tries time and again to kill her stepdaughter. To do so, she deviously disguises herself as a mild old woman offering seemingly harmless items (Grimm 171-174). In a cruel parody of a fairy godmother, the stepmother takes advantage of the trust that a poor old woman would inspire in a young, motherless girl far from home. The witch in "Rapunzel" grasps at control, to the point of locking her adopted daughter away from the world (131). Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters likewise exercise their power over Cinderella cruelly, and the evil fairy of Sleeping Beauty's story misuses her powerful magic to oppress others (155-157, 102). Each of these women does gain power for a time, but she makes a grave mistake in placing all of her hopes in her power. All of the villains are defeated because they, like all human beings, have finite power. In abusing their power to gain even more control, they forget that they are not in fact what they pretend to be: almighty. When their power is overcome, they are left with nothing.

The villain here is not evil because she is weak or a woman. She is evil because she believes that her weakness and her womanhood are wrong. In this sense, she is herself a victim, having fallen prey to the ideals of a fallen world that devalues her womanhood. Cardinal Ratzinger states, "It is precisely woman who most harshly suffers

the consequences of the confusion, of the superficiality of a culture that is the fruit of masculine attitudes of mind, masculine ideologies, which deceive woman, uproot her in the depths of her being, while claiming that in reality they want to liberate her”

(Ratzinger 93-94). Similarly, von Hildebrand writes:

As women are weaker than men, and as they do not bask in the limelight as much as men do, as they are less ‘creative’ than the strong sex, they are bound to be the victims of this distorted hierarchy of values. That women have been victimized by this distortion of the hierarchy of values is deplorable and sad indeed; *but that feminists have endorsed this inversion is still more pitiful* (26).

While it is my personal belief that von Hildebrand paints feminists with a rather unfairly broad brush, her assertion that our widespread social “hierarchy of values” is distorted rings all too true. Rather than focusing solely on how women ought to have more power, would it not be healthy, as Christians and as human beings concerned for the welfare of our brothers and sisters in humanity, to consider also what can be learned and imitated from the feminine nature?

### *Heroine*

*[T]he girl was obliged to do hard work from morning till night, to get up at daybreak, carry water, light the fire, cook, and wash. Not content with that, the sisters inflicted on her every vexation they could think of. They made fun of her, and tossed the peas and lentils among the ashes, so that she had to sit down and pick them out again. In the evening, when she was worn out with work, she had no bed to go to but had to lie on the hearth among the cinders.*

*(Grimm 155-156)*

In contrast to the villain, the heroine patiently accepts her state in life with hope and trust, without resigning herself to her fate. She hopes for a better life, but she does not consider herself owed anything, thereby modeling the perfect Christian attitude. She finds a paradoxical strength in her humble acceptance of weakness: “Humility is not servility, not a readiness to be walked on, not a hatred of self, not psychological self-contempt, not a desire to be placed at a disadvantage. Humility is the virtue that tells us the *truth about ourselves*, that is, how we stand, not in the eyes of men, but before God” (Sheen 42). Cinderella prayed three times a day at the tree on her mother’s grave. Snow White, even as she escaped her stepmother’s wrath and took refuge in the house of strangers, “committed herself to heaven” before sleeping. The heroine’s patience and humility are actually what make her the heroine. This is not a reflection of a woman’s “place” or a rationale for submission to men; rather, the heroine in these fairy tales is, as Pope John Paul II understood, an archetype for humanity: “To be conscious of one’s weakness and to trust in God’s help is the way to authentic strength and victory” (von Hildebrand 42). We all must embrace our weakness before God, for only then can we properly accept His mercy.

Throughout salvation history, God has chosen those who seem least equipped to bring about His plans. Moses, despite his speech impediment, became a great leader, ushering the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. Ruth was a widow and a stranger in Israel who became an ancestor of King David. David himself was only a young shepherd – and his father’s eighth son – yet God chose him to be the next king of Israel. Saint Peter was a poor and impulsive fisherman, and yet Christ chose him to lead His Church. In choosing such people, God manifests His glory and mercy much more than if His

heroes had been strong and powerful. Before God all human beings are equally lowly, but in the eyes of human beings, it is easier to see the hand of God working through an impossible victory of the weak over the strong.

