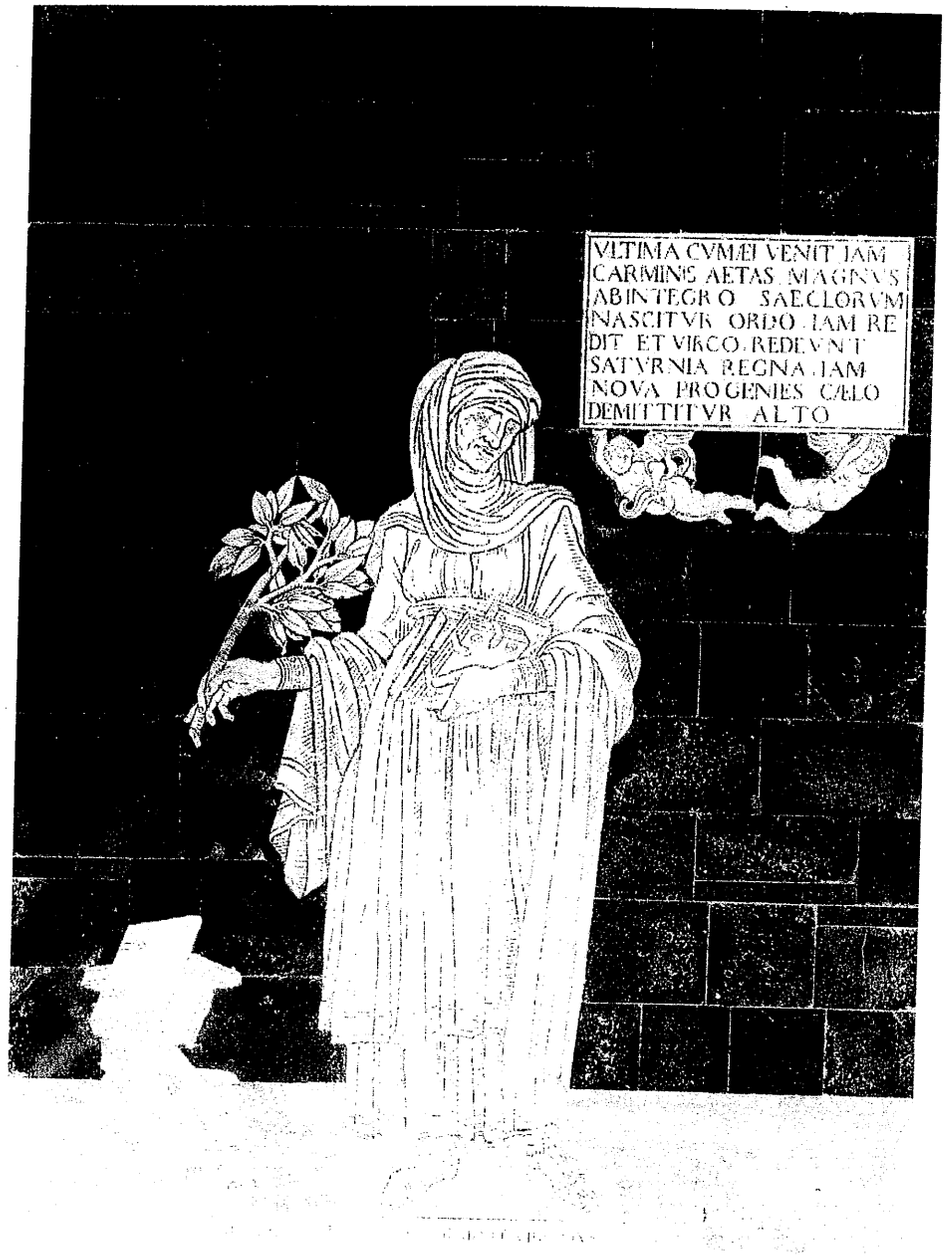


The Sibyl of Cumae was something of a trickster as well as a seer: when Tarquin of Rome would not pay her price for the Sibylline books, she burned three, and then three more. He paid, rather than see the remaining books in her hand join the pyre at her feet. (Giovanni di Stefano, 1482, pavement, Duomo of Siena.)

CHAPTER 1

In the Cave of the Enchantress

For me your love is only pain
I've opened up my eyes
And seen in you, my lady fair,
The devil in disguise.

The Tannhäuser Ballad

When it looked as if Christianity was taking hold in her native Campania in southern Italy, the Sibyl left her labyrinth of caves in Cumae below the temple of Apollo. She had pronounced her oracles there for hundreds of years, but she was now taking to the hills, to make one of the last stands of paganism on the highest ridge of the Apennines, still called the Monti Sibillini in her honour.

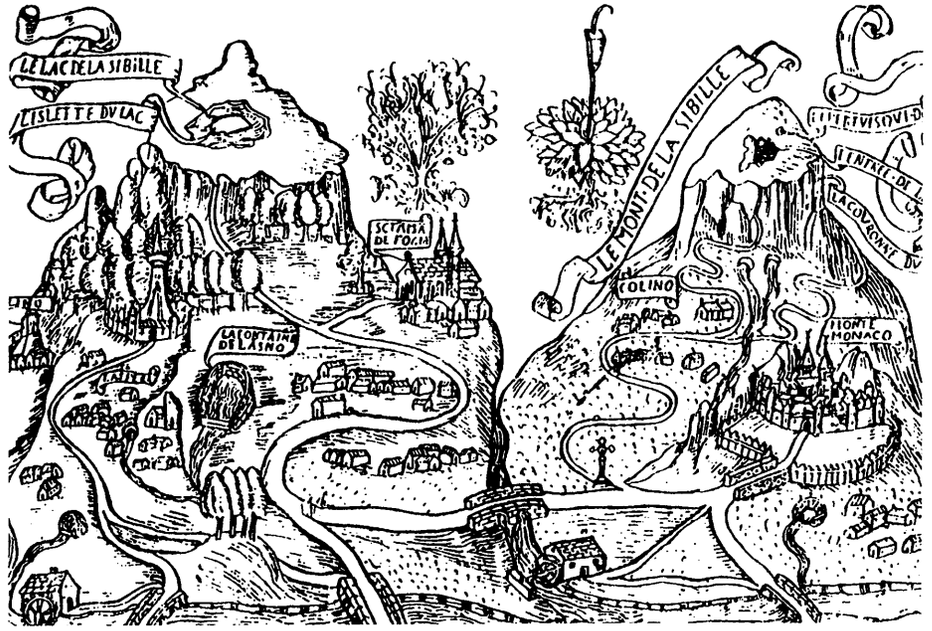
She had shown Aeneas the way down to the pagan underworld in Virgil's epic; she had sold the volumes of Sibylline leaves, her oracles written on palms, to the last king of Rome, Tarquin the Proud, and had proved that she was worldly-wise as well as deep: when he would not pay the price she asked for the nine books, she burned three, and when he still would not pay, she burned another three, and so he found himself outmanoeuvred and had to pay the full price for the last remaining three volumes rather than risk their total destruction. But, with the new faith gaining ground, the oracles' author was obliged to run, to conceal herself in a cave, and practise her forbidden arts there, under the rose. One of these was making up stories, passing on information; giving a picture of what the future might hold for her hearers. In some accounts, she had even invented the first alphabet in the West – but there are one or two other contenders for this title.

The 'Grotta della Sibilla' in the Umbrian mountains is first mentioned in medieval not classical legend: it appears in the chivalric romance *Guerino il Meschino*, written by Andrea da Barberino (also called Andrea dei Magnabotti) in 1391 and subsequently read by the literati, as well as told and retold by professional storytellers, the *cantastorie*. Its eponymous hero, Guerino the Wretch, soon became a byword for Italian cunning and fearlessness: he is an orphan hunting for

his parents in the company of an innkeeper's son; in the course of their wanderings, the two youths reach a mountain pass near Norcia in Umbria, where they meet the Devil. The Devil wants Guerino's soul – what else? – and tempts him with news of a great *fata*, a fairy, an enchantress, called Sibilla, who lives near by, in a subterranean kingdom where every delight will be his. Guerino takes up the new quest eagerly, though he is warned what might lie in store for him when he comes across Macco, a victim of the fairy, at the mouth of the cave; changed by the enchantress into a terrible snake, he has been left there, ordered to keep guard.

The Christian origin of this legend demanded that the two great enemies of the faith in Barberino's day – Jews and heathens – be represented in some sort of conspiracy together. By giving the fairy's victim the name Macco, the author was demonstrating his orthodoxy. For 'Malco' was the Wandering Jew of legend, and the serpentine shape would then reflect the anti-semitism of such Christian legends, just as the fantasies of female magic emanate from the religion's prejudices against all daughters of Eve, 'the Devil's gateway'. In the story, Guerino immediately tramples the snaky Macco underfoot, and passes blithely on. Inside the cave, he finds the *fata*: 'so great was her charm that she would have deceived any human being, and with her sweet words and her lovely greetings, there was courtesy in her beyond measure …' In her subterranean kingdom, trees flower and fruit at the same time, and there is no pain or age or sorrow. She offers to discover the identity of Guerino's lost father if only the hero will yield to her charms, and these are considerable: 'when he was in bed, she laid herself down by his side and showed him her beautiful, white flesh, and her breasts indeed seemed to be made of ivory …' He learns from the fairies in her entourage that she is the learned Cumaean Sibyl, and that she will live until the crack of doom. According to a divergent variation on the legend, she had fled to her present refuge because, after prophesying the birth of the Saviour from a virgin, she had expected to be chosen herself for the task. 'She [had been] so virginal … she thought God would descend into her when he went and took flesh.' To her disgust, the lot had fallen upon Mary instead.

Guerino, a type of folkloric trickster, and a wily survivor, manages to keep his virtue and resist the *fata*, in spite of all the enchanted blandishments and treats with which he is regaled in the cave. Her 'paradise' offers a life of endless feasting, music, fashionable dress, no pain, no hunger, no poverty, no ageing. But he rejects her, and he becomes glad of his strength of mind, for he soon discovers that on Saturdays Sibilla turns into a monster, and her beautiful attendant ladies into other horrible creatures. He learns it when he peeps and sees their deformed



The highest peaks in the Apennines were associated with the defeat of paganism, but seekers after unorthodox wisdom continued to climb to the Sibyl's 'paradise' and join her in her bower of bliss. Antoine de La Sale mapped the hazards of the journey he made in 1420.

nether limbs under their skirts. So he turns on his lover, and rejects her and her fairy kingdom in fury. She protests at this cruelty, invoking the name of Aeneas, recalling how much more courteously she was treated by that great founding father of civilization, a man who surpassed even Guerino in accomplishments, as he had instituted the Roman empire. But Guerino will not be swayed; he is a pattern of Christian virtue, and he manages to make his escape – he goes to Rome and is absolved of his misspent year in the Sibyl's company.

A few years later, in 1420, Antoine de La Sale, tutor to Giovanni di Calabria, the son of Louis III, King of Sicily and Count of Anjou, decided to look into the legend of this Sibyl; he travelled from Norcia, across the wide dry bed of a glacial lake called the Piano Grande, crossed the ridge of the Sibillini beneath the 2500-metre peak of the Monte Vettore, and climbed up to the site of the cave from a shepherd's village on the other side called Montemonaco. He mapped the route he took, and added drawings of the landmarks to the account he produced, '*Le Paradis de la Reine Sibille*', one of the miscellaneous ingredients in his entertaining *La Salade* of 1437–42 (a pun on his name, adopted 'because in a salad one puts many good herbs'). '*Le Paradis*' follows some exempla in the art of good government and passages from Roman history, but it represents a complete change of

'A beautiful woman above, a serpent writhing below': Mélusine taking her Saturday bath is one of many snaky or otherwise monstrous enchantresses of legend, whose human lovers discover their magical deception just in time. (Frontispiece to F. Nodot, Mélusine *Paris, 1697.)*

register, as Antoine is writing a form of travel autobiography, about a journey he had made himself twenty years before. He mentions local flora, for instance, used in cooking and medicine, but he continually shrugs off responsibility by referring to his sources: 'the old chatter of the common people'. He was gathering local accounts about those who had made the long, difficult journey to the Sibyl's lake in the crater on one peak, and to the Sibyl's cave on the other, to dedicate their *grimoires*, or books of spells, and consult the enchantress in her grotto, and he warns that permission to visit it has to be given by the villagers and their lords because storms rose and damaged the harvest when pagan necromancers, intent on improving their diabolical arts, made the pilgrimage to the grotto. The villagers would capture such visitors and deal with them summarily – a bad priest and his companion had been torn to pieces, La Sale reports, and thrown into the lake quite recently. He himself did not dare journey any further than the opening of the cave, but he dwells stirringly on the perils en route – the narrowness of the path, the dizziness he felt, the rampart of stone 'three lances high' which had to be crossed by one of two tracks you had to dismount to negotiate. 'And I assure you that the better of these two pathways is enough to put fear into the heart of someone who would not be afeared of any mortal fear …' Antoine de La Sale did not stint on the storyteller's hyperbole, though it may be true that the summit is indeed so high that on a clear day the sea is visible on both sides of Italy – the Sibyl's refuge was situated on a magic apex.

La Sale found the entrance, shaped like 'a pointed shield', and crawled through it on all fours to enter a small square chamber, lit by a hole above, with seats carved into the rock on all sides. He did not dare scramble in deeper, but remained content to describe what his informants told him: the corridor running deep into the mountain, which led to polished doors of metal, opening on to the inner labyrinth, the doors of crystal that followed, the great wind 'very horrid and marvellous' which howled up from the lower regions, the narrow bridge over a torrent after that, and the two dragons breathing fire at the end. The names of lost knights, who had ventured in and never returned, were carved in the rocks on either side of the grotto's mouth. The writer in La Sale inspired him to copy them down, and he added his own.

Antoine de La Sale stands as a precursor of a Rider Haggard hero or an Indiana Jones, the type of intrepid explorer relying on hearsay to advance into dread, unknown adventures. He was accompanied by a local doctor and other inhabitants of Montemonaco, and on the mountain they heard 'a loud voice crying as if it were the cry of a peacock which seemed very far away'. The others told him it was the voice of the Sibyl's paradise, but, La Sale adds scathingly, 'as for myself, I don't believe a word of it'. It was the neighing of the horses, he asserted, which they had left below, before the last leg of the climb.

The early humanist tradition, of which La Sale forms a part, gave the legend of the Sibyl of the Apennines the character of a secular romance, and as such it becomes enriched and entangled with folklore about fairy seductresses: the winged siren Mélusine from the French medieval romance, the deceiving Lamia and the witch Alcina in the chivalrous cycle of Roland stories also turn into monsters unbeknownst to the heroes until it is – almost – too late. These tales have multiple forebears, in classical mythology (the *Odyssey* – Calypso, Circe) as well

as Celtic faery lore, for the Sibyl's secret paradise resembles in many ways the kingdom of Tir-na-nog, the isle of perpetual youth in Irish myth. The tale of Guerino the Wretch becomes, in La Sale's telling, a jaunty love story, about a German knight who finally reaches the Sibyl's kingdom across all those perils inside the mountain and enters there a garden of earthly delights, thronged with beautiful young men and women in exquisite clothes, drinking and dancing and dallying with grace, and speaking every language with ease, and passing on instantly all their accomplishments, so that after only nine days any new arrival finds his tongue loosed as well. But then, alas, peeping at his beloved at midnight one Friday, when, as is her custom, she has shut herself away, this knight discovers, like the worthy and chaste Guerino, that she is really an illusion, and 'all her ladies in the state of snakes and serpents all together'. The Sibyl's paradise is nothing but a trick of the Devil, its sweets poison.

The German knight realizes that he must set himself free, and at last, after 330 days – the final term beyond which all escape is impossible (La Sale's hero does not cut short his time of bliss) – he manages to leave the accursed mountain, and travel to Rome to see the pope and obtain his forgiveness for his great season in Hell. But in this version, the pope refuses, and the knight goes back to rejoin his lady the Sibyl – having usefully told his story to the world outside – to live in bliss for ever more (except on Saturdays).

Clive Bell, in a sprightly nursery rendition of 1923, thought the story preached excellent epicureanism, just the message that was needed:

> ... tons of may-be bliss don't measure
> One ounce of certain, solid pleasure.

And he concludes, addressing the errant knight:

> In my opinion, you did well
> To live for love, though love is hell.

Antoine de La Sale's princely pupil was only ten years old when *La Salade* was written for him, to celebrate his recent marriage – the arranged unions so central to fairy tale's concerns. La Sale himself, born around 1388, a Provençal by birth, had taken up writing late in life after decades as a soldier and a courtier in the Angevin household; he was in his fifties when he was tossing his *Salade*, a ripe age for the period. He tells his young charge that he has set the story down 'to laugh and pass the time, and I am sending it to you so that ... one day ... you might go there to amuse yourself, and I promise you that the queen and all those ladies will give you a great welcome and feast you in very great joy'. In the fifteenth century, men had a different idea about the education of young princes than we might expect.

La Sale tells tales with relish – and a touch of mischief. In the case of the story of the Sibyl, he wants to have it both ways, and so he too makes several bows to orthodoxy, delivering himself finally of a ringing palinode in which he denounces the woman and all her works, accusing her of being a false prophet, even in terms of classical legend; Christ's death had brought all pagan devilry to an end. Significantly, he does not relate the Sibyl's prophecy of Christ's birth from a virgin: the idea that the pagan and the Christian could overlap in truth-telling in this way perhaps struck too risky a note.

The legends Antoine de La Sale collected appeared in different forms elsewhere: Fazio degli Uberti (*d.* 1367) had written a poem about Simon Magus, in which the wizard travels to the area to dedicate his *grimoire* to the pagan oracle; Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (*d.* 1464), who became Pope Pius II, first identified Sibilla with the goddess of love, Venus herself. This was an appropriate move, perhaps, for him to make, as he had enshrined a Roman sculpture of the Three Graces in the centre of his private chapel in the Duomo of Siena. The reputation of the Sibylline peak combined erotic fantasy and pagan magic in a witch's brew, and it exercised a potent fascination, as a story and as a place. The poet Leandro Alberti, writing in 1550, mentioned that he had been told the story by women when he was a child: it was circulating in high and low forms, literary and oral, learned and popular. Around the same time, the Inquisition obtained a confession of witchcraft from Zuan delle Piatte, who described a journey to the Sibyl's mountain, where he renounced his faith and met 'Donna Venus' and many of her victims, sleeping an enchanted sleep in the cave. Among them was Tannhäuser, and indeed, the legend is principally known to modern audiences through Wagner's interpretation. Inspired by broadsheet *Lieder* accounts of the German knight's attempt to enter the earthly paradise ('I've ... seen in you, my lady fair, a devil in disguise!'), Wagner used the variant name, the Venusberg, for the mountain stronghold of diabolical passion, reinterpreting it in *Tannhäuser* to convey his own torments about love and lust.

The cave can no longer be entered; a combination of circumstances has destroyed access to the chthonic world of the legends. In 1497, Rome was already threatening excommunication to any profane pilgrims to the area, and in the early

The Sibyl of Cumae's ruses were not successful with Apollo, god of prophecy. When he fell in love with her, she asked for a long life; he granted her wish, but as she still spurned him, he did not remind her to ask for eternal youth as well. (Salvator Rosa, River Landscape with Apollo and the Cumaean Sibyl, *c. 1655, detail.)*

seventeenth century, it seems, the authorities had ordered that it be filled up to prevent the growing number of pilgrims, and sentries posted at the approaches. They were coming, it was said, in great numbers to dedicate their *grimoires,* consult the Sibyl and increase their powers. In 1898, a mountaineering journal reported that the grotto had been dynamited to prevent wizards from escaping. The word for an inhabitant of Norcia – *norcino* or *nursino* – actually became synonymous in Italian with 'necromancer', and still is.