In fact, if any creature of God may be counted a hero, surely it is the young girl from Nazareth who agreed faithfully and wholeheartedly to be His Mother. And yet, Mary is hardly mentioned in the Bible. Despite being the one through whom God reaches down to save mankind, the one through whom God effects His Incarnation and the salvation of humanity, she is a perfectly humble handmaid, content to serve (Stein 69, 46). Yet her heroism is entirely dependent on her disappearance from view, as Father Marie-Dominique explains in his book *The Mysteries of Mary* (60). We know very little about Mary herself because she always directs devotion and attention away from herself and toward God.

Mary's *fiat*, her humble and affirmative response to the angel's annunciation that she is to be the Mother of God, is an active submission to God's will, an intentional sacrifice of her own expectations on the altar of God's love. "Mary's motherhood is really the model of all other services that God may ask of men" (Philippe 97). This is because her motherhood is in its very essence a living out of love.

Christian love implies service, because it takes as its root and example the love of God. True love is generously self-giving, as John Paul II reiterates time and again, saying: "The model... is God himself as Trinity, as a communion of persons. To say that man is created in the image and likeness of God means that man is called to exist "for" others, to become a gift" (MD 7). The God of heaven and earth has shown us what it means to love, which is to give of oneself totally for others. A complete gift of self is not

easy, and it requires dying to oneself, but ultimately “What characterizes holiness is this limitless readiness to serve others” (von Hildebrand 32). Mary, then, is not humble because she does not have the strength to live for herself. She is humble because she has the wisdom to know that her life is not her own and the strength to live for her Lord: “In the *fiat* of the Annunciation, Mary gives herself to God... God gives Himself in His only Son... This is the new covenant realized in this *fiat* of love. This *fiat* requires perfect docility on Mary’s part” (Philippe 89-90).

In these fairy tales, a similar humility usually takes one of two forms. A character may literally serve others, a particularly trying situation for one who, by all accounts, does not deserve the fate of a servant. At other times, a character may be trapped and helpless, forced to rely on the wit and whims of others. In both of these scenarios, the heroine must cultivate a life of humility, patience, and trust.

Cinderella lives out this service of love in a very literal way. Although she is forced to serve her stepfamily, she does so patiently and uncomplainingly, even kindly (Perrault 58-61). Snow White, after finding a home with the seven dwarves, takes care of them and their home, as they take care of her (Grimm 170). They seem to form a family of sorts in this way.

Rapunzel and the Sleeping Beauty, on the other hand, appear more helpless. They do not ever get the opportunity either to serve others or to refuse to serve. Rapunzel is shut away in a tower and the Sleeping Beauty falls asleep for one hundred years (Grimm 131, 103). Rather than focusing on their inactivity, however, I would like to concentrate on these two women as archetypes of the Christian soul. Despite everything they undergo, from what amounts to psychological torture to a century-long magically induced

coma, Rapunzel and the Sleeping Beauty patiently suffer through their misfortunes.

Physically, but especially spiritually, we too must endure and trust in God as we traverse the “valley of darkness” (Ps 22:4). Hard as it is to accept in an age of such technological advancement, there are some trials that must be suffered through and cannot be avoided or escaped. However, they provide opportunities to grow in trust and humility before God.

Christ Himself modeled perfect humility in accepting His death on the cross. He did not desire to suffer, for suffering only exists as an effect of sin. Nevertheless, He offered Himself for all of humanity in the truest gift of love. Pope John Paul II stressed the link between Christ’s offering on the cross and marriage: “The ‘sincere gift’ contained in the Sacrifice of the Cross gives definitive prominence to the spousal meaning of God’s love” (MD 26). Whenever a person acts in self-giving love, he/she witnesses to Christ’s great sacrifice and love. Nowhere is this clearer than in marriage, when two people vow to lay down their lives for each other every day of their lives together.

Each of our four heroines marry by the end of their stories. This fact makes for a traditional happy ending, but it also points to another way of loving by giving of oneself.