In Ovid, the Cumaean Sibyl tells Aeneas that Phoebus Apollo had fallen in love with her and offered her anything she wanted if she would only sleep with him – she then asked for as many 'birthdays as there were grains of dust' in a heap she scooped together in her hands. But she had forgotten to ask for eternal youth as well. Apollo had reminded her, but she still 'scorned him'. When she meets Aeneas, she tells him she will 'shrink from her present fine stature into a tiny creature … shrivelled with age', and that, eventually, her outer form will disintegrate altogether. Then she concludes, 'But still, the fates will leave me my voice, and by my voice I shall be known.'

In the *Satyricon* by Petronius, written more than a thousand years before La Sale's account, Trimalchio claims that he has seen the Sibyl herself in her cave, so shrivelled with age that she was no bigger than a bat; she was hanging in a bottle, he says, from the roof, moaning that the only thing she wanted was to die. But another traveller reports that he had seen her tomb, at Delphi, inscribed with the epitaph:

> I Sibylla, Phoibos's wise woman,
> am hidden under a stone monument:
> I was a speaking virgin but voiceless
> in this manacle by the strength of fate.
> I lie close to the Nymphs and to Hermes:
> I have not lost my sovereignty.

These words capture the paradox of the Sibyl of myth: she is exiled, even abandoned, her voice is muffled, even muted. Yet from inside the 'manacle' of the monument, she goes on speaking.

The voiceless who voice their 'sovereignty' against the odds are by no means always female. But the blocked-up cave is unblocked in the imaginary world of her story, by the memory of her presence inside, the fantasy of her magic and knowledge. The cave represents a pleasure dome, a dream of longliving gaiety and delight – and it is the creation of a figure who is both a teller of tales (the Sibyl, the prophet), and the protagonist of the multiple legends she inspires. The negative value attached to her kingdom never quite convinces: it remains at the same time a garden of earthly delights, a paradise indeed, which its visitors, its reporters, serve. In this sense, the Cumaean Sibilla, taking refuge in the mountains, bodies forth the sheer value of entertainment, as Antoine de La Sale was well aware. That his cautions would fall on deaf ears, he also knew. Fairy tales often claim the moral ground, but their spellbinding power lies with the enchantresses and giants, the magic, the wonders, the mishaps and the good fortune they relate.

Stories often described as fairy tales, be they told in the Caribbean, Scotland or France, can flow with the irrepressible energy of interdicted narrative and opinion among groups of people who have been muffled in the dominant, learned milieux. The Sibyl, as the figure of a storyteller, bridges divisions in history as well as hierarchies of class. She offers the suggestion that sympathies can cross from different places and languages, different peoples of varied status. She also represents an imagined cultural survival from one era of belief to another: Sibilla exists as a Christian fantasy about a pagan presence from the past, and as such she fulfils a certain function in thinking about forbidden, forgotten, buried, even secret matters.

'By my voice I shall be known': it is no bad epitaph for a storyteller.

CHAPTER 2

The Old Wives' Tale: Gossips I

Women
Rabbit rabbit rabbit women
Tattle and titter
Women prattle
Women waffle and witter

Men Talk. Men Talk ...

Women gossip Women giggle
Women niggle-niggle-niggle
Men Talk ...

Liz Lochhead

In *The Old Wives' Tale*, a play by George Peele of around 1590, Xantippa, who is fair of face but evil-tongued, goes to the well to draw up the water of life, and finds a severed head rising from the water instead. It chants to her:

Faire maiden, white and red
Stroke me smoothe and combe my head,
And thou shalt have some cockell bread.

But she is not called Xantippa after Socrates' proverbial shrew of a wife without good reason; she believes that words count: 'A woman without a tongue/Is as a souldier without his weapon ... '. She wields her weapon, and as she lays into the wheedling head with her curses, she breaks her jug over it. A bolt of lightning, a clap of thunder, and a monster husband appears to claim her. As he is deaf as a post, her tongue will struggle against him in vain.

Her sister Celanta follows her to the well; she is foul of face, but sweet-natured, and so she responds kindly when the head comes up and asks her:

Gently dippe but not too deepe,
For feare thou make the goulden beard to weep.
Faire maide, white and redde,
Combe me smoothe, and stroke my head;
And every haire a sheave shall be,
And every sheave a goulden tree.

She takes up the invitation without flinching, does as she is told, combs the head smooth and strokes it, and finds corn and gold fall into her lap. When a husband appears to carry her off in turn, he turns out to be blind, so is said to be able to put up with a fright for a wife.

George Peele included the folk tale known as 'Three Heads in a Well' in a blithe farrago of a play in which he mixed all kinds of materials – classical myth, nonsense verse, fairy stories, literary allusions, pantomimic double entendres (as above) and local superstitions. When he called his comedy *The Old Wives' Tale*, he provided possibly the earliest instance of the phrase used in a title. In the framing plot, an old 'Gammer' unfolds the story. Gammer meant Granny, the pair of Gaffer, and both words carried strong connotations of chattiness; a certain Dame Chat, indeed, another garrulous old character, also appears in another farcical fairytale play of the time, *Gammer Gurton's Needle* by William Stevenson. These

OPPOSITE Eloquence – and gold – are the rewards for special kindnesses: when the heroine does not flinch at grooming three heads in a well, gold and jewels fall from their hair and her lips. (H. J. Ford's illustration to 'Bushy Bride', Andrew Lang's variation, 1890.)

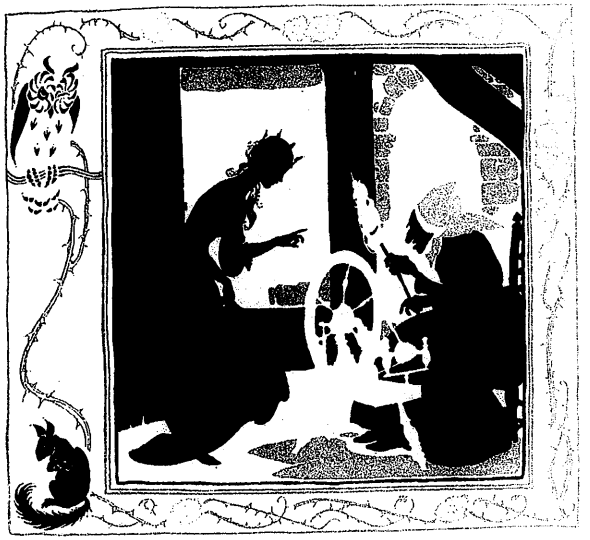
are the Old Wives of the Tales as recounted by their parodists.

Peele's play marks a moment in England when such a tale or tales turn into drama, when oral fairy tales become fixed in print as popular entertainment. The flavour of his drama, its combination of the magical, fantastic and patently ridiculous, catches the precarious value of the old wives' tale, poised between wisdom and folly. Similarly, in France, at the end of the seventeenth century, when the literary fairy tale emerges in print for the first time, commentators connected old women with fantastic tale-telling; the Abbé Fénelon, for instance, imagines Achilles saying to Homer, 'The *Odyssey*'s just a heap of old wives' tales.' Both the English poet's and the French priest's concern with women's tongues point to an issue that beats at the heart of the fairytale genre and its development as a moralizing and socializing instrument in the lives of girls – and boys.

Plato in the *Gorgias* referred disparagingly to the kind of tale – *mythos graos*, the old wives' tale – told by nurses to amuse and frighten children. This is possibly the earliest reference to the genre. When the boys and girls of Athens were about to embark for Crete, to be sacrificed to the Minotaur, old women are described coming down to the port to tell them stories, to distract them from their grief. In *The Golden Ass*, Charite, a young bride, is captured by bandits, forcibly separated from her husband and thrown into a cave; there, a disreputable old woman, drunken and white-haired, tells her the story of Psyche's troubles before she reaches happiness and marriage with Cupid: 'The old woman sighed sympathetically. "My pretty dear," she said, " ... let me tell you a fairy tale or two to make you feel a little better." ' The picture of another's ordeals will console Charite and distract her from her own distress. William Adlington published his exuberant translation of 'sondrie pleasaunt and delectable Tales, with an excellent Narration of the Marriage of Cupide and Psiches ...' in 1566; it is most improbable that a writer like George Peele would not have known this earliest recognizable predecessor of 'Cinderella' and 'Beauty and the Beast'.

In Latin, the phrase Apuleius uses is literally 'an old wives' tale' (*anilis fabula*); the type of comic romance to which 'Cupid and Psyche' belongs was termed 'Milesian', after Aristides of Miletus, who had compiled a collection of such stories in the second century AD; these were translated into Latin, but are now known only through later retellings. The connection of old women's speech and the consolatory, erotic, often fanciful fable appears deeply intertwined in language itself, and with women's speaking roles, as the etymology of 'fairy' illuminates.

The word 'fairy' in the Romance languages indicates a meaning of the wonder or fairy tale, for it goes back to a Latin feminine word, *fata*, a rare variant of *fatum*



Like the fates who spin the future, fairies see the life to come; their words are magic, their spells are binding: the fairies' prophecies at the princess's christening are fulfilled when she pricks her finger on a spindle and falls into a thousand-year sleep. (Arthur Rackham, 'The Sleeping Beauty', 1920.)

(fate) which refers to a goddess of destiny. The fairies resemble goddesses of this kind, for they too know the course of fate. *Fatum*, literally, that which is spoken, the past participle of the verb *fari*, to speak, gives French *fée*, Italian *fata*, Spanish *hada*, all meaning 'fairy', and enclosing connotations of fate; fairies share with Sibyls knowledge of the future and the past, and in the stories which feature them, both types of figure foretell events to come, and give warnings.

Isidore of Seville (*d.* 636), in the *Etymologies*, gives a famous, sceptical definition of the pagan idea of fate and the Fates: 'They say that fate is whatever the gods declare, whatever Jupiter declares. Thus they say that fate derives from *fando*, that is, from speaking ... The fiction is that there are three Fates, who spin a woollen thread on a distaff, on a spindle, and with their fingers, on account of the threefold nature of time: the past, which is already spun and wound onto the spindle; the present, which is drawn between the spinner's fingers; and the future, which lies in the wool twined on the distaff, and which must still be drawn out by the fingers of the spinner onto the spindle, as the present is drawn to the past.' These classical Fates metamorphose into the fairies of the stories, where they continue their fateful and prophetic roles. But fairy tales themselves also fulfil this function, quite apart from the fairies who may or may not make an appearance: 'Bluebeard' or 'Beauty and the Beast' act to caution listeners, as well as light their path to the future.

Although they do not have the same root, 'fairy' has come under strong semantic influence from 'fay' and 'fair', both of which may be derived ultimately from

The storyteller of imagination inherits the fates' role, spinning possible versions of the future: in the second-century novel The Golden Ass, *a disreputable old woman tries to console the weeping bride Charite, kidnapped by bandits on her wedding day, by telling her a love story with a happy ending. (Agostino Veneziano, after Michel Coxie, c. 1530.)*

the Middle English *'feyen'*, Anglo-Saxon *'fegan'*, meaning to agree, to fit, to suit, to join, to unite, to bind. Thus the desirable has the power to inspire – even compel – agreement, as well as to bind. Binding is one of the properties of decrees, and of spells. Interestingly, this root also gives 'fee', as in payment, for transferrals of money too arise from agreed bonds, as a response to a desire, a need.

Although the ultimate origin, in time and place, of a fairy tale can never really be pinned down, we do sometimes know the teller of an old tale in one particular variation, we can sometimes identify the circle of listeners at a certain time and place. The collectors of the nineteenth century occasionally recorded the name of their sources when they took down the story, though they were not as interested in them as historians would be now. One salient aspect of the transmission of fairy tales has not been looked at closely: the female character of the storyteller.

Italo Calvino, in his 1956 collection of Italian *Fiabe*, or Tales, the Italian answer to the Grimms, drew attention to this aspect of the tradition, noticing that several of the nineteenth-century folklore anthologies he drew on and adapted cited female sources. Agatuzza Messia, the nurse of the Sicilian scholar and collector of tales Giuseppe Pitré, became a seamstress, and, later, a quilt-maker in a section of Palermo: 'A mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, as a little girl, she heard stories from her grandmother, whose own mother had told them having herself heard countless stories from one of her grandfathers. She had a good memory so never forgot them.' The *Kalevala*, the national poem of Finland, was collected from different oral sources and reshaped by Elias Lönnrot in the mid-nineteenth century in the form in which it is read today; Sibelius, who would compose many pieces inspired by the *Kalevala*'s heroes and heroines, heard the epic in part direct from Larin Paraske, a woman bard, who held eleven thousand lines of such folk material in her head. Karel Čapek, the utopian Czech writer most famous for his satire *RUR* (which introduced the concept of Robots), wrote an acute essay about fairy tale in 1931, in which he decided:

> A fairy story cannot be defined by its motif and subject-matter, but by its origin and function ... A true folk fairy tale does not originate in being taken down by the collector of folklore but in being told by a grandmother to her grandchildren, or by one member of the Yoruba tribe to other members of the Yoruba tribe, or by a professional storyteller to his audience in an Arab coffee-house. A real fairy tale, a fairy tale in its true function, is a tale within a circle of listeners ...

He himself remembered his mother and his grandmother telling him stories – they were both millers' daughters, as if they had stepped out of a fairy tale. The *traditio* does literally pass on, as the word suggests, between the generations, and the predominant pattern reveals older women of a lower status handing on the material to younger people, who include boys, sometimes, if not often, of higher position and expectations, like future ethnographers and writers of tales.

So although male writers and collectors have dominated the production and dissemination of popular wonder tales, they often pass on women's stories from intimate or domestic milieux; their tale-spinners often figure as so many Scheherazades, using narrative to bring about a resolution of satisfaction and justice. Marguerite de Navarre, in the *Heptaméron*, gives the stories to ten speakers, five of whom are women: they too, like the narrator of *The Arabian Nights*, put their own case, veiled in entertaining and occasionally licentious fantasy. Boccaccio, and his admirer and emulator (to some degree) Chaucer, voiced the stories of women, and some contain folk material which makes a strong showing in later fairy stories; the Venetian Giovan Francesco Straparola (the 'Babbler') reported the stories told by a circle of ladies in his entertaining and sometimes scabrous fantasies, filled with fairytale motifs and improbabilities, called *Le piacevoli notti* (The Pleasant Nights), published in 1550; the Neapolitan Giambattista Basile, in *Lo cunto de li cunti* (The Tale of Tales), also known as *Il Pentamerone* (The Pentameron), published posthumously in 1634–6, featured a group of wizened and misshapen old crones as his sources.

The women who inaugurated the fashion for the written fairy tale, in Paris at the end of the seventeenth century, consistently claimed they had heard the stories they were retelling from nurses and servants. Mme de Sévigné, writing to her daughter, revealingly reported a metaphor borrowed from the kitchen to describe the new enthusiasm: '*cela s'appelle les [contes]* mitonner. *Elle nous* mitonna *donc, et nous parla d'une île verte, où l'on élevait une princesse plus belle que le jour*' (it's called simmering them [tales]; so she simmered for us, and talked to us about a green isle where a princess grew up who was more beautiful than the day).

Charles Perrault's collection of 1697 bore the alternative title of *Contes de ma Mère l'Oye* (Mother Goose Tales); in an earlier preface, to the tale '*Peau d'Ane*' (Donkeyskin), Perrault also placed his work in the tradition of Milesian bawdy, like the tale of 'Cupid and Psyche', but he added that he was passing on 'an entirely made up story and an old wives' tale', such as had been told to children since time immemorial by their nurses. While referring to a written canon, he thus disengaged himself from its élite character to invoke old women, grandmothers and governesses as his true predecessors. He was quick to add, however, that unlike the moral of 'Cupid and Psyche' ('*impénétrable*'), his own was patently clear, which made it far superior to its classical predecessors:

> These Milesian fables are so puerile that it is doing them rather an honour to set up against them our own Donkeyskin tales and Mother Goose tales, or [they are]so filled with dirt, like *The Golden Ass* of Lucian or Apuleius ... that they do not merit that we should pay them attention.

Perrault may have had his tongue in his cheek when he protested that 'Donkeyskin', a tale of father–daughter incest, was morally impeccable. But a contemporary pedant, the Abbé de Villiers, took his argument at face value, and rounded in outrage on Perrault and the writers of fairy tales, penning a pamphlet against the genre, 'As a preventive measure against bad taste.' There he lumped women and children together as the perpetrators of the new fad: 'Ignorant and foolish, they have filled the world with so many collections, so many little stories, and in short with these reams of fairy tales which have been the death of us for the last year or so.' The diminutive form of the nouns (*sornettes*, *bagatelles*, *historiettes*) recurs in the rhetoric of detractors and supporters alike; the former branding fairy stories as infantile, the latter praising them as childlike. This tension between opposing perceptions of the child informs the development of the tales and continues to do so.

Villiers sets up an imaginary debate between a fashionable Parisian and a sensible visitor from the provinces. The provincial calls them *sottises imprimées* (follies in print) and compares them derogatorily to fables, scorning them as 'Tales to make you fall asleep on your feet, that nurses have made up to entertain children'. The Parisian counters that nurses have to be highly skilled to tell them. To which the provincial retorts that if such tales ever contained a coherent moral purpose, they would not be considered in the first place 'the lot of ignorant folk and women'. The battle was joined, over the value of fairy tales; their female origin was not really contested.

Villiers's Parisian was putting forward the views of poets and literati like Mlle Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier de Villandon (p. xv) (1664–1734), a cousin and close friend of Perrault, who defended the form with fighting spirit precisely because it conveyed the ancient, pure wisdom of the people from the fountainhead – old women, nurses, governesses. In her preface to the story '*Marmoisan, ou l'innocente tromperie*' (Marmoisan, or the innocent trick) of 1696, she declared herself a partisan of women and their stories, remembering: 'A hundred times and more, my governess, instead of animal fables, would draw for me the moral features of this surprising story ... Why yes, once heard, such tales are far more striking than the exploits of a monkey and a wolf. I took an extreme pleasure in them – as does every child.'

L'Héritier could never rid her praise of its defensive tone ('the moral features'), and for good reason. The phrase 'old wives' tale' was superficially pejorative when Apuleius used it on the lips of his hoary-headed crone of a storyteller; it remained so, in the very act of authenticating the folk wisdom of the stories by stressing the wise old women who had carried on the tradition. It is still, in English, an ambiguous phrase: an old wives' tale means a piece of nonsense, a tissue of error, an ancient act of deception, of self and others, idle talk. As Marlowe writes in *Dr Faustus*, 'Tush, these are trifles and mere old wives' tales'. On a par with trifles, 'mere old wives' tales' carry connotations of error, of false counsel, ignorance, prejudice and fallacious nostrums – against heartbreak as well as headache; similarly 'fairy tale', as a derogatory term, implies fantasy, escapism, invention, the unreliable consolations of romance.

But the idealistic impulse is also driven by dreams; alternative ways of sifting right and wrong require different guides, ones perhaps discredited or neglected. Women from very different social strata have been remarkably active in the fields of folklore and children's literature since the nineteenth century. The Grimm Brothers' most inspiring and prolific sources were women, from families of

The veillées, or evening gatherings for gossip, news, and stories, were part of artisan as well as agricultural working life, in cities as well as the country. Emile Fréchon took this photograph of a woman and her audience, in a series on the Pas de Calais, around 1900, and called it 'Narration'.

friends and close relations, like the Wilds – Wilhelm married Dortchen, the youngest of four daughters of Dorothea Wild, who possessed a rich store of traditional tales, and she provided thirty-six for the collection. Dorothea, the Grimms' sister, married Ludwig Hassenpflug, and his three sisters passed on forty-one of the tales. From the Romantic literary circle of the artistic aristocratic von Haxthausens (who contributed collectively no fewer than sixty-six of the Grimms' tales) Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, the poet, and her sister Jenny were among the women who eagerly took part in telling the brothers the stories they had heard as children and more recently from their local area of Westphalia. Oscar Wilde's father, a doctor in Merrion Square, Dublin, in the mid-nineteenth century, used to ask for stories as his fee from his poorer patients: his wife Speranza Wilde then collected them. Many of these were told to him by women, and in turn influenced their son's innovatory fairy tales, like 'The Selfish Giant' and 'The Happy Prince'. At the end of the century, the omnivorous Scottish folklorist Andrew Lang relied on his wife Leonora Alleyne, as well as a team of women editors, transcribers and paraphrasers, to produce the many volumes of fairy stories and folk tales from around the world, in the immensely popular *Red*, *Yellow*, *Green*, *Blue*, *Rose Fairy Books*, which he began publishing in 1890. The writer Simone Schwarz-Bart stitched her memories of Creole stories from her Martinique childhood into her poetic, adventurous, linguistically hybrid fictions. The grandmother Reine Sans Nom (Queen-With-No-Name) in *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* (1972) embodies survival and history, and keeps the memory of slave culture, and of Africa before that. With the help of her friend, a sorceress, she passes on lore, fables, fairy tales, ghost stories to her granddaughter. As Simone Schwarz-Bart once said in an interview, 'The tale is, in large part, our capital. I was nourished on tales. It is our bible ... I don't have a technique, but I know. I'm familiar. I've heard. I've been nourished ... when an old person dies, a whole library disappears.'

*The proverbial wise woman narrator was placed on the outskirts of the village, on the edge of the woods, and, according to the tradition of children's literature, she is very old while her listeners are young. (*Tom Pouce, *Paris, 1825.)*

It would be absurd to argue that storytelling was an exclusively female activity – it varies from country to country, from one people to another, and from place to place within the same country, among the same people – but it is worth trying to puzzle out in what different ways the patterns of fairytale romancing might be drawn when women are the tellers.

The pedagogical function of the wonder story deepens the sympathy between the social category women occupy and fairy tale. Fairy tales exchange knowledge between an older voice of experience and a younger audience, they present pictures of perils and possibilities that lie ahead, they use terror to set limits on choice and offer consolation to the wronged, they draw social outlines around boys and girls, fathers and mothers, the rich and the poor, the rulers and the ruled, they point out the evildoers and garland the virtuous, they stand up to adversity with dreams of vengeance, power and vindication.

The *veillées* were the hearthside sessions of early modern society, where early social observers, like Bonaventure des Périers and Noël du Fail in the sixteenth century, describe the telling of some of today's most familiar fables and tales, like 'Donkeyskin' and 'Cinderella'. These gatherings offered men and women an

Monotonous tasks that are never done, like so much routine household work, provoked retaliation, in the form of dreams, gossip, stories, fairy tales. (Geertruid Roghman, Woman Spinning, *Dutch, mid-seventeenth century.)*

opportunity to talk – to preach – which was forbidden them in other situations, the pulpit, the forum, and frowned on and feared in the spinning rooms and by the wellside. Taking place after daylight hours, they still do not exactly anticipate the leisure uses of television or radio today – work continued, in the form of spinning, especially, and other domestic tasks: one folklore historian recalled hearing the women in her childhood tell stories to the rhythm of the stones cracking walnuts as they shelled them for bottling and pickling. As Walter Benjamin wrote in his essay on 'The Storyteller':

> [The storyteller's] nesting places – the activities that are intimately associated with boredom – are already extinct in the cities and are declining in the country as well. With this the gift for listening is lost and the community of listeners disappears ...

Benjamin never once imagines that his storytellers might be women, even though he identifies so clearly and so eloquently the connection between routine repetitive work and narrative – storytelling is itself 'an artisan form of communication', he writes. And later, again, it is 'rooted in the people ... a milieu of craftsmen'. He divides storytellers into stay-at-homes and rovers – tradesmen and agriculturalists, like the tailors and the shoemakers who appear in the stories, on the one hand; on the other, the seamen who travel far afield adventuring, like the questing type of hero. He neglects the figure of the spinster, the older woman with her distaff, who may be working in town and country, in one place or on the move, at market, or on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, and who has become a generic icon of narrative from the frontispiece of fairytale collections from Charles Perrault's onwards. The Scottish poet Liz Lochhead, who has drawn on much fairytale imagery in her work, has written:

> No one could say the stories were useless
> for as the tongue clacked
> five or forty fingers stitched
> corn was grated from the husk
> patchwork was pieced
> or the darning was done ...
>
> And at first light ...
> the stories dissolved in the whorl of the ear
> but they
> hung themselves upside down
> in the sleeping heads of the children
> till they flew again
> into the storyteller's night.

Spinning a tale, weaving a plot: the metaphors illuminate the relation; while the structure of fairy stories, with their repetitions, reprises, elaboration and minutiae, replicates the thread and fabric of one of women's principal labours – the making of textiles from the wool or the flax to the finished bolt of cloth.

Fairy tales are stories which, in the earliest mentions of their existence, include that circle of listeners, the audience; as they point to possible destinies, possible happy outcomes, they successfully involve their hearers or readers in identifying with the protagonists, their misfortunes, their triumphs. Schematic characterization leaves a gap into which the listener may step. Who has not tried on the glass slipper? Or offered it for trying? The relation between the authentic, artisan source and the tale recorded in book form for children and adults is not simple; we are not hearing the spinsters and the knitters in the sun whom Orsino remembers chanting in *Twelfth Night*, unmediated. But the quality of the mediation is of great interest. From the mid-seventeenth century, the nurses, governesses, family domestics, working women living in or near the great house or castle in town and country existed in a different relation to the élite men and women who may have once been in their charge, as children. The future Marquise de la Tour du Pin recalled in her memoirs how her nurse was her mainstay and that, when she

turned eleven and a governess was appointed instead, 'I used to escape whenever I could and try to find her [the nurse], or to meet her about the house.' Another noblewoman, Victorine de Chastenay, also wrote that her own mother alarmed her and dominated her, and that she took refuge with her nurse and her nurse's family. The rapports created in *ancien régime* childhood shape the matter of the stories, and the cultural model which places the literati's texts on the one side of a divide, and popular tales on the other, can and should be redrawn: fairy tales act as an airy suspension bridge, swinging slightly under different breezes of opinion and economy, between the learned, literary and print culture in which famous fairy tales have come down to us, and the oral, illiterate, people's culture of the *veillée*; and on this bridge the traffic moves in both directions.

Women writers like Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier and Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy mediated anonymous narratives, the popular, vernacular culture they had inherited through fairy tale, in spite of the aristocratic frippery their stories make at a first impression. Indeed, they offer rare and rich testimony to a sophisticated chronicle of wrongs and ways to evade or right them, when they recall stories they had heard as children or picked up later and retell them in a spirit of protest, of polite or not so polite revolt. These tales are wrapped in fantasy and unreality, which no doubt helped them entertain their audiences – in the courtly salon as well as at the village hearth – but they also serve the stories' greater purpose, to reveal possibilities, to map out a different way and a new perception of love, marriage, women's skills, thus advocating a means of escaping imposed limits and prescribed destiny. The fairy tale looks at the ogre like Bluebeard or the Beast of 'Beauty and the Beast' in order to disenchant him; while romancing reality, it is a medium deeply concerned with undoing prejudice. Women of different social positions have collaborated in storytelling to achieve true recognition for their subjects: the process is still going on.

For a long time, authenticity was an issue – the scientific folklorist, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, sought to catch the accent of the common people; and authenticity was equated with the pristine, the autochthonous, the tale pure and unadulterated by élite ideas; the enterprise was closely associated with romantic nationalism, as in the case of the Grimms. Oral purity is, however, a quest doomed to failure; the material of fairy tale weaves in and out of printed texts, the Greek romances, *The Arabian Nights*, *Tristan* cycle or *matière de Bretagne*, the novels in verse of Chrétien de Troyes, *Mélusine*, saints' lives, and so forth – language conducts from mouth to page and back again, and orature, or, in the West, oral literature, has not existed in isolation since Homeric times. The evangelists knew they had to write down Christ's teachings, in order to continue the process of passing them on by word of mouth, for preachers to use. But the sacred appeal of oral transmission remains crucial. The memory or the fancy of the story's origin inspires the simulation of a storyteller's voice in the literary text, and this performance modifies the narrative, it solicits the audience.

The pretence at anonymity, even in a signed work, like D'Aulnoy's '*La Chatte blanche*' (The White Cat) or '*Serpentin vert*' (The Great Green Worm) or the Grimm Brothers' 'Juniper Tree', confers the authority of traditional wisdom accumulated over the past and acknowledged and shared by many on account of its truthfulness and capacity to teach and be useful.

Fairy tale is essentially a moralizing form, often in deep disguise and often running against the grain of commonplace ethics: Benjamin uses the generic term, 'the storyteller', in order to lift his writers into fantasy figures on a priestly level: 'He [the storyteller] has counsel,' writes Benjamin, in messianic mode. 'Not for a few situations, as the proverb does, but for many, like the sage.' And he concludes, 'The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself.' For the élite writers, who lie behind so many of the famous fairy tales as they have come down to children today, the figure of fairytale storyteller, embodied in the righteous old serving woman, was the figure through whom they could encounter their own enhanced value (Benjamin's 'righteousness'), a field where they could struggle for their ideas and vision.

The orality of the genre remains a central claim even in the most artificial and elaborate literary versions, of the French, or the Victorians or later inventions; it is often carried in the texts through which fairy tales have circulated in writing for three hundred years by the postulation of a narrator, a grandmotherly or nanny type, called Gammer Gurton or Aunty Molesworth or Mother Hubbard as well as Mother Goose or some such cosy name, and by the consequent style, which imitates speech, with chatty asides, apparently spontaneous exclamations, direct appeals to the imaginary circle round the hearth, rambling descriptions, gossipy parentheses, and other bedside or laplike mannerisms that create an illusion of collusive intimacies, of home, of the bedtime story, the winter's tale.

The old wives' tale might be stuff and nonsense, but it too could yield a harvest in corn and gold, if you stroked it smooth and combed it through. Just as history belongs to the victors and words change their meanings with a change of power, stories depend on the tellers and those to whom they are told who might later tell them again. 'Never trust the artist. Trust the tale,' D. H. Lawrence's famous dictum, fails to notice how intertwined the teller and the tale always are.

The old wives' tongues are wagging RIGHT *as they pass on lonelyhearts lore in a bawdy parody of sententious manuals,* Les Evangiles des quenouilles, *or* The Gospel of Distaves *(Bruges, c. 1475); the patron saint of trouble and strife, dubbed Aelwaer, or All-True* ABOVE *also makes mock of pious conventions, and rides on an ass like the Virgin Mary fleeing into Egypt, holds a squealing piglet under one arm instead of a baby, while a magpie perches on her head instead of the dove of the Holy Ghost. (Cornelis Antonisz., Amsterdam, c. 1550.)*

CHAPTER 3

Word of Mouth: Gossips II

Patient as an old master
I love to study the faces
of pious, spiteful old women.

The mortality of their lips,
and the immortality of the power
that pressed those lips together.

Olga Sedakova

A French print of 1660 depicts '*Le Médecin céphalique*', or Skull Doctor, hard at work at an unusual task: with the help of a hammer and anvil, he is forging new heads for women brought to him by their menfolk – husbands, chiefly – in order to make them into properly docile wives. In jocular style, the inscription relates how the doctor learned the secrets of his trade in Madagascar – a suitably remote, orientalist provenance, with overtones of head-hunting and -shrinking – and then goes on to itemize the women's offences: they are shrewish, loud-mouthed, devilish, angry, mad, haggard, bad, annoying, obstinate. On one side, where French couples are arriving, the inscription above reads:

Great man, through your care almost all our wives
Are now well behaved and give us peace …

And it goes on to say that Frenchmen cannot offer adequate thanks for the great feats the doctor has performed, except to honour his name – Lustucru – for ever more. Lustucru derives from *L'eusses-tu cru?* (Would you have believed it?).

On the opposite side, foreign husbands add their voices to the praises of Lustucru: men from Germany, Switzerland and Sweden, as well as Spaniards, Dutchmen and Armenians, beg the great doctor to visit their countries now and effect the same transformation on their women. Superannuated, severed heads fill the shelves of Lustucru's surgery, or hang from the ceiling; outside, more heads are impaled to advertise his remedy. The shop sign shows a headless woman (*'Une femme sans tête'*) with the legend, 'Everything about her is good', while in the

'I will make you good,' declares the doctor Lustucru, as he hammers out a wife's head on the anvil. 'Husbands, rejoice!' says his assistant, while another woman, with mouth open, waits her turn. The sign outside the smithy, 'A La Bonne Femme', *shows a headless woman. This popular eighteenth-century woodcut from Normandy, takes up a satire against bluestockings, feminists, scolds, and other opinionated women of almost a hundred years before.*

centre, on the anvil, the inscription reads, *'Touche fort sur la bouche. Elle a meschante langue'* (Strike hard on the mouth: she has a wicked tongue).

The print of this burlesque smithy is one of several variations; in another (p 28), Lustucru is saying, as he hammers, *'Je te rendrai bonne'* (I will make you good) while an onlooker exclaims, *'Maris, réjouissez-vous!'* (Husbands, rejoice!). There are also Italian and German versions extant; prints continue to appear into the eighteenth century. It was the brainchild – the cephalic offspring, indeed – of a certain *curé*, and was inspired by the controversy over the bluestockings of the Paris salons, writers and poets like Madeleine de Scudéry, whom Molière satirized in his famous plays *Les Précieuses ridicules* of 1659 and *Les Femmes savantes* of a few years later; it belongs to a prolonged and intense satirical conflict provoked by the intellectual ambitions of seventeenth-century aristocratic women. Their ideas and their way of life challenged the conventions of the time: from their position of influence as hostesses in Parisian society, they criticized arranged marriages and the dynastic and social market in wives, and sought instead to cultivate equal, companionable relations between men and women, exchanging ideas in an atmosphere of literary and artistic sophistication. The Querelle des Femmes, in this phase, was fierce, but not always bitter. For instance, a gallant, male partisan of the *Précieuses*, the poet Baudeau de Somaize, composed an elegy, *'La Mort de Lustucru: lapidé par les femmes'* (The Death of Lustucru: Stoned by Women) which was recited in the course of one of his comedies, *Véritables Précieuses* (The Authentic Précieuses), in 1660. It was his learned retaliation against the great number of burlesque sketches in which Lustucru figured as the champion of hen-pecked husbands, a hero among men.

The last decades of the seventeenth century saw an early outbreak of feminist argument, and the right of women to voice their opinions was at the centre of the struggle. Christian tradition held the virtues of silence, obedience and discretion as especially, even essentially, feminine, but this view spread far wider than the circle of the devout. The Silent Woman was an accepted ideal. That cliché about the sex, 'Silence is golden', can be found foreshadowed in the pages of Aristotle: 'silence is a woman's glory', he writes in the *Politics*, adding, 'but this is not equally the glory of man'.

The First Epistle to Timothy, attributed to Saint Paul, contains the famous injunction, 'Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection' (2: 11). The letter then continues, 'But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence' (2: 12). The author gives his reasons, moving in a characteristically Pauline way to an allegorical exegesis of the Fall: that Adam was

made first, to symbolize his precedence over Eve, and that Eve, the pattern of all women to come, sinned through speech, by tempting Adam to eat with her words. So speech must be denied her daughters. The prejudice against women's talk has scriptural legitimacy.

The epistle later lists the varieties of improper speech in which women will so frequently indulge, and it proscribes at least five of them: above all, Timothy must not listen to 'profane and old wives' fables' (4: 7). Even younger widows, too, warns Paul, are 'not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not' (5: 13). He fears gossip as well, and observes that young widows' behaviour will give rise to talk unless they remarry. By contrast, he exhorts his disciple to be 'an example of the believers, in word, in conversation ...' (4: 12), and at the end to avoid 'profane and vain babblings' (6: 20).

The translators of the King James Authorized Version, working in the period 1604–11 – that is, just subsequent to George Peele's play *The Old Wives' Tale* – had no difficulty with English words for these different types of condemned speech; and in this matter, at least, Catholics and Protestants were in agreement: garrulousness was a woman's vice, and silence – which was not even considered an appropriate virtue in the male – one of the chief ornaments a good woman should cultivate. It is a commonplace that what counts as articulateness in a man becomes stridency in a woman, that a man's conviction is a woman's shrillness, a man's fluency a woman's drivel. The speaking woman also refuses subjection, and turns herself from a passive object of desire into a conspiring and conscious stimulation: even fair speech becomes untrustworthy on a woman's lips. The *mulier blandiens* or *mulier meretrix* of Ecclesiasticus (25: 17–36) and Proverbs (6: 24–6) comes in for much vituperation; the biblical text 'A man's spite is preferable to a woman's kindness' (Ecclus. 42: 14) provoked much nodding of pious heads, as well as pamphlet and chapbook confirmation.

The interdiction on female speech tolls down the years, one of those insistent refrains of misogyny that has acquired independent life, regardless of context, of the times, or the speaker's own circumstances. The French poet, historian and polemicist Christine de Pizan (*d.* 1430), who complained about the portrayal of women in the writings of predecessors like Jean de Meung in his *Roman de la rose*, noticed this poverty of invention in the abuse, the way such writings perpetuated the stale conceits of classical invective. The early middle ages had seen comparative tolerance towards women's communications, but by the fifteenth century reaction invoking the Church Fathers and classical authorities had set in. As Howard Bloch points out, in his study *Medieval Misogyny*, 'Misogyny is a way of speaking about, as distinct from doing something to, women'; such speech acts can sometimes seem as indestructible as those plastic containers which drift over vast distances, bobbing unaffected by on the various currents and deeps of changing individual experience. A packet of popular 'wheat wafers' called Miller's Damsel, currently on sale in English supermarkets, gives this explanation for its name:

> Our company name is derived from a three-tongued rod used in the milling process, which rotates and vibrates the hopper and enables wheat to be fed into the millstones. Over the years this rod has been referred to affectionately as a Miller's Damsel because 'it has three chattering tongues' and our symbol is a representation of it.

Nobody would suggest that this brand of biscuit will inspire in consumers a sudden fresh conviction in women's propensity to chatter in the world around them, any more than it will conjure up millers and damsels; but the example does illustrate the clinging character of certain ideas – which contain a reflection of reality, of experience perhaps, of imagination for certain.

The seduction of women's talk reflected the seduction of their bodies; it was considered as dangerous to Christian men, and condemned as improper *per se*. Female folly had brought about the Fall, so must be quelled. In the Vulgate, Jerome used *seducta* for Eve's transgression: the serpent led her astray, and she then 'seduces' Adam, too. The connotations of the verb are already sexual. Women's words are mixed up with women's wiles – beauty and expression go hand in hand, as Paul implies when he also lays down that women should dress modestly, without show of jewels or elaborate coiffures (1 Tim. 2: 9). Eve sinned by mouth: she bit into the apple of knowledge, she spoke to the serpent and to Adam, and she was in consequence cursed with desire, to kiss and be kissed ('Thy desire shall be to thy husband' (Gen. 3: 16)).