Marriage and family, according to John Paul II, is in fact an image of the Trinity on earth:

The fact that man “created as man and woman” is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created as a “unity of the two” in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life. (MD 7)

Marriage is not a reward for the meek and patient princess, nor a prize for the dashing and courageous prince. Rather, it is the next step in learning how to live and

love generously and to grow in virtue together. In this sense, it would be more correct to see this next stage of her life as an icon of the love of the Holy Trinity, which is an inherently and immeasurably self-giving love. What better model of love and holiness could one have than God Himself?

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

*Consequently, even the rightful opposition of women to what is expressed in the biblical words, “He shall rule over you” (Gen 3:16), must not under any condition lead to the “masculinization” of women. In the name of liberation from male “domination,” women must not appropriate to themselves male characteristics contrary to their own feminine “originality.” There is a well-founded fear that if they take this path, women will not “reach fulfillment,” but instead will deform and lose what constitutes their essential richness. It is indeed an enormous richness.*

*(MD 10)*

Feminine nature – and its intrinsic dignity – cannot be properly understood without reference to motherhood. This truth might sound rather confining and limiting to modern sensibilities. Women and men have spent years advocating for women to be seen as more than wives and mothers. I am certainly not trying to argue that women be seen as “merely” wives and mothers. At the same time, a life devoted to nurturing the lives and souls of fellow human beings must certainly be one of the most honorable and beautiful vocations. What could be more beautiful, or indeed, more important? The wide range of specialized jobs and professions makes it easy to find one’s identity in what one does. Motherhood, while susceptible to its own particular faults, makes abundantly clear both that people are more than their accomplishments, and that every person is lovable, no matter what they have done.

The fairy tales outlined above offer striking examples of women who embrace their motherhood. Although biological mothers make brief appearances (if any) in these tales, the stories nevertheless present three kinds of mother figures. One of the mother figures rejects her maternity, and so becomes the villain. The fairy godmother and the heroine, however, provide two different paths of motherhood. Indeed, to say that all women are mothers is not to say that all women must fit the same mold; there is in fact only one type of villain, but different ways to live out one's motherhood well. When women accept their maternity and make it their own, we see a varied and beautiful array of holy mothers.

The fairy godmother lives out her motherhood when she nurtures the physical and moral life of her godchild, as well as when she facilitates loving relationships in the young woman's life. She spends her life in motherly service, humbly and anonymously providing her goddaughter with the means to mature. Meanwhile, the villain demands power, even power over the life of the heroine, to satisfy her pride and selfishness. The heroine reveals her maternal nature more subtly, but she still exhibits the nurturing, compassionate, and humble traits of motherhood.

Motherhood is an integral aspect of womanhood. In fact, femininity hinges on motherhood. Sadly, the feminine and maternal qualities that mothers contribute to humanity relate to values that human societies often overlook and even undermine. This is not only an assault on femininity and so on women, but also on humanity in general. Women are archetypes of every human being: "Holy women are an incarnation of the feminine ideal; they are also a model for all Christians, ... an example of how the Bride must respond with love to the love of the Bridegroom" (MD 27). To rob humanity of the

unique gifts of women – be they working professionals, stay-at-home mothers, both, or neither – would not only be incredibly unjust, but would also be innately self-defeating. Fortunately, a woman’s motherhood has nothing to do with any particular profession, and so is compatible with any profession and every vocation.

Motherhood comes from God and, like all of Creation, bears within itself an imprint of the divine reality. God loves in a way that encompasses all that human beings can imagine and more, meaning that His love is that of a mother as well as that of a Father. God loves tenderly, compassionately, humbly, and sacrificially. Christians know that God wishes men and women to love as He loves. Men and women must therefore learn from each other in order to love as God loves. Men and women are, in a sense, incomplete without the opposite sex. God does not call everyone to marriage, but He does call everyone to live in community and learn from each other. Women share the feminine genius and men share their corresponding gifts, as witnesses to God’s love. Together, men and women more fully express the love of God than any one person can.

The aspects of motherhood that I have chosen to study, and their incarnations in these fairy tales, do not provide a full picture of the feminine genius, or even of motherhood. The feminine genius manifests itself specifically in woman’s capacity to give life, to foster relationships, and to suffer and serve God humbly, but it is also present in all of the countless beauties of femininity that can never be defined or captured in words at all.

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