When the Knight of La Tour Landry composed a manual for his daughters' behaviour in the fourteenth century, he enumerated the nine follies of Eve: 'And know ye that the sin of our first mother Eve came by evil and shrewd acquaintance by cause she held parlement with the serpent which as the History saith had a face right fair like the face of a woman. And spake right meekly.' The chapter and verse of Eve's folly continues to concentrate on her speaking: to the serpent in the first place, to Adam about the fruit, to God when she tried to excuse herself. 'Therefore my fair daughters,' the Knight admonishes, 'herein may you take good

example, that if one require you of folly or of any thing that toucheth your honour and worship you may well cover and hide it saying that you shall speak thereof to your lord.' The virtue of Prudence, portrayed as a good housewife, wears a padlock on her mouth. Sixteenth-century morality tales likewise painted the portraits of the Wise Man and the Wise Woman (p. 34), the latter declaring through lips firmly under lock and key:

> Everyone look at me because I am a wise woman …
> A golden padlock I wear on my mouth at all times
> so that no villainous words shall escape from my mouth
> but I say nothing without deliberation
> and a wise woman should always act thus …
> do not tell tales on others' actions, I say to you roundly …

By contrast, the foolish prattler was a standard, and often bitter, subject of jest. A figure from the topsy-turvy world of carnival, the Dutch saint Aelwaer – Saint All-True – was envisaged by the artist Cornelis Antonisz. in a broadsheet of around 1550 which brazenly parodies holy pictures (p. 26). Sister to other mock patrons of such sinners as sluggards (Sinte Luyaert; Sainte Fainéante), spendthrifts (Sint Reijnuut), and prattlers (Sainte Babille), Aelwaer was paid tribute in a lengthy but not entirely ill-tempered ballad which targeted many men who marched under her banner:

> On Saint All-True's head sits a bird
> Called a magpie, who always chatters,
> Just so is a quarrelsome man who never shuts up
> Who never has anything good to say …

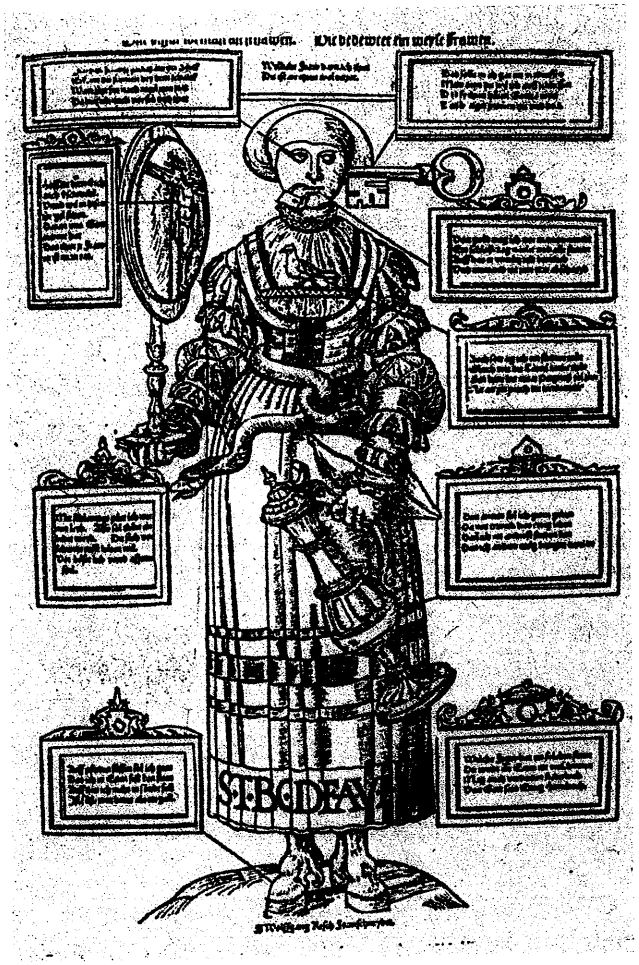
She was made patron saint of all quarrellers, rioters, troublemakers, revellers, musicians and other rowdy crew of Flanders and of Amsterdam in particular. She wears a screeching magpie on her head, carries a squealing pig under her arm, and holds up a fighting and no doubt caterwauling cat in her other hand. This comic epitome of the fighting, nagging, scolding, malicious, prattling, tongue-wagging busybody rides upon an ass: a blasphemous parody of the Virgin – of Dürer's *Flight into Egypt* in particular – with a piglet replacing the baby, and the magpie the Holy Ghost. Interestingly, the anonymous verses celebrate her powers and the chorus calls all to join in worship of the Great, the Holy Aelwaer, presiding genius of all uproar, for at the end of the day the gravity of such noise, says the anonymous author, has been much exaggerated.

Gossip was perceived to be a leading element in women's folly, and in the sex's propensity to foment riot. Yet the changes in meaning of the word 'gossip', however pejoratively weighted, illuminate the influential part of women in communicating through informal and unofficial networks, in contributing to varieties of storytelling, and in passing on their experience in narrative.

II

In 1014, the word 'gossip' was used in English for a baptismal sponsor, godmother or -father; by 1362, it denoted a 'friend' and applied almost exclusively to female friends invited by a woman to the christening of her child. A 'gossiping' is an old word for a christening feast. Jan Steen's high-spirited painting known also by that title, in the Wallace Collection in London (Pl. 3), shows a kitchen bustling with friends and helpers; the confined mother lies in bed in an alcove, looking very weak, while two women keep by her side; around the table, by the chimney, more women are heating water, gesturing to each other, engaged in conversation as they focus on the newborn child. From 1590 to the 1660s, when such festivities were set to become ever more popular and lavish sources of social bonding, among Catholics and Protestants alike, the word 'gossip' had gone into free fall, and came to mean 'a person, mostly a woman, especially one who delights in idle talk; a newsmonger, a tattler'.

The words *compadre* and *comare* or *commare* reveal a similar shift in meaning in Italian: originally a co-father or co-mother, the masculine variant retained its meaning of godfather (Marlon Brando continued the custom in the film). The feminine version meanwhile shifted to refer to a midwife. In modern Italian, *commare* means a gossip or crony, one of the grackle women dressed in black who can still be seen sitting out in the street passing the time of day with her friends in the traditional daily *chiacchiera* or gossip. The word's connection to midwives has become obsolete, but was current before the seventeenth century and the (male) professionalization of the skill. Scipione Mercurio's early treatise on childbirth was entitled *La commare o' raccoglitrice*, and was published in 1595, with a dedication in verse to the 'learned daughter of a wise man' whom everyone honours for her skills. In French, *commère* followed the same downward path: originally a godmother, it too came to mean a gossip-monger, a telltale; the English 'Cummer', now obsolete, also meant godmother, intimate friend and gossip, as well as midwife and wise woman until the last century.



The Wise Woman, a paragon compounded of classical and biblical morality, wears a padlock on her lips to signify obedience and discretion, and declares that she would rather die, like Lucretia, than dishonour her husband. Her key signifies good housekeeping, the mirror recalls the transience of worldly pleasures, the snakes at her waist warn of evil backbiting and quarrelling, the jug represents her charity to those in need, and her horses' hooves stand here for sure-footedness in the treacherous ways of temptation; she exhorts all wives to follow her example. (Anton Woensam, c. 1525.)

There are several strands in this web of associations around women as gossips which, pulled together, enhance the emblematic figure of the storyteller. Women dominated the domestic webs of information and power; the neighbourhood, the village, the well, the washing place, the shops, the stalls, the street were their arena of influence, not only the household. To some extent, in some societies, women still do so, and their roles as unofficial carers, voluntary fund-raisers, parish helpers often make women newsbearers and informal fixers in the modern city as well as the medieval, and in London as well as Naples.

The control of fertility and mortality, through skills like midwifery, and the direction of attitudes and alliances and interests through gossip exist in close relation to each other in the unofficial networks of the social body; informal speech and exchanges are 'a catalyst of the social process', which can produce harmony and conflict, which can divide and bind: 'Gossip is a powerful social instrument', writes the anthropologist Robert Paine, 'for any person who learns to manage it and can thereby direct or canalize its catalytic effect.'

Gossipy gatherings of women together were the focus of much male anxiety about women's tongues in Reformation as well as Catholic Europe: when the Knight of La Tour Landry's instruction manual was published in Augsburg in 1498, the woodcuts illustrating it pictured women in church incited to chatter by the Devil; the following page showed a group of them gossiping during Mass

Sinful women prattle during Mass and keep the devils busy: one chews on a parchment to stretch it so that the devil scribe will have enough room for all the wicked tittle-tattle he overhears. (From Der Ritter von Turn, *Augsburg, 1498.)*

(above). One devil is sitting in the corner with pen and inkwell, taking down what they are saying, while another is busy stretching the parchment with his monstrous mandibles because, as the Knight wrote, it was too short to contain all the talk. Tellingly, the Knight included men among the chatterers in church in his text, but the illustrator shows only women so engaged. His men are depicted at prayer.

Typical meeting places for women alone, like public laundries and spinning rooms, were feared to give rise to slander and intrigue and secret liaisons. Of all the professions, official and unofficial, those which allowed women to pass between worlds out of the control of native or marital family seemed to pose the greatest threat to apparent due order. Prostitutes, midwives and wetnurses occupied no fixed point in the structure of society, as they physically moved between

worlds: in a 1508 edition of *The Hours of Simon Vostre*, one of the earliest printed prayerbooks in Europe, a dance of death depicts the Reaper gathering up one woman after another to the grave. He dances off with a queen, a duchess, a regent, a knight's lady, an abbess, a prioress, a damoiselle, a market vendor, a theologian – *théologienne*! – all the way down the moral and social scale to the witch, the bigot and the fool – *la sote* (p. 352). All are wearing headgear or hairstyles appropriate to their walk in life, and of all the older women, only the *nourrice* (wetnurse) has her hair escaping, untidily, from under her headcloth – this unkemptness betokening the essential disarray of her role, neither virginal (symbolized by long maiden hair) nor matronly (hair hidden beneath a wimple) nor cloistered (veiled), but passing between those states, as a 'mother' to other women's children, perhaps unattached herself, a messenger bringing news, gossip, from another place.

One of the earliest secular books of tales attributed to women, *Les Evangiles des quenouilles* – or *The Gospel of Distaves*, as it was known in the translation printed by Wynkyn de Worde – first appeared around 1475 in French, in Bruges, and it relates a typical session – or so it claims – of women's gossiping and consultation. Numerous references in other works, from sermons to plays, attest the wide diffusion of this book; there was a copy in the library of the château at Chantilly, and Colbert, the great statesman and financier of the early part of Louis XIV's reign, owned another. Colbert was Charles Perrault's patron and friend, so that the *Evangiles* were known in the circle of the first writers of fairy tales as literature.

The book belongs, generally speaking, to the tradition of gossiping and eavesdropping, of which tale-telling is a branch – Straparola, the author of *Le piacevoli notti*, when summoned before the Inquisition for indecency, defended himself by pleading that he had only taken down the stories he had heard from the lips of the lady storytellers.

The pretext is a common one, and disingenuous, as we shall see in the case of the *Evangiles des quenouilles*, where the writer informs us, from the start, that he has been called in as a mere scribe to record the wit and wisdom of the gathering, exchanged over a series of six days, a traditional hexameron (p. 27). The questions are practical, and frequently erotic; the group of matrons – of old wives – give remedies for impotence, wife-beating, unwanted babies, they interpret dreams and omens and weather portents, they recommend love potions, they give advice about handling animals, they foretell the future – all tasks intimately connected with natural processes. This was of course the domain of midwives, layers-out – and witches – and the target concern of a hellfire preacher like the Franciscan Olivier Maillard, who inventoried current superstitions. He naturally denounced sorcerers, who made pacts with the Devil, but he also attacked the practices described in *Les Evangiles*: *carminatores* (charmers) who use verbal spells to heal, diviners who prognosticate, chiromancers who interpret bodily signs, and interpreters of dreams, all fell to the lash of his tongue.

The friar was in deadly earnest, but in *Les Evangiles* the author has his tongue in his cheek. The whole proceedings are presented in facetious, mock-scholarly style, with Question and Answer in the schoolmen's favourite manner of *disputatio*, and glosses offered by the attendant ladies. The woodcuts included in the first edition of *Les Evangiles* depict the participants telling the points of their arguments on their left hand with the index finger of their right, in the classical style of the rhetor, while the youthful scribe sits at work to the side with pen and scroll. Apart from the off-colour character of the remarks, the participants are given burlesque, dirty-minded names – Sebille des Mares (Sybil of the Swamps), Ysabel de la Creste Rouge (Isabella Red Crest) – or downright bawdy – Belote la Cornue, Perrette du Trou-Punais, Noir Trou (Big Horned Bella, Little Perry Stink-Hole, Black Hole), and so forth; the artist represents some in full matronly veils and coifs, their younger companions in décolletage and the fashionable steeple wimples of the late fifteenth century. Though it is indisputable that the book contains lore in circulation as seriously intended remedies and methods of redress, it passes it mockingly as lewdness and superstition and guys the purveyors as whores and bawds, beldames and trots. The distaff, the symbol of women's domestic industry, also carried dubious connotations, on account of its shape, and it was frequently positioned by artists at a suggestive angle. It is also featured as a recurrent double entendre in the solution to obscene popular riddles – for instance, 'I am one span long, delicate, round and white …' (p. 137).

When one of the distaff-wielding beldames, Transie d'Amour (Transported by Love), hears from the group that the loss of a shoe means that a lover or husband will go astray, she comments that this must be correct, as she lost her garter in the street a few days ago and has not seen her lover Joliet – Little Pretty One – since. The text does not fail to tell us that she is sixty-seven years old – a stereotypical figure from the *danse macabre* of the crone inflamed with lust. Cuckoldry fans the jokes, at the expense of women who instigate chaos and of men who allow it, just as in Steen's christening feast a guest is already surreptitiously making the sign of the horned beast over the baby's head, an apotropaic gesture, perhaps, against the humiliation inevitably threatening his future in this unruly society dominated by the deceits and scandalous appetites of women (Pl. 3).

Les Evangiles des quenouilles sends out conflicting messages, but it clearly paro-

dies a type of circulating medieval text which had on occasions been written by a woman: the mirror of conduct, or, in other words, 'life, a user's manual'. Christine de Pizan, for instance, earnestly composed deeply felt variations on this didactic genre, and when she was invited, by a nobleman, to compose a poem about an unhappy love affair, she took the opportunity to combine a long verse romance with personal, stinging comments on the problem of passion for women. Like a beldame in the circle of the *Evangiles des quenouilles*, she doled out advice in the risky area of sex. But unlike them, she was sceptical of love's promises. *The Book of the Duke of True Lovers* was probably written between 1403 and 1405, and in it Christine creates, as the mouthpiece of her practical discourse against romance, an older woman with the emblematically lofty name of Sebille de Monthault, Dame de la Tour. This Sibylline figure interrupts the lovers' poetic duet to warn that their adultery is folly and will bring them misery and shame.

Not a message for gallant ears, and indeed a dynamic part of Pizan's continuing campaign against medieval perceptions of women's primary erotic role, for good or ill. The letter Sebille writes the lovers reappears as an example of the good advice a chaperone might send her mistress in Christine's *The Treasure of the City of Ladies* of 1405, and it takes up a theme already present in yet another urgently phrased document, the earlier *Debate of Two Lovers*: thraldom to love, she points out there, very rarely truly happens, in spite of romance literature's obsession with its power. 'That's a very common *conte*', she writes dismissively, 'a tale told to women', and 'she who believes it in the end is not considered very wise'.

Bearing in mind Christine's Sibylline rejection of prejudice and fraudulence in traditional courtly romance and her level-headed warnings against its harmfulness, the claim that the parodic old women in *Les Evangiles des quenouilles* are peddling ancient, typical female wisdom looks collusive with that precise fraudulence. Attributing to women themselves the kind of salacious advice that corroborates adultery conveniently portrays women inciting and perpetuating the conditions which make them – as well as men – suffer. The male scribe, the male author, by picturing such erotic conspiracies among women alone, exculpates his own kind from responsibility for current fantasies about the opposite sex. But it is also clear, both from Christine's strictures and from the *Evangiles*' author's asides, that storytelling and spindle chatter were agreed to gather together women of different classes, and to disseminate dangerous attitudes to love and the governance of men.

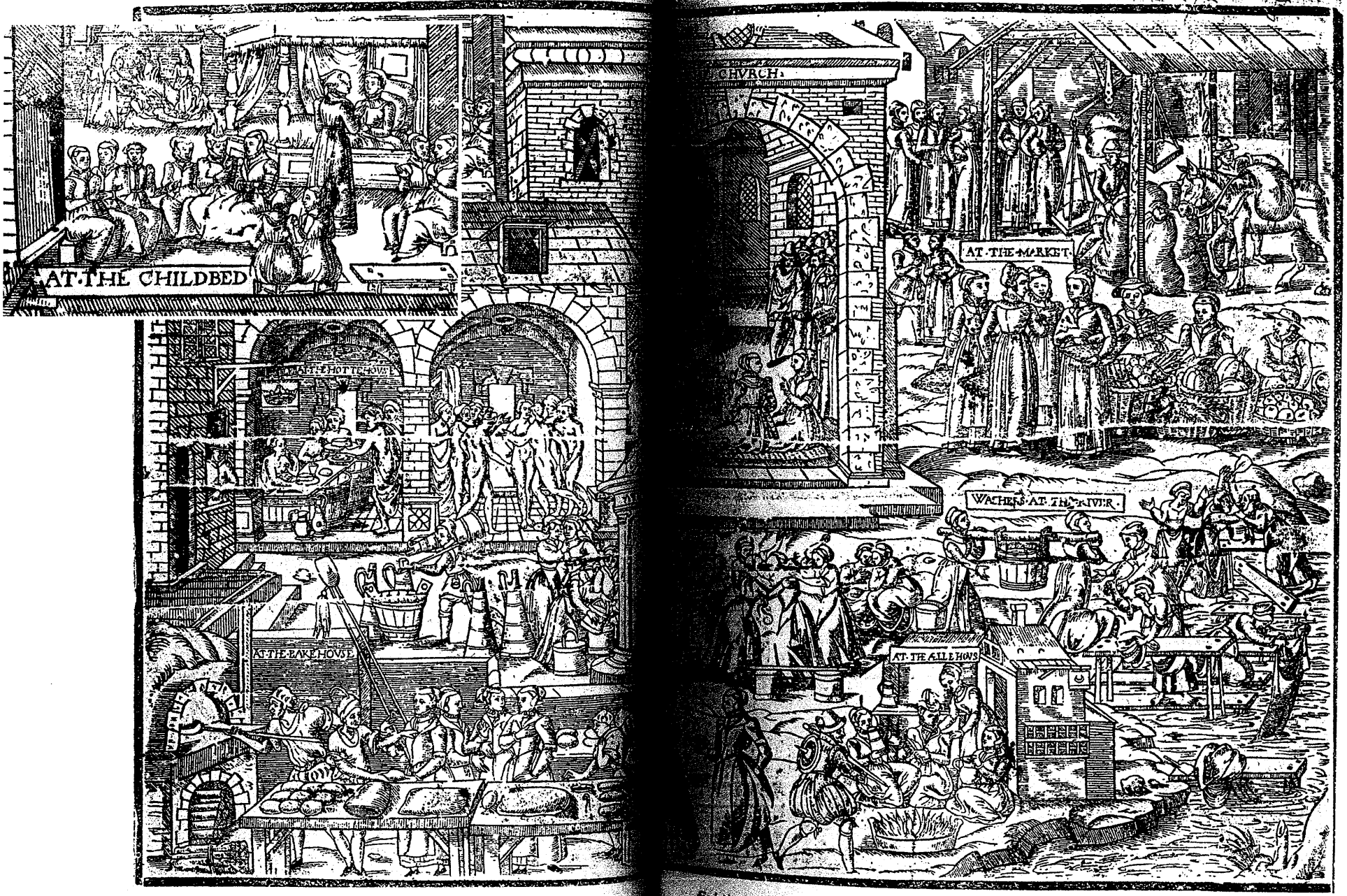
In the *Evangiles* the female 'secrets' on which he eavesdrops transgress as well in refusing a rational perception of the universe – as Christine implies with her reproaches against mother-wit. At the end, the self-styled scribe evades involvement altogether, and issues a warning that what is written in these Gospels demonstrates the frailty of those who give way to gossip when they find themselves together.

In France and England, in the two centuries following the publication of the *Evangiles*, the theme of women's gossip and its dangerous powers grew in intensity. In the seventeenth century, broadsheets denounced women's rattling tongues. They were associated with curses and spells, with the vices of nagging and tale-bearing; there even exist, from the same century that saw the development of Mother Goose tales, branks or scold's bridles – contraptions like dog muzzles designed to gag women who had been charged and found guilty of blasphemy and defamation. In England, in 1624, a law against cursing was passed, and its targets were not only men who swore, but women who could conjure. Victims identified as witches in league with the Devil by inquisitors and prickers were often only poor old folk who might use swearing and vituperation to retaliate against maltreatment or neglect in default of other means of defence. The classical and medieval topoi of unruly wives and matrimonial pains survived sturdily in the culture of print and gained a more sinister social and legal footing.

In France, the unruliness of women's wagging tongues was illustrated in a print of around 1560 called '*Le Caquet des femmes*', in which the women are shown brawling among themselves as well as provoking fights between men as a consequence of their chatter. An early seventeenth-century English broadsheet – 'Tittle Tattle; or the several Branches of Gossiping' – similarly depicts the feared sites where women's tongues will wag, where they find themselves alone and able to communicate without supervision (pp. 40–1). The first place is 'At the Childbed'. Women friends of the new mother – the gossips – are arriving to help with the birth. The 'Market' follows, then the bakehouse, the baths, church, and the river for laundry. The admonition concludes:

> Then Gossips all a Warning take,
> Pray cease your Tongue to rattle;
> Go Knit and Sew and Brew and Bake
> And leave off Tittle Tattle.

The word *caquet*, cackle, was used in the titles of a popular variety of book, collections of supposed female secrets: *Caquets des poissonnières* (1621–2) (Fishwives' Chatter), *Caquets des femmes du Faubourg Montmartre* (1622), and, the



The places where women gathered alone offered dangerous freedom, this broadsheet warned, in the lively exchange of news and gossip. At the lying-in TOP LEFT, *in the hothouse, and then at the baker's, the well (conduit), the alehouse, the river bank for the laundry, at the market, and in church they mark ordinary moments of a woman's work (and play). However fighting* CENTRE *and other unruliness results. The author says: 'At Child-bed when the Gossips meet,/ Fine stories we are told;/ and if they get a Cup too much,/ Their Tongue, they cannot hold.' ('Tittle-Tattle, or the several Branches of Gossipping', English, c. 1603.)*

most successful, *Les Caquets de l'accouchée* (Chatter at the Lying-in), which first appeared in 1623 with several reprints (one appeared later in the same publisher's list of *Facéties*, or Jests, alongside *Les Evangiles des quenouilles*). As in *Les Evangiles des quenouilles*, this chatter at the childbed by the mother's friends and cronies was reportedly transcribed at her behest by *un secrétaire* over a period of eight days. The women are imagined to exchange complaints about men: for instance husbands do not work hard enough to provide their wives with luxuries. The mother-to-be is twenty-four and a half and already has borne seven children, but still her mind fixes on frivolities (of course). The text, in spite of its levity, includes sober reflections on the cost of dowries, and the difficulties poor women have in finding a husband who will accept them dowerless. On the whole, it jokes against women, focussing on their erotic adventures. It reports that a sick man was advised by his physician to smuggle himself in to listen, as what he would overhear would stir him up so much he would regain his health.

It would be absurd piety to suggest that the transformed meanings of the word 'gossip' and all its pejorative connotations do not spring from experience. But, as ever, it depends whose experience, where, and when. The gossip-mongering of the Roman *borgo* or inner-city neighbourhood can look rather different from a woman's point of view. Elisabetta Rasy, the contemporary Italian novelist, offers some pungent observations on the prejudice against the *chiacchiera*, the traditional chatter of women in the street in Italy; gossip carried knowledge of secrets, of intimate matters – including illicit information about sex, contraception and abortion which threatened the official organs of the Church, the law, and science. Gossip includes mother-wit, and mother-wit knows a thing or two that They don't know, or rather, that They don't want to be known. Or, again, that They fear they don't know. Rasy makes the connection between intimate talk and the control of women's flesh – its pleasures and its sufferings – which those locker-room-minded mischief-makers, the anonymous authors of *Les Evangiles des quenouilles* and *Les Caquets de l'accouchée*, were insinuating, but she makes it as a partisan of gossip, not its enemy.

In a tobacconist's shop in Jalisco province in Mexico, two postcards were recently on sale, both lurid caricatures: in one a bent old harridan hauls her shopping while two lounging men look on approvingly: she has a huge padlock through her lips (Pl. 14). In the other, a sharp-featured woman's eyes are popping in terror as a hairy fist pulls out her viper's tongue and prepares to cut it off with scissors (p. 50). These images correspond to cautionary children's literature of the late nineteenth century, in which a similar asymmetry between the value of men's and women's expression governs the laws of good behaviour. The wife of Monsieur Croquemitaine the bogeyman comes for little girls who show too much curiosity and shuts them up in a trunk. The practice of storytelling was adapted to curb the tales children themselves might tell.

III

Rhetoric and iconography which exhibit fear of gossips' influence have persisted in singling out the ageing woman as culprit. The high-spirited bawdy of *Les Evangiles des quenouilles* makes fun of old women's lusts; later, the accusation turns nastier, and by the seventeenth century the outward form of the garrulous crone was established as an allegory of unwifely transgressions, of disobedience, opinion, anger, outspokenness, and general lack of compliance with male desires and behests. Female old age represented a violation of teleology, and this carried implications beyond the physical state, into wider prescriptions of femininity.

The satire of Lustucru's smithy gave a new twist to a medieval theme: the recycling of wives when their husbands are tired of them. Lustucru works as doctor and smith at one time, but the texts return to the verb *repolir* – to repolish. This ingenious topos relates to the medieval burlesque image of *The Mill of Old Wives*, which also circulated in print form. In a nineteenth-century woodcut version from Denmark (below), undesirable crones approaching the mill (one is being wheeled by her husband): they are shown being fed into the mill, ground and

Early cosmetic surgery: halt and maimed, bald and toothless, crones are encouraged to try the magic of The Mill for Old Wives. Helped into the hopper and ground on the millstone, they emerge bright-eyed and bushy-tailed into the arms of gallant young husbands. (Danish, nineteenth century.)

whittled, until they re-emerge whole and young and vigorous and amorous – again. 'Their mouths', says the inscription, 'will be all the better for kissing now.' The turning of the millstone does the work of Lustucru's hammer; the women are worked and honed and polished. (Curiously, the men themselves have not suffered the effects of old age – an imperviousness which signals the unimportance of the issue in their case.)

The virtue of Obedience was traditionally represented by the iconic representation of Silence; the third of the Franciscan vows, Obedience puts a finger to her lips in the thirteenth-century fresco by the Maestro delle Vele in Assisi. When the object of desire raised her voice, her desirability decreased; speaking implied unruliness, disobedience. And the penalty for this – the quick, ready-to-hand expression of this undesirable lack of compliance – was the appearance of physical decay. Decrepitude enciphered ugliness, ugliness unloveliness, unloveliness unwomanliness, unwomanliness infertility: a state of being against nature. The association between a woman's body and her speech, between her face and figure and her tongue, lies at the heart of the public male quest for a desirable match. To look fair and speak fair are linked feminine virtues; to look foul and speak foul equally; the hag curses, the scold is ugly. The womb redeems the tongue; vulgarly speaking, a wombful excuses a mouthful. The First Epistle to Timothy makes the link explicit : motherhood redeems woman not merely from sexuality, but from her sinfulness as a speaking woman: 'A woman ought not to speak ... Nevertheless she will be saved by childbearing' (1 Tim. 2: 15).

Consequently, the infertile woman, past the age of childbearing, transgresses the function and purpose of her sex, and like any transgressor against the God-given, natural order could serve to represent other pejorative and repugnant aberrations. As lewdness was a vice, and inappropriate lewdness, in a woman past her bloom, an even greater vice, the bedizened crone, or the hag who seeks to tempt love, emerges as an emblem of Sin itself, in allegories of vice in a wide variety of media, in secular and religious manuscript illumination, in sculpture, embroideries, tapestries, ivory, enamel work, as well as the major fine arts. This iconographic language remains stable, like its verbal counterpart – the word 'hag' has not shifted in meaning since it first was established in English usage in the sixteenth century; Shakespeare, in whose work it acts as a synonym for witches, also frequently associates the word with an evil tongue.

Although allegory is a learned language, it travels, and it combines with cultural *données* to convey shared, material attitudes. Uncovering its structural axioms can help dismantle those conventionally attributed meanings themselves. For instance, in René d'Anjou's early fifteenth-century romance, *Le Livre du cueur d'amours espris* (The Book of the Heart Smitten with Love), Jalousie, a female, lies in wait for the hero, the Knight of the Heart, and waylays him in the forest. The chivalric novel describes her in ferocious terms:

> A hunchbacked dwarf made all at cross purposes [*contrefaicte*] in face and body ... hair ... like the pelt of an old boar ... eyes ... like fiery coals ... nose ... large and twisted ... mouth long and wide to her ears ... yellow teeth, ears hanging down more than a palm's length ... dugs big and soft and hanging on her belly ... her feet broad and webbed like a swan's ...

Jealousy is represented with unkempt hair and pelts of beasts (as well as withered dugs and splay feet) as she waylays the page Ardent Desire, in the foreground and the Knight of the Heart, visored behind him. (René d'Anjou, Livre du cueur d'amours espris, *French, fifteenth century.)*

The key word here is '*contrefaicte*' – counterfeit, or 'made against', implying that her physical condition flouted nature's laws and purposes. More particularly, Jalousie represents, in the romance, wicked counsel or speech, for she has captured and gagged the helpful and beautiful youth called Bel Acueil (Fair Welcome) who was to lead the lovers through the forest; and with her long, wide mouth she utters dreadful curses on them to impede their progress.

A female personification – Justice or Charity, for instance – embodies meaning in its absolute and ideal ontological fullness, but does not pretend to represent the virtue's active human agent (the good judge, the almsgiver). By contrast, allegories of the vices usually perform their wicked deeds themselves. They communicate meaning by anecdote and example: in the choir at Chartres, Gula (Greed) prepares to eat a large pork pie, while on the South Portal, Luxuria (Lust) is represented as a lewd embrace between the Devil and a lady. The vices cannot belong

When it comes to images of hags, the conventions of allegory merge with the assumptions of moralizing: a classic representation of Vanity, as a wrinkled old flirt, with mirror, fripperies, and roses doomed to fade, is renamed for publication in print as 'The Old Procuress at the Toilet Table' and passes for a portrait of a real life bawd. (Jeremias Falck, after Bernardo Strozzi, seventeenth century.)

in the universal world of fixed forms, without falling into the Manichaean heresy of granting equal power and existence to the realm of the Devil. So they must be made flesh, take on humanity; when that humanity is female, the sin and the sinner become one and the same, allegory flows into anecdotal or literal depiction, the figured idea acquires social, historical and material context, participating in a narrative of either imaginary or lived experience. In the area of sexuality and its linked sins – like Vanity – the ageing woman emerges as the most fittingly abhorrent image. A seventeenth-century *Allegory of Vanitas*, for instance, was drawn by Jeremias Falck after a painting by Bernardo Strozzi. When the engraving was published, it was given a different title, namely, *The Old Procuress at the Toilet Table* (above). This hesitancy, which fails to distinguish clearly between the social document – an image from a brothel – and the figuration of an abstract idea – Vanity – in the engraving reveals a crucial historical aspect of the representation of vice as an old woman.

Allegories of vice are often hard to see; they can wear a look of naturalistic documentation; the allegorical tradition mingles with and influences the conventions of the naturalistic mode of representation, and whereas idealization is easy to detect, vituperation can present itself in the guise of verisimilitude.

In seventeenth-century Dutch painting, the figure of the bawd, as painted by Strozzi, recurs as a conventional character. She is often toothless, chapfallen, and scraggy; in *The Procuress* by Dirck van Baburen, this kind of crone scratches the palm of her hand avariciously as a client embraces a smiling and voluptuous girl (Pl. 5). Yet the confessions of prostitutes and their madams in seventeenth-century Amsterdam reveal that many of the bawds began their careers in their twenties – as soon as they could leave the activity of prostitution and run a girl or two themselves, they did so. In consequence, the average age of the bawds was between thirty and thirty-five, around ten years older than the young women working under their control. Even allowing for different life expectancy and health, the bawds in Strozzi's or Van Baburen's paintings could not be in their thirties: the tradition of allegorical vice has modified the artists' pictorial language and led them to the hag in order to convey the moral meanings they intended.

When the Dutch genre painters turned to scenes of urban life, the language available to them for communicating the identity of a procuress was particular and limited. It was provided by a medieval vocabulary of sensual sin, which provided hags as the principal characters in a cautionary tale about the ugliness and the penalties of lust.

Allegory has a long reach, deep into the most seemingly realistic ways of representation. The topos does not belong exclusively to the Judaeo-Christian tradition and its expression in Dutch Protestant culture. Since classical times, the hag has been reviled; and the hag who does not know herself to be a hag but primps and coquettes like a young woman came in for special abuse. Desire in a woman who cannot justify it by the grace of fecundity becomes excessive and unnatural; her lust *ipso facto* a mark of perverse insatiability. But the allegorical hag's sins are not bodied forth only by the impairments and disfigurements of age, the sagging breasts and scrawny genitals against which medieval poems like the pseudo-Ovidian *De Vetula*, for instance, inveigh. A constant tendency inspires the image of transgressions as sins of her mouth: especially the noisy evils of her tongue. The classical personification of Ira (Anger) resembles Invidia (Envy) in her railing, and both derive from the Greek daimon Eris, or Strife, in Homer. Similarly, the conventional allegory of Invidia, Envy, is associated with wrongful speech; Cesare Ripa, author of the influential handbook on symbolic representation, the *Iconologia*, recommends that she be represented raging, gnawing her own heart and crowned with a mane of hissing snakes.

The principal sin, however, with which the tongue is particularly connected is lust, for, since the days of Eve and the serpent, as we have seen, seduction lies in talk, and the tongue is seduction's tool. In medieval representations, the Devil at his work of temptation sometimes mirrors Eve's own face, but he also often has wrinkled female dugs – his perversion blazoned on his chest as breasts that have lost their true purpose of nursing. Consequently, the body of an infertile woman,

when invoked in any way as a body, expresses perforce a perverted dimension of the natural, becomes transgressive in itself, open to derision as well as fear.

The mill of youth and the anvil of Lustucru stand as emblems that the old woman's voice was particularly disagreeable and disturbing, to male ears in particular: 'Strike hard on the mouth: she has a wicked tongue.'

IV

Both the linguistic link between godmothers and old gossips, and the social link between ageing women and secret, wicked powers, are crucial in the world of fairy tale; wresting control of that evil tongue occupied the energies of many of the pioneers of nursery tales.

Old women, either as godmothers or wicked fairies, dominate the channels of influence depicted within the tales, as Charles Perrault flippantly underlines in his moral to *'Cendrillon'*, his famous Cinderella story, when he adds how important it is for a young person to have a well-placed godmother. Perrault was alluding to the worldly society of aristocratic Paris, but in his story he translated the powers of networking into traditional wise-woman magic to assist his heroine's social success – the rat coachman, the lizard footmen (advisedly picked because lizards bask in the sun all day and footmen were notoriously idle) and the pumpkin coach. Such metamorphoses, half a century before Perrault was writing, would have marked the fairy down for a most nefarious witch; indeed, Perrault appears almost to be punning on the fantasy of the witches' stew. Common fears circulated – especially about women who could destroy married bliss by casting spells which made the husband impotent: they were called *noueuses d'aiguillettes* because they were thought to achieve their ends by tying knots using little needles on images of their victims. But by 1697, Perrault and his audience could make light of any dangers from sorcery, while enjoying the fancy of such wonderful powers.

The practice of godparenting created bridges between different social islands: between the poor and the nobility, and vice versa. The disadvantaged might seek a sponsor among the powerful, but an aristocratic family, like the family of the Montaignes, would invite a beggar to hold the infant Michel, the future essayist, at the font at his baptism in 1533, to instil at an early age Christian principles of humility. This custom of infant sponsorship, or co-parenthood, came under pressure from reformers, but it survived, and was ritualized in continued exchanges of hospitality, gifts, and information, as new social alliances were forged at very different levels. The bond was considered so close and strong that it debarred co-sponsors from marrying each other, as if they stood in blood relationship. Gossips created family ties: they marked out the faultlines of allegiance and dissociation.

Gossip and fairy tales have in common a cavalier relation to accuracy; the truths they seek to pass on do not report events with the veracity of a witness in court. They are partial, tending to excess in both praise and blame; tale-bearing is a partisan activity. Though both forms of speech tend to be practised by the least advantaged members of society, they can achieve considerable, even dangerous, influence by such means. Defamation, scandal, hearsay, all aspects of gossip, reappear metamorphosed in fairy tale's plots, featuring wicked stepmothers, false brides, bloodsucking ogres, and predatory suitors. Children, of whatever rank, who play around the women gossiping are learning the rules of the group; fairy tales train them in attitudes and aspirations. This can be a conservative influence: the old can oppress the young with their prohibitions and prejudices as well as enlighten them. But the tale-bearing will in either case pass on vital information, about the values and beliefs of the community in which they are growing up, will instruct them in who is trusted and who is not, about what is considered praiseworthy and what is condemned, about alliances and enmities, hopes and dangers. Stories function in a similar manner: they chart the terrain. Some directions are urged, but the signposts are not entirely coercive. Gossip and narrative are sisters, both ways of keeping the mind alive when ordinary tasks call; the fictions of gossip – as well as the facts – act as compass roses, pointing to many possibilities.

The literary women who wrote fairy tales, the sophisticated milieu in which 'Cinderella', 'The Blue Bird', 'The Subtle Princess' and 'The Sleeping Beauty' were produced, mounted a critical attack on many prejudices and practices of their day, which confined and defamed women in their view and coarsened the minds and manners of all members of society. Paradoxically, gossip was one of the battlefields on which they engaged their enemies, one of the weapons they seized. The culture of the salons in the second half of the seventeenth century fostered the art of conversation as one of the foundation skills of civilization.

The Marquise de Rambouillet (née Catherine de Vivonne de Savelin, 1588–1665), found the court of Louis XIII rather too rustic for her taste, and started receiving at home instead. As a hostess, she made many innovations of a startling kind, which in themselves developed in form and style the custom of the lying-in. She invited her guests to attend her in her *chambre bleue*, her blue bedroom, and she refashioned the interior of the Hôtel de Rambouillet so that they approached this inner sanctum through a sweeping enfilade of rooms, until they reached their hostess. In this 'alternative court' the lady lay in bed, on her *lit de parade* (her show bed) in her *alcôve*, waiting to be amused and provoked, to be told

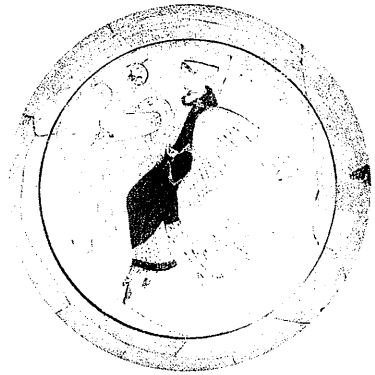
stories, real and imaginary, to exchange news, to argue and theorize, speculate and plot. The Marquise de Rambouillet sat her favourite guests down to talk to her by her side in the *ruelle* – the 'alley' – which was the space between her bed and the wall. *Ruelles* became the word for such salons, which sprang up in imitation of hers in the city; those who attended were called *alcôvistes*, privy to the *alcôve*. This arrangement of social space, both public and private at the same time, was presided over by women and it lasted until the Revolution. The word 'salon' itself came into use only after the practice had died out.

Ruelles were the frames in which the most familiar fairy tales of the modern nursery were sown and carefully tended, as part of a conscious project to overturn prejudices and refashion conventional values and attitudes. Among these, some of the most lively and refreshing experiments focussed on the pursuits and powers of women, especially in private matters. Gossip was transformed in the *ruelles* into an art of cosmopolitan finesse; stories were elaborated to entertain and instruct; relationships were defined and refined through exchanges of intimate intensity but unbesmirched decorum. Madeleine de Scudéry, the most successful novelist of the day, devised the *Carte de Tendre*, or Map of [the land of] Tenderness, which charted the journey true lovers must take across a symbolic landscape of seas of enmity, lakes of indifference, wastelands of betrayal in order to discover tenderness, in its varied forms, loving friendship as well as ardent passion. If the *académies*, controlling the written word, were dominated by male authors and thinkers, then the *ruelles* were the sphere of women, where they presided over the spoken word and its uses. The grammarian Claude Favre de Vaugelas even conceded them this territory when, in his almost scriptural *Remarques sur la langue française* of 1647, he noted, 'in case of doubt about language, it is ordinarily best to consult women'. The *ruelle* was a space created by noblewomen in the image of the humbler, more chaotic gathering, the gossiping, and among its varied pastimes it strove to give new value to that traditionally despised pursuit and talent of women, old and young: to give tittle-tattle its due as an art of communication, as an aspect of storytelling.

Strong measures for rattling tongues: Mexican postcard, c. 1985.

CHAPTER 4

Game Old Birds: Gossips III



Storks were descending in slow circles in the direction of the river, soon to hold their first parliament before flying off to warmer lands. Helena suddenly recalled the local superstition – if a young woman sees a stork in a meadow it means that she'll become pregnant soon. What has happened, she thought. What have I done? But she was in a state of sleepy bliss.

Tadeusz Konwicki

During the closing, valedictory session of *Les Evangiles des quenouilles*, one of the hags, Dame Berthe de Corne, tells the company that she is going to give away 'a marvellous secret few men know'. She then reveals, 'I tell you true: storks, which keep themselves in these parts in summer and in winter return to their own country near Mount Sinai, are creatures just like us.'

Another member of the company, '*vieille à merveille*' (wondrously ancient), with the cod name Dame Abreye l'Enflée (Dame Put-down Over-the-top), confirms this secret, relating that she had often heard how her uncle Claus from Bruges had been to the monastery of Saint Catherine in the Sinai and had become

The goose was sacred to the Goddess of Love, Aphrodite, who occasionally settled herself sidesaddle in the crux of the bird's neck and wing to travel through the air LEFT. *(White ground cup attributed to the 'Pistoxenos Painter', c. 460 BC.) A millennium or two on, and 'Old Mother Goose when she wanted to wander, / Would fly through the air on a very fine gander.' (Arthur Rackham, 'Mother Goose',* The Old Nursery Rhymes, *1913.)*

nature'. He goes on to connect it with the splay foot of a woman who works a spinning wheel all day – again a return to the scene of storytelling – an association however which would postdate by some considerable interval the romance of '*Berthe aus grant pié*,' as the spinning wheel reached Western Europe from the Middle East only some time in the fourteenth century.

In the story of the knight in the fairy kingdom who peeps at his beloved and finds that she has monstrous limbs, in the profusion of legends about women's hidden nether parts, furred, clawed or webbed, in Sheba's heterodox malformation as pictured by the spirited imagination of Pantaleone of Otranto, the fantasy and energy of curious imaginations – boys' and girls' – have faced the place of origin, the mother's genitals. Lacan argued that the phallus functioned as the dominant sign of symbolic language and that the vulva was bodied forth only by lack or absence; but it takes looking to see the obvious, the mutations and migrations performed by vernacular symbolism once on everybody's lips. The metonymy of bird feet for the secret, 'shameful' part of woman, that organ tempting men to sin, circulated in the common language of medieval and Renaissance Europe, attaching itself to figures as various as midwives, riddling queens, and nursery storytellers. It is even hinted at in the famous story of Cinderella, where she is proved by her foot – or does the love and recognition she wins from the prince heal her in the place where her innermost nature is marked? From a historical point of view, it is interesting that the earliest surviving tale of a wronged daughter dropping her shoe was set down in China in the ninth century when footbinding was practised (see Chapter Thirteen).

The stigma of the secret foot acknowledged the power of narrative to transmit knowledge, retaining the suspicion that stories and narrators could be highly unreliable; it represented an attempt to contain and subdue the heterodox; it accorded the tellers all the fascination that secrets hold, while it held out a promise that the act of narrative itself could enrol its makers and hearers back into the fold.

CHAPTER 9

On Riddles, Asses and the Wisdom of Fools: The Queen of Sheba III

And be these juggling fiends no more believ'd
That palter with us in a double sense ...

Macbeth, V, vii

The hard questions the Queen of Sheba put to Solomon in the Bible are not given, but in the subsequent literature, they are consistently assumed to be riddles. Biblical commentators' cross-references direct the reader to other passages, where male heroes and prophets like Solomon distinguish themselves by setting or answering puzzles: to Samson who put the riddle of the lion's carcass that brought forth sweetness (Jg. 14: 12–18), to Daniel who interpreted the dreams and visions of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 1: 20).

The Book of Kings then goes on to say that the Queen of Sheba 'communed with him of all that was in her heart', and that Solomon reciprocated, sharing all his knowledge with her: 'And Solomon told her all her questions: there was not

'Know thyself': a fool in ass's ears is admonished by a stern nymph with a looking glass in an early example of instructive children's literature. (John Bewick, vignette in John Trusler, Proverbs Exemplified, *London, 1790.)*

any thing hid from the king, which he told her not.' Solomon, the wisest man on earth, trusts Sheba with all he knows and understands. No wonder she becomes 'breathless' when she hears him, and exclaims that reports of his wisdom have fallen short of the true dimensions of his brilliance and his munificence (1 Kgs. 10: 1–13).

But before she takes her leave of him, there is a further exchange: King Solomon gave the queen 'all her desire, whatsoever she asked ...' The passage continues, 'beside that which Solomon gave her of his royal bounty'. So his gifts included something more than material goods, and she is represented expressing desire: her body moves, her flesh breathes in a way that Solomon's does not. Though they are matched in wisdom (and in wealth, almost), and now share belief in the same God, their styles of articulating their meanings differ.

The distinction drawn between his 'bounty' and the fulfilment of other desires she may have expressed led hearers and readers of the Bible since the sixth century to imagine the passionate and fertile love of the king and queen. Medieval painters chose the subject, the meeting of Solomon and Sheba, for the decoration of sumptuous and festive *cassoni* or trousseau chests, clearly seeing their encounter as a form of bridal procession, with Sheba like a bride who comes to her groom's bed bringing with her a rich dowry (p. 109). The Ethiopians, as we saw, believed a child was born from their love. As a consequence of this suggestive enigmatic description in the Bible, Sheba's special province of expertise becomes sexuality, its distinctions, its rules; in a popular and important strand of her tradition, beyond the material in the Sibylline apocalyptic books, her hard questions, presented in the form of riddles, elucidated, slyly but clearly, tabooed or secret areas of knowledge.

When she is represented, as she so often is, pointing her index finger in the gesture of discrimination and instruction, she is seen to speak of sexual difference and correct moral judgements, as in a tapestry from Alsace of around 1475–1500, into which is woven one of the puzzles she puts to Solomon: how to tell the difference between boys and girls. Solomon scatters sweets on the ground and then points out that the boys scoop them up by the handful while the girls go down on their knees to gather them into their skirts one by one (right). 'There,' says Solomon in satisfaction. 'Kneeling shows the female sex.'

The encounter between Solomon and Sheba was thus recounted as a battle of the sexes as well as a battle of wits, and the challengers faced each other not only to determine the truth and errors of their gods, but the respective mettle of their minds. Middle Eastern beliefs about Solomon's wizardry travelled and grew,

The Queen of Sheba asks Solomon to tell the difference between girls and boys: he nonchalantly tosses balls among them and the boys catch them while the girls kneel to pick them up. 'Kneeling shows the female sex', declares this kingly paragon of wisdom in a tapestry from Alsace or Strasbourg, 'The Riddles of the Queen of Sheba' (c. 1475).

magical *grimoires* were frequently ascribed to his authorship from the thirteenth century onwards. By virtue of her contact with Solomon, Sheba could be accounted wise. However, just as kneeling showed the female sex, she is still rather less wise than the wise king, a messenger of his knowledge rather than an originator.

Alongside Christian legends of the cross, various materials imagined what the Queen of Sheba said and what she did in the course of her duel with Solomon. These texts illuminate again how in popular narratives, their shuttles flashing back and forth between oral warp and literary woof, the character of the teller encloses the tenor of the tale; how the teller enters and takes part in the story, becomes a protagonist; how Mother Goose herself exemplifies the type of the story she tells. The Cumaean Sibyl who knows hidden mysteries and can reveal them to mortals like Aeneas becomes confused with the dramatis personae of the stories about valiant knights who stray from the true path; she becomes the subject of a prophetic and cautionary narrative, she who used to be their inventor or narrator. Her journey gives us an insight into the relationship of the Sibylline queen with the evolution of the image of fairy storyteller.

For public repudiation turns to acceptance, and the excluded, derided figure of the pagan queen who attracts anti-semitic, anti-pagan, anti-Islam propaganda gains admittance to the fold, as in Piero's frescoes. And in consequence her heterodoxy, her difference, her whiff of marginal, secret wisdom returns, unrepressed, its poison drawn, its dangers passed, its owner tamed. Or so it is presented by the tale that she is reputed to tell – eventually.

The queen clearly knows beforehand some of the solutions to the riddles she asks and is merely trying Solomon's wit. For instance, on a related topic of forbidden sex, she asks: 'A woman said to her son, thy father is my father, and thy grandfather my husband; thou art my son, and I am thy sister.' Solomon answers, quick as a flash: 'Assuredly, it was the daughter of Lot who spake so to her son.' Both the daughters of Lot slept with their father after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, when she and her sister feared there were no more people left on earth (see Chapter Nineteen).

Such family riddles are very old, and the history of their distribution remains hazy. They are examples of conundrums still enjoyed today, as in the rhyme, 'Brothers and sisters have I none, / But this man's father is my father's son.' (Answer: My son.) An eighth-century Syrian bishop and riddle-master included Lot's daughter's question in a collection of forty-two similar posers, and it reached England, making an appearance in the *Exeter Book of riddles*, a manuscript of around 1000. In a Midrash commentary on the Bible and the Book of Esther, composed in the fifteenth century by Yachya Ben Suleiman, several of the questions focus on questions of gender, on permitted erotic relations, and the mysteries of life. The transgression against the incest taboo preoccupies the Rabbi, for here too in her riddles the queen focusses on the marriage of Tamar to one of her own sons and the union of Lot and his daughters. She asks: 'Who are the three who went into a cave and came out five?' Again the answer comes: 'They are Lot, his two daughters and their two sons.'

The queen's puzzles also introduce the themes of pregnancy, childbirth, menstruation, and suckling: 'There is an enclosure with ten doors, when one is open, nine are shut; when nine are open, one is shut.' The answer to this is: 'The womb: the ten doors are the ten orifices of man [sic] – his eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, the apertures for the discharge of the excreta and the urine, and the navel; when the child is in the embryonic state, the navel is open and the other orifices are closed, but when it issues [from the womb] the navel is closed and the others are opened.' In other collections, Sheba shows a lighter side; some of her riddles concern eye make-up and fast horses and other pleasures. But on the whole, her wisdom, in conjunction with Solomon's, concentrates on those mysteries of sex and the body – the suspect, alarming and magical territory commanded by midwives and matchmakers.

Examples of the queen's riddling can be found in rabbinical folklore, in secular theatre, in Christian poetry, in painting, as well as storytelling. The distinction between boys and girls even featured in a pioneering theme park in the Doolhof or Old Labyrinth in Amsterdam, opened during the first half of the seventeenth century. Automata of Solomon and Sheba surrounded by children performed the riddle in one of its versions. The contemporary guide book describes it:

> The queen has brought some of her most beautiful little pages and maids with her ... all dressed in women's clothes, so that nobody could tell them [apart]. And the queen put the riddle to the king ... [He] ordered at once a bowl of water, and commanded [this gaudy band] to wash their faces ... The pages did not hesitate to rub their faces in a masculine fashion, while the girls, bothered by a virginal modesty, hardly dared to touch the water with their fingertips ...

'All these above mentioned figures,' the guide concludes, 'make their movements with a delightful and artistic dexterity, and so do the four Roman pikemen and the dwarf.' The Labyrinth with its attractions remained until 1862, when all the figures were destroyed, except for David and Goliath.

The story of Sheba's riddle coursed through the cultural bloodstream and reached the capillaries of street entertainment; there, it was denounced as rubbish by the learned like the seventeenth-century Dutch scholar Servatius Gallaeius, who in his attack on the Sibyls, including Sheba, adduced the test of the children as an example of Solomon's and the queen's entirely non-Christian trickery.

II

Fairy tales similarly concern themselves with sexual distinctions, and with sexual transgression, with defining differences according to morals and mores. This interest forms part of the genre's larger engagement with the marvellous, for the marvellous is understood to be impossible. The realms of wonder and impossibility converge, and fairy tales function to conjure the first in order to delineate the second: magic paradoxically defines normality. Hence the recurrence, in such stories, of metamorphoses, disguises and above all the impossible tasks – the *adynata* – of folk narrative. These can take an active form: that the protagonist

should fill a cribbled pail with four-leaved clovers, as in Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's '*Serpentin vert*', or that the questor should come neither clothed nor naked, neither riding nor walking, neither bearing a gift nor not bearing one. This riddling demand, made in traditional tales in many different languages, was given to King Solomon and the trickster Marcolf in medieval texts, and to the poor peasant's clever daughter in the Russian fairy tale, collected in the nineteenth century. Verbal riddles do not always invite performed solutions, but Sheba's to Solomon do, and in her role in these stories she takes the place of the lowlife, cunning figure, like Marcolf, or the quickwitted peasant girl, as she tries to have the advantage over Solomon. This riddle is solved when the subject of the challenge rides on a goat (or a hare), with one shoe off and one shoe on, one leg on the ground, draped only in a net, and carrying a hare (or a quail) which springs to freedom as soon as he or she arrives.

The riddles posed by Sheba relate to the matter and the manner of many fairy tales, which dramatize 'witches' duels': in these the heroine or hero confounds the powers of fairy evil by surpassing them in verbal adroitness, in tricksterism. The Devil turns tricks, but those who elude him can outsmart him at his own game. In one of the highly popular ballad versions of 'The Elfin-Knight', for instance, a story which exists in different forms all over the world (the most famous being 'Rumpelstiltskin', hero of the Brothers Grimm's popular tale of that name), the heroine wrestles with the Elfin-Knight, who would snatch her away to the underworld as his bride, by using her verbal wit against his power. The Devil who has come for her in marriage sets her ten riddling questions, and she replies staunchly to all of them. He puts to her:

> O what is whiter than the milk
> Or what is softer than the silk?

To which she replies:

> Snow is whiter than the milk
> And love is softer than the silk.

When he asks:

> O, what is greener than the grass?
> And what is worse than woman was?

She gives the right answer again:

> O poison's greener than the grass
> And the devil's worse than e'er woman was.

With instant results:

> As sune as she the fiend did name,
> He flew away in a blazing flame.

Only God can remain the Unnameable: naming the Devil, knowing him for what he is, undoes his power. (Even Wittgenstein was moved to remark with regard to this type of fairy tale, 'Profound, profound.')

Turandot, Puccini's famous opera, is one of many works to take its inspiration from a fairy tale about a haughty princess who refuses to marry, ridding herself of all suitors by setting them impossible riddles – until her heart is touched by the kiss of the prince who gives the right solutions. Sheba's role, structurally, duplicates the adversary's in these tales – she sets the riddles and is answered; she is knowledgeable, taking the part of eliciting the right answers and the correct responses, while remaining morally ambiguous herself, like the Devil or the strong, cruel female protagonist; her testing of Solomon in the folk tales becomes a prelude to their love match, an early form of the blind-date interview.

Fairy tales likewise often seek to define, within a romantic contest, appropriate male and female conduct, to endorse the correct version and – usually – reward it with more than Solomon's bounty of sweets. Riddles, when they are included in a fairy tale, often reflect the incestuous relationship at the core of the plot, as in the cycle of Donkeyskin tales about a father who wants to marry his daughter (see Chapter Nineteen). Other stories dramatize trials of identity in which the heroine (usually) is concealed, as it were, in a riddle, and her sex is put to the proof, as in '*Marmoisan*', by Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier, and '*Belle-belle, ou le Chevalier Fortuné*' by Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy. The high-spirited double cross-dressed tale of star-crossed lovers which Perrault may have written in collaboration with a notorious rake, the Abbé de Choisy, spoofs this basic convention of romance.

The literary form of the riddle, while still part of nursery lore in Britain, has more often than not split off from fairy tales themselves today. But in the early years of written wonder stories, riddles were embedded within them: Straparola's tales in *Le piacevoli notti* are punctuated with double entendres presented in riddle

form. These were dropped from later, literary editions, but a scholar in Germany heard one about a 'churning-tub' which Straparola had included, from a twelve-year-old girl at the beginning of the century. Another set of verses described a distaff in merry terms ('Madam has me unceasingly, wishes me between her young fingers, or next to her thigh'), and was illustrated, in a Dutch edition of 1624, for instance, opposite a decorous engraving of a housewife alone at her spinning (p. 137).

Riddles are traditional, like tunes, and it is harder to date their origin, since their style remains fairly consistent. An eighteenth-century example asks:

I am white and stiff it is well known
Likewise my Nose is red;
Young ladies will as well as Joan,
Oft take me to their Bed.

'Answer: It is a candle.' This is the same kind of joke as the ones about distaffs and churning-tubs. In Italy today, a favourite children's riddle still goes: 'What goes in hard and comes out soft?' Again, the comedy lies in the second-guessing; the interrogator traps the listener into a dirty thought – a devilish trick. For the right answer is 'Macaroni'.

When printers first began directing their products at children, in the eighteenth century in Britain, they also included 'jest books', which told riddles. They are angled towards children, often in a jocular spirit; the frontispiece of *The Riddle Book, or Fireside Amusements*, for instance, shows a certain 'Miss Clever' who 'the prize from her visitors took / By unriddling riddles in this riddle book'. The recurrent ribaldry in the material shows the same temper as the equivocal, slightly comic tone of the legends about the wise queen's lower parts; her riddling, her secret knowledge, her suggestive sexuality ring in the same key as the foolish, naughty, comic, even scabrous old woman who is dubbed Mother Goose in children's literature later.

III

The animal most closely associated with merriment and folly is the ass; but, paradoxically, donkeys are also the beasts most endowed with powers of divination and wisdom in fairy and folklore. Indeed they rival geese in making fools of themselves and thus showing up the folly of others. The ass, whose hoof also appears to brand the body as marginal and dangerous, the outsider and the heathen, sets

The distaff's shape and role in women's work gave rise to ripe innuendoes, couched in merry riddles. (Anon. engraving, Enigmata sive emblemata amatoria *(Riddles, or Amorous Emblems) Leiden, 1624.)*

up such distinctions, and leads to another set of dynamic metaphors active in fairy tales. For in the same way as the genre exalts the little man (and woman) and shows up the mighty, defeats the giants and crowns the thumblings, so the stupidest of the beasts turns out to be the wisest according to the logic of the stories. This logic organizes the material of fairy tales internally, but its imagery, the costumes it assumes, are borrowed from elsewhere: and, as is the case so often, the topsy-turvy exemplar of the wise donkey can be found in the Old Testament and was passed on into secular folklore by medieval works like the *Speculum humanae salvationis* and the *Biblia pauperum*, in which Balaam and his ass, with the Queen of Sheba, are paired as unlikely but commendable prophets.

Monumental evidence exists of the pairing from an earlier date, which probably inspired the textual diffusion of the images: on both sides of the Portail Royal, the North door of Chartres Cathedral, elongated, solemn figures appear of Old Testament patriarchs and prophets. Carved around 1230, they occupy a place in the overarching scheme of the sculpture programme of the entire portal, connecting the time before the Redemption with the time after, prefiguring the New Covenant and the return of grace to the world. On the right side, one of the three lower statues is Solomon with Marcolf the jester crouched beneath his pedestal; next to him stands the Queen of Sheba, with her feet resting on a Moor; next to her Balaam with his ass.

What is the connection? Balaam enters the Bible as another magician and foreigner, like Solomon in the first case and Sheba in the second, to be granted a vision of the truth of the Jewish god and the coming Saviour. In the Book of Numbers, Balak, King of Moab, fears the Israelites who are settling in the valley

of the Jordan 'because of their immense number' and asks Balaam, a powerful sorcerer, to come and pronounce a curse upon them: '"For this I know," he says, "the man you bless is blessed; the man you curse is accursed."' He sends money for the divination to Balaam by the hand of some Moabite elders, and Balaam responds that he will pray overnight to Yahweh. Yahweh warns him not to curse the Jews, and so Balaam refuses the king's request (Num. 22: 1–14).

A second embassy is sent to him by Balak, to change his mind, and this time Yahweh allows Balaam to go, but orders him to do 'nothing except what I tell you'. The wizard saddles his ass and on the way – this is the famous episode, for which he and his she-donkey have remained part of Christian storytelling – an angel with drawn sword bars the way forward. Balaam cannot see the angel, in spite of his spiritual powers. But his donkey can, and she runs away from the road. Balaam beats her until she returns to the path. The angel again bars the road, this time in a narrow place, so that Balaam grazes his foot as the donkey swerves to avoid the angel. Again she is beaten harshly for her refusal. A third time the angel stands in their way, and this time the donkey lies down, and Balaam takes a stick to her.

Then Yahweh opened the mouth of the donkey, who said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you? Why beat me three times like this?'

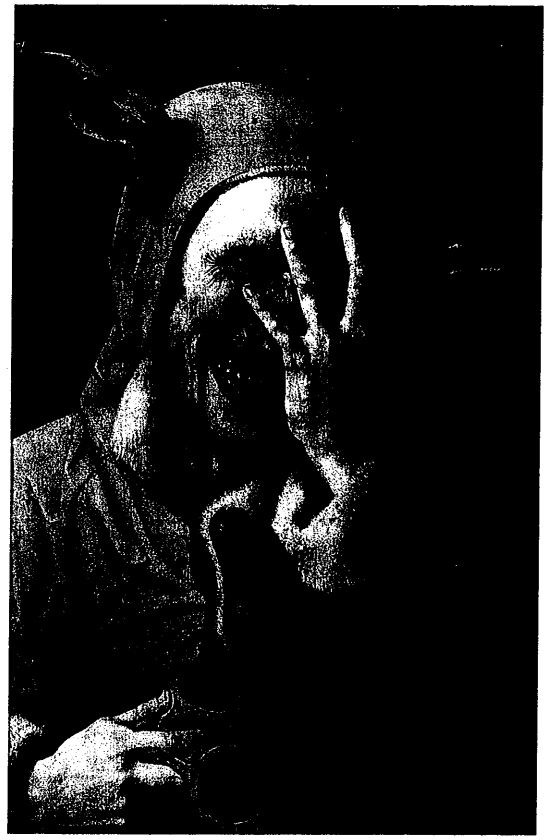
To which Balaam replies, 'Because you are playing the fool with me.' If he had a sword, he adds, he would kill the animal (Num. 22: 20–29). The tables are to be turned, of course, on a man who has not the wit to realize that a talking donkey is something out of the ordinary to be reckoned with. For after another bitter exchange, Yahweh vouchsafes the same vision to Balaam, and opens his eyes – the sentence echoes exactly the earlier miracle of the donkey's powers of speech – and he becomes able to see the angel with the sword barring the way. He falls on his face to worship; the angel tells him, again in a precise echo of Balaam's earlier threat to his ass, that he would have run Balaam through if the donkey had not stopped in time.

After this encounter, a chastened Balaam, newly alert to human folly, meets the King of Moab and showers blessings on Israel in a series of inspired oracles, spouting at some length and with enthusiasm, to the despair of Balak who had commissioned him rather to lay dreadful curses on the Israelites. Balaam's prophecies include, 'A star shall rise out of Jacob…' (Num. 24: 17) This was interpreted later to refer to the birth of Christ and connected to the portent which drew the wise men from the East to Bethlehem.

The miraculous donkey who speaks the truth when her master fails to see it represents the possibility that lowly creatures may prove wiser than their learned masters, that the meek shall inherit the earth – a fundamental Christian maxim that remains to be proved. Although the notes to the Jerusalem Bible comment that a she-donkey was considered a princely mount in biblical times, Balaam's talking ass was received as a symbol of humility, and entered the body of medieval ass-lore. The beast of burden acts as a totem of the most sublime of Christian virtues, humility, and is specially precious to God in consequence. The legend of Saint Anthony of Padua relates how scoffers about the real presence of Jesus in the host were taught a lesson by the saint: he presented a hungry donkey with a consecrated host and the beast knelt before it instead of wolfing it down (below).

The alliance between the prophets and Balaam's ass has been perpetuated by the sculpture programmes of twelfth- and thirteenth-century churches in

The donkey knows better than his master: according to the legend of St Anthony of Padua, while its owner insisted on denying the miracle of transubstantiation the animal knelt before the true host rather than eat it.(Taddeo Crivelli and Guglielmo Giraldi, The Gualenghi-d'Este Hours, Ferrara, *c. 1470.)*



The Fool, with his grotesque bauble, in his coxcomb with ass's ears, peeping through parted fingers, sees very well. (Anon. Dutch, Fool Laughing at Folly, *c. 1500.)*

Europe; but it was also made in a most significant fashion with regard to popular storytelling, in the more ephemeral form, liturgical drama – with lasting effects. The *Ordo prophetarum*, or Play of the Prophets, was performed at Matins at Christmas time; the earliest dramatic versions date from the eleventh century, but it was inspired by a sermon, which was written four or five hundred years before, and also chanted as a lesson at Christmas. Entitled 'Against Jews, Pagans and Arians', it was attributed to Augustine, whose august name added credibility to the sermon's bigotry. It upbraided all those who do not recognize the truth of Christ, by invoking the seers who did, in the usual unpleasant manner of the Sibylline oracles. The Jews are denounced by their own Old Testament prophets like Isaiah and Daniel and Moses, while famous pagans like the Sibyl join in the attack. Venerable old men and women from the New Testament who just preceded Christ and were able to recognize him, like Simeon who was present at the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, then add their voices to the chorus.

This *Lectio*, or reading, was adapted in verse and set to music; the entry of each new prophet was greeted by a salvo of imprecations against those who had failed to acknowledge the true Saviour. In the thirteenth-century Laon version, the Sibyl preceded Simeon, 'in a woman's dress, bare-headed, garlanded with ivy and most like someone crazed'. She then sang her song, 'Judgement's Sign', with its prophetic acrostic, JESUS SOTER, as we saw in Chapter Five.

Bringing up the rear of this procession was Balaam, the fool turned wise, who was to be bearded, astride his ass, holding a palm frond and spurring on the animal. This was performed, not merely described: the manuscript provides that the '*puer sub asino*' (the boy under the donkey) should now give the reason he cannot go forward, that he sees an angel standing in his way with a drawn sword.

Later versions of the *Ordo prophetarum* swelled the number of seers to as many as twenty-eight, and the ritual was sometimes performed after Christmas, on 1 January, the Circumcision, a feast which of its nature splices the Old Covenant with the New, since it presents Jesus accepting the law of the Jews while at the same time inaugurating a new era in which that law will no longer obtain. The similarity grows between this solemn Christmas rite and the carnivalesque *Festum asinorum*, or Feast of Donkeys, which was celebrated in other French churches like Rouen Cathedral in the same period. A King of Fools, riding an ass, was crowned while the congregation made merry. Karl Young, in his *Drama of the Medieval Church*, suggests that Balaam's ass was borrowed from the Feast of Fools, not vice versa, but does not really pursue the questions raised by introducing the magical ass with the power of speech into the presumably serious rite of the *Ordo prophetarum*. The *Festum asinorum* was rollicking and licentious in tone, in the tradition of the pagan Hilaria festival, and drew on classical associations with Dionysiac revelry – Silenus, Bacchus' lewd companion, was mounted on an ass who sometimes threw him, much to everyone's delight. Balaam's ass, impersonated by a *puer*, turned the solemnities upside down, made fools of the preceding prophets, including the Sibyl and her ilk, opened up the possibility of laughter. This too is the function of the grotesque, be it the bray of a wise ass in church, or the riddles of an ass-footed queen or a web-footed siren.

Donkeys were the jester's symbolic beast. The jester's cap bears ass's ears: in a splendidly lively, anonymous Dutch painting, *A Fool Laughing,* of around 1500, from the Wellesley Museum, his head-dress shows its origins in an asshide quite clearly (left); in Quentin Massys's *Allegory of Folly* of 1510, the fool's cap includes a crowing rooster and other emblems of rampant sex, as well as long, suggestively flaccid donkey ears.

The atmosphere of the thirteenth-century cathedral ritual cannot really be

known; what can be uncovered are some illuminating connections between popular texts, like riddles and fairy tales, and medieval donkey-lore, and they deepen the relation between the genre and figures like women and geese, proverbially foolish creatures. In eighteenth-century riddle books, the riddles are sometimes put to an interlocutor labelled 'Balaam's Ass'. 'I answer,' the animal says, standing in as mouthpiece for the compiler, and then provides the solutions.

IV

Balaam's ass makes a mock of pomposity, and defends the right of the ignorant to knowledge. Talking animals in general could be considered a more reliable denominator of folklore than fairies themselves, especially the donkey, who features as hero, star and victim in hundreds of fables, by Aesop and Phaedrus as well as the comic romances and the Milesian farces. Charles Perrault, comparing the tone of his work favourably to the classics, was again having it both ways: enjoying the reproduction of classical levity and daring, and dressing it up as a moral apprenticeship to life for young people.

The wits of seventeenth-century Paris were indeed uneasy in their relations with the popular material which inspired the fairy tales they had espoused as an improving instrument of *civilité* in the *ruelles*. At the same time, however, they relished the tradition's naughtiness and the escape from the pompous euphemisms of the Académie Française that it offered. The donkey, like the goose, was a key actor in this comedy of wisdom and folly: the creature is the most popular hero – or heroine – of fable and fairy tale. Lucius in *The Golden Ass* is turned by mistake into a donkey by a witch, caught and put to work as a pack animal, and then witnesses all the events of the novel in that dumb, long-suffering shape, including the storytelling scene in which 'Cupid and Psyche' is related (p. 16).

Apuleius' romance draws its inspiration from the Greek comic genius Lucianus of Samosata, who had been translated into French and was still inspiring versions during the period fairy tales were beginning to be written down. Perrot d'Ablancourt, scholarly scourge of piety and platitude, translated a selection of Lucian's works, including his *Lucius, or the Ass*. The relationship between this bawdy tale, earlier, lost Greek texts, and Apuleius' much more elaborate romance *The Golden Ass* is complicated, and classicists are still reviewing it. The interest here lies however in the contents of *The Ass*, which closely resembles Apuleius' book; both books are of consequence in the formation of fairy tale.

In *The Ass*, Lucius the hero goes to stay in Thessaly, a province famous for the magic powers of its women, and asks the maidservant in the household to let him peep at his hostess while she casts her spells. As he watches, she smears an oint-

OPPOSITE Lucius consults a renowned witch of Thessaly when he wants to fly like her; but she gives him the wrong ointment and he turns into a donkey. (Anon., engraving in Lucian, The Ass, *translated Perrot d'Ablancourt, Amsterdam, 1709.)*

LEFT Witchhunters' fantasies placed the donkey in the devil's crew; here three witches fly off to the Sabbath on their beast familiars. (Woodcut in Ulrich Molitor, De Lamiis et phitonicis mulieribus, *(On Lamias and Witches), Constance, 1489.)*

ment over her body and turns into a bird, sprouting feathers and flying out through the window. Lucius begs the maid to steal the same ointment for him, but she picks out the wrong box, and when he anoints himself he turns into an ass (p. 142). He then has to undergo terrible ordeals, until at last he is fed on roses – flowers sacred to Venus – the only food that can restore him to human shape.

The tone of *The Ass* is joyously lewd, and unremitting in its satire of human savagery and self-interest. After heroic sexual adventures with the maid, the hero enjoys even more strenuous entertainment with a woman who loves him precisely because he is an ass for obvious, pornographic reasons, and discards him when he is turned back into a man. Terrible tortures are plotted by the robbers; nobody behaves well: nothing is for the best in the worst of all possible worlds.

Perrot d'Ablancourt also translated, in 1658, Lucian's *True History*. This comic fiction is a natural predecessor of Baron Münchhausen's extravagant tales, and other, later hyperbolic raconteurs, down to Salman Rushdie and his novels today: the narrator vows to tell the truth and nothing but the truth and then proceeds to improvise the most farfetched and fantastical adventures. The hero's short romp includes a journey to the moon as well as a descent into the underworld, and brazenly parodies many of the most cherished epics of the classics – the wanderings of Odysseus, Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War* – and sends them up in a truly postmodern spirit of pastiche, plagiarism and irreverence. In Hell, for instance, the voyaging hero becomes aware that 'Liars were especially tormented, and also those who had imposed on posterity with their fabulist writings, like Ctesias and Herodotus ...' But this 'gave me some consolation. There's no vice of which I am less guilty.'

The exaggerations, marvels, dislocations of time and space, the supernatural forces and irrational sequence of events relate Perrot d'Ablancourt's work to the fairytale fashion in France which followed some thirty or so years later – the publication of his translation took place during its time of continuing popularity, in 1709. But Perrot's work is symptomatic of the interests of *littérateurs* exploring new registers of tone. His translation's ironic blitheness looks forward to Voltaire, and influences the literary fairy tale in its early printed form. The *True History*, for instance, even includes a pumpkin metamorphosis:

> On the third day we were attacked by barbarians who navigated on great pumpkins six yards long, for, when they are dry, they hollow them out, using seeds instead of stones in the fighting and leaves instead of sails, with a reed for a mast.

Perrot d'Ablancourt's translation of Lucian was illustrated with engravings, including one showing the metamorphosis of the hero (p. 142). The juxtaposition of the conjuring sorceress with the man sprouting a donkey's head condenses vividly the underlying assumption that makes witches and donkeys natural allies (bedfellows): forbidden knowledge, specifically of an erotic character. The donkey belongs firmly in the bestiary of witchcraft: a woodcut from a tract on demonology printed in 1489 shows a witch with an ass's head riding on a broomstick with a devil beast pillion behind (p. 143). In one of Hans Baldung's ferocious drawings and engravings of witches at their covens, dated 1510, there appear the remains of a donkey: its skull lies in the foreground. The coven has probably distilled the famed potency of an ass for the potion the witch on the right flourishes against the curdled and bloody sky: an elixir of sexual enchantment, no doubt. The ass transgresses human society's norms by aggressive wantonness, and witches were suspected of the same polluting disregard of appropriate, moderate sexuality. In that most famous of fairy plays, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bottom the weaver, when 'translated into an ass', finds himself rapturously wooed by Titania, Queen of the Fairies, who has herself been cast under a spell by her husband after a domestic quarrel (see jacket). All is topsy-turvy as Oberon, with Puck his messenger, makes mischief. All is merry, too, and will be set to rights.

Lucius' misadventures as an ass had been passed on, with divergences and accretions, in Latin manuscripts of both Lucian's work and Apuleius'. Interestingly, Apuleius, who was born around AD 124 in that part of north Africa which is now Algeria, was accused by his wife's relatives of obtaining her love by witchcraft (she was rich, and a widow). He stood trial in Alexandria but was, it would appear, acquitted.

The lineaments and motifs of the story, if not its tone, went on shaping popular variations of 'Beauty and the Beast', long after *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as we shall see in Chapter Seventeen. The Brothers Grimm edited and translated a version of *The Ass* in the early nineteenth century, when they were working on their folktale collection. They did not, however, include it in *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, not just because it was bawdy, but because it was classical, and they were aiming at a purely German anthology.

Ludicrous compared to the other witch's familiar, the cat, associated with lubriciousness rather than seduction, the donkey also inspires pathos. The beast symbolizes Christ's humility and became the totem of Franciscan poverty, as Perrault himself discussed in his arguments against Cartesian views of

animals. Descartes had argued that animals had no souls, and in consequence no consciousness, but were like machines. Perrault vigorously defended animals' powers of imaginative understanding by quoting Isaiah's messianic prophecy (Isa. 1: 3): 'The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib'.

The braying of the beast could be used to convey anguish at its condition rather than brute ignorance: the anonymous lady who replied in high indignation to Richard de Fournival's thirteenth-century misogynist commentary on love, *Bestiaire d'amour,* wrote that he had provoked her so that she felt like the wild ass who cries out only when hunger makes him rage: 'O, by my faith, I should cry out indeed!' The ass could perform this empathetic role for a woman because it was the least of the beasts. To be a beast is to be dumb; to be a donkey is to be the dumbest beast of all: in French, *bête* means foolish, stupid as well as animal. But to be a donkey is also to possess a voice: a voice of a certain sort, like the cat and the rooster, the bray of an ass speaks for the passion of the creature without language: in numerous folk tales, as well as in bestiaries both ancient and medieval, the donkey is distinguished by the proud brutishness of its heehaw heehaw. In spite of the loudness and persistence of its cry, it is an animal that cannot communicate: the very intensity of the bray conveys that condition of powerlessness, of exile from human congress.

If lovers of stories could create a memory palace of narrative literature in order to remember what are its forms, its changes, its developments, the room that would represent fairy tales would lie between romance and fable, jokes and riddles, and its tenants would not only be the fairytale beauties, princes and princesses so often associated with the genre, but would include a donkey, a goose, a stranger queen with an anomalous foot, and an old woman, laughing. As the fairy tale became established as a literary form, directed at children, this last figure became, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the narrator's most important and visible mask, for male authors as well as female.

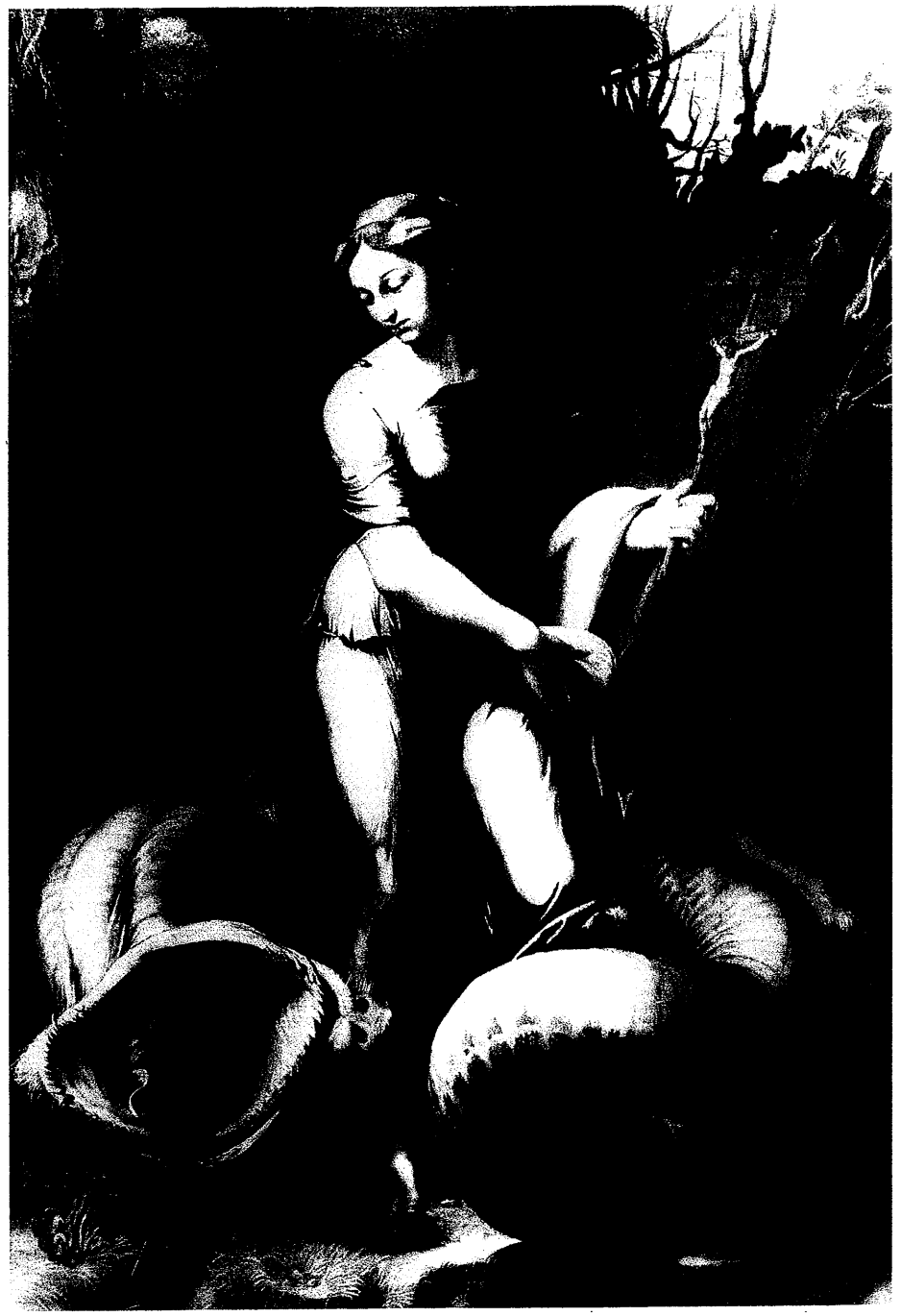
CHAPTER 10

Sweet Talk, Pleasant Laughter: Seduction I

There was an old woman tossed up in a basket,
Seventeen times as high as the moon;
Where she was going I couldn't but ask it,
For in her hand she carried a broom.
Old woman, old woman, old woman, quoth I,
Where are you going to up so high?
To brush the cobwebs off the sky!
May I go with you?
Aye, by-and-by.

Medea's nurse in Euripides' tragedy, or Juliet's in Shakespeare, eggs on the young to pleasure, to vice and folly; the old nurse or crone's connection with inflammatory, foolish advice, with artful persuasion and insider's erotic knowledge, led to their adoption as persuaders by a different variety of aspiring seducer: the storyteller. The effective seductiveness of the crone was so deeply implied that authors appropriated it for themselves to their own ends, or at least represented with some relish male impersonations of the storytelling old wife and

Mother Goose comes in many guises: John Inman takes up the traditional drag role in the pantomime, c. 1990.



Saint Margaret was swallowed by a dragon, but he spewed her up safe and sound; her delivery from the gaping maw made her the special patron of childbirth. (Raphael, Saint Margaret, *c. 1520.)*

CHAPTER 16

The Ogre's Appetite: Bluebeard II

The husband who comes secretly gliding into your bed at night is an enormous snake, with widely gaping jaws, a body that could coil around you a dozen times and a neck swollen with deadly poison. Remember what Apollo's oracle said: that you were destined to marry a savage wild beast … he won't pamper you much longer … when your nine months are nearly up he will eat you alive; apparently his favourite food is a woman far gone in pregnancy.

Apuleius

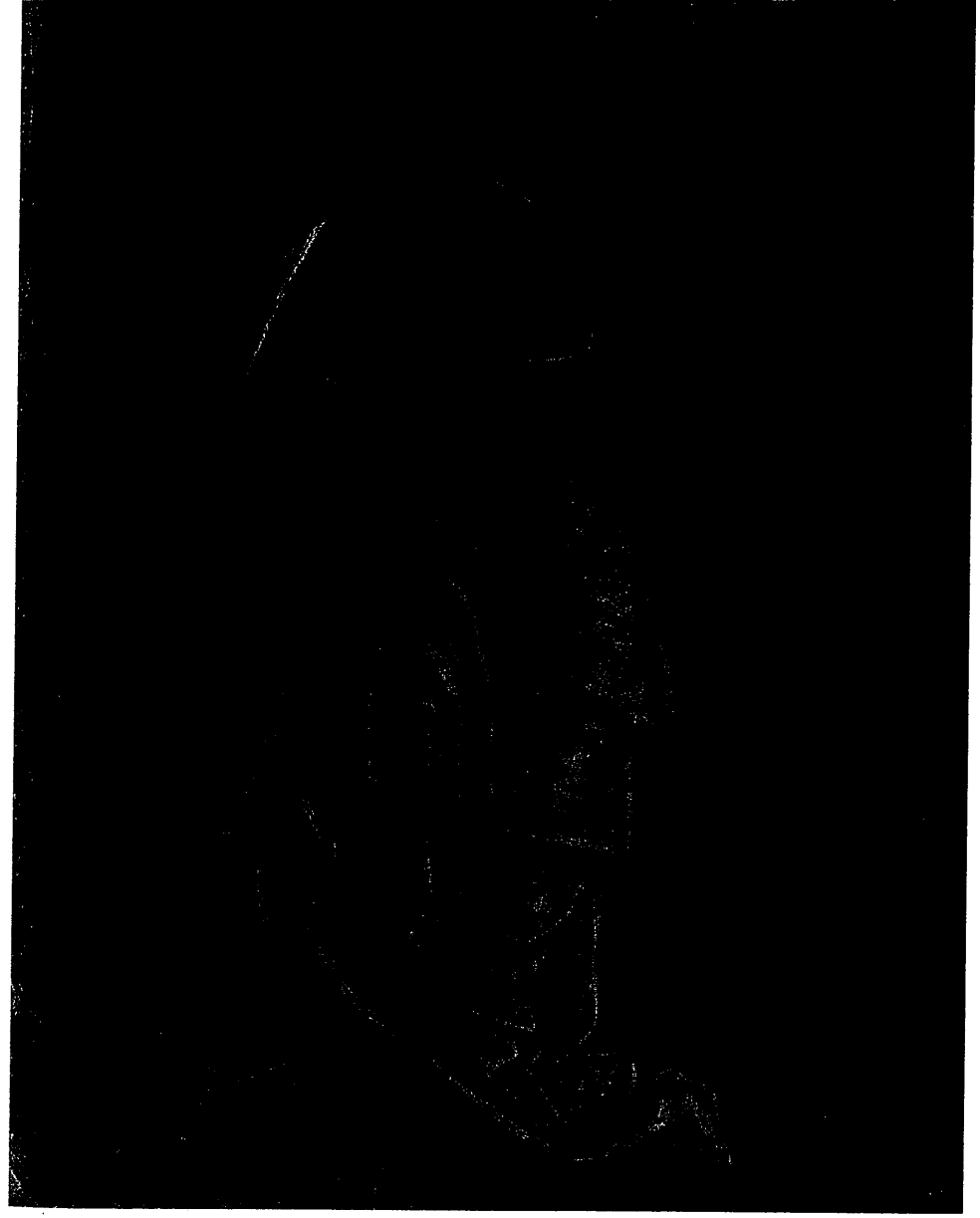
Saint Margaret of Antioch, one of the most popular saints of the middle ages, resisted the unwanted attentions of the Roman prefect Olybrius, seeing him off with the words, 'Thou shameless hound and insatiable lion! Thou hast power over my flesh, but Christ reserveth my soul.' Thrown into prison for this contumely, she is assaulted there by the Devil. He first appears as a dragon, and swallows her alive. But the power of her holiness proves too strong for his digestion: he regurgitates her safe and sound (left). He then makes another attempt on her virtue, this time, 'in the form of a man'. She confounds him again: 'She caught him by the head and threw him to the ground, and set her right foot on his neck saying, Be still thou fiend under the feet of a woman … She took her foot off his head and said, Hence thou wretched fiend, and the earth opened and the fiend sank in.'

In myth and fairy tale, the metaphor of devouring often stands in for sex: ogres like Bluebeard eat their wives, we are told, even though the story itself reveals their bodies hanging whole in the secret chamber, or chopped into pieces, apparently uneaten; Beauty, like Psyche, is terrified that the Beast will eat her, as he eats other creatures. The Cocteau film *La Belle et la bête* shows the Beast's pelt and paws smoking after a fresh kill, and Belle revolted as well as terrified. In a chapbook of 1796, the author adds a helpful footnote to explain the word 'ogre': 'An Ogree [*sic*] is a Giant with long teeth and claws, with a raw head and bloody bones, [who]runs away with naughty Boys and Girls and eats them all up.'

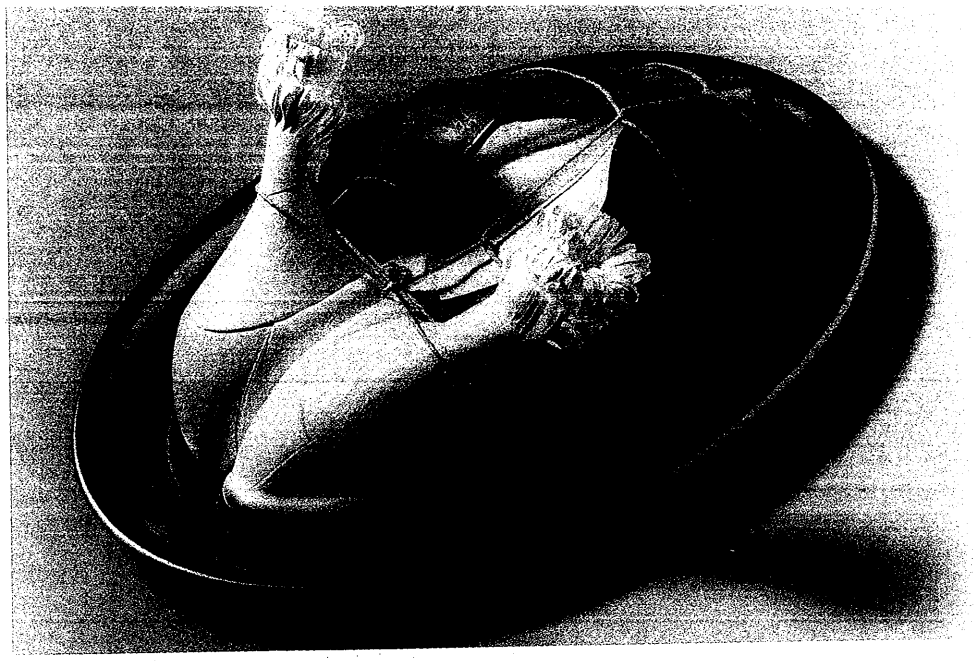
But consumption does not end with disciplinary measures in the nursery, or with sexual contact: the woman's fears do not focus on the act itself, but on its consequences, which are also often spoken of in images of eating: the woman's body, especially pregnant, is particularly delicious to beasts, it seems. For the greedy villains of fairy tale relish babies: their appetite first aims at women, but with an ulterior motive of devouring their offspring.

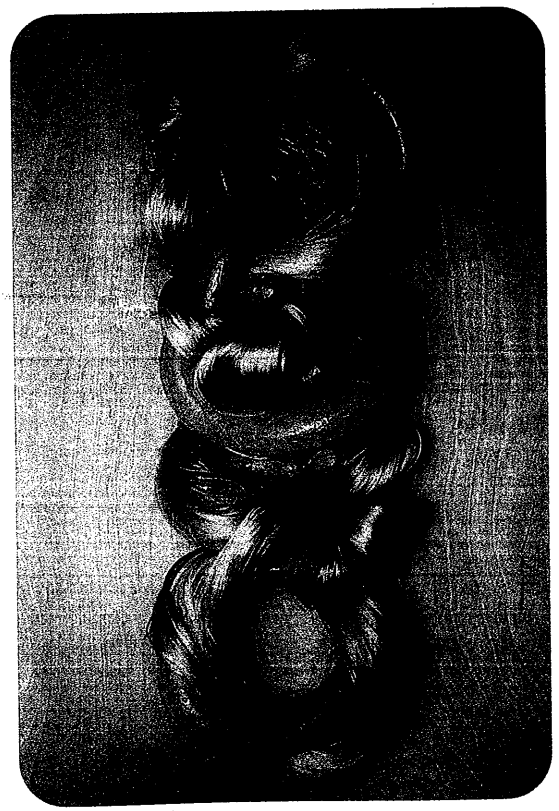
This cannibal motif conveys a threefold incorporation: sexual union, by which a form of reciprocal devouring takes place; pregnancy, by which the womb encloses the growing child; and paternity, which takes over the infant after birth in one way or another. Fairytale princesses enclosed in towers are themselves metonymically swallowed up. One of Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier's tales, *'La Princesse Olymphe, ou l'Ariane de Hollande'*, describes how Olymphe is abandoned on an island where a monster roams who devours young women; later, it turns out he is an ordinary man in disguise who keeps his victims alive, but captive underground. Again, the threat of being eaten stands for the dread of being immured, confined. (It is interesting that the word 'confinement' is used of the late stages of pregnancy.) The motif of deliverance – Margaret's case, when she was spewed forth safely from the dragon's belly – conveys a twofold physical salvation: first, from the act of sexual congress itself (in her legend and in those of all virgin martyrs like her, she remains a virgin), and secondly, from the threatened physical trauma of childbearing. Saint Margaret, one of the most powerful intercessors before the Reformation, had a specific jurisdiction: childbirth. The dragon, by swallowing her whole and then vomiting her up safe and sound, seemed to offer a picture of the perfect delivery. In some representations of her assailant, his yawning gullet does more than hint at the association with the maternal womb (p. 258). As the patron saint of childbirth at a time when the act carried grave dangers, she gave rise to a flourishing cult: there are over two hundred churches dedicated to her in England alone.

The sphere of Margaret's influence points to an interesting undercurrent in the Bluebeard group of fairy tales, in which flows the theme of children's and mothers' deaths. Perrault's immediate source for *'La Barbe bleue'* is not known, but Gilles de Rais, the Breton nobleman, Marshal of France and companion at arms of Joan of Arc, who was hanged in 1440 for satanism and the murder of hundreds of children, has been long associated with the fairytale ogre, especially in Brittany and the Vendée, where Gilles de Rais's castle of Tiffauges stood. In *Saint Joan*, Shaw even calls the historical character 'Bluebeard' and gives him a goatee of that tint. But although the crimes of Gilles de Rais swelled the figure of the fairytale



15 The Zodiac sign of Virgo, in a fresco depicting the month of August, with her hair tumbling down her back in golden abundance, borrows some of the attributes of Proserpina, daughter of Ceres who presides over the harvest: she offers a pomegranate of fruitfulness in one hand, while above her head, she holds a wheatsheaf, emblematic of Spica, the brightest star in an auspicious constellation that promises fertility, plenty and ripeness. (Francesco del Cossa and Ercole de' Roberti, Triumph of Ceres and Astrological Symbols, *detail, Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara, 1469–72.)*





25 The white shoes trussed like a chicken on a dish were given the title Ma Gouvernante, My Nurse, Mein Kindermädchen *by the artist Meret Oppenheim, who was commemorating, in a spirit of mordant rebellion, the voice which in childhood points a girl towards love and marriage.*
26 The dual aspect of sexuality at the core of fairy tale's concerns, here rendered as a disturbing visual oxymoron: spirals of bright hair interwined with gleaming pink pig gut. (Helen Chadwick, Loop My Loop, *original title* Quite Contrary, *1991.)*

villain, another, earlier, Breton story offers a more thought-provoking possible original connection.

A young woman called Triphine, the daughter of Guerech, Count of Vannes, was married to Cunmar or Conomor of Brittany, surnamed 'ar Miliguet', or 'the Accursed'. In a jealous rage, he killed her, cutting off her head. But a local saint, Gildas, abbot of Rhuys in the sixth century, was miraculously able to join her head again to her body; together they then forded the stream of the Blavet to pursue Cunmar to his castle and confront him there. As they approached his castle, its walls came tumbling down. The episode was recorded in the *Vita* of Saint Gildas five hundred years after his death, by another monk of the foundation at Rhuys, and it drew on Breton legend. When Cunmar the Accursed married Triphine, he had already murdered several of her predecessors, and Triphine, his latest bride, fled from him after she was warned of her likely fate by the wives' ghosts. When she went to pray by the family tombs in the ancestral chapel, they spoke to her; there, in this foreshadowing of Bluebeard's secret chamber, they told her that Cunmar killed his wives as soon as they became pregnant. As Triphine knew that she too was expecting a child, she tried to escape, but Cunmar pursued her into a wood and killed her – and with her their unborn child.

Cunmar is a historical figure: a ruler of Brittany in the mid-sixth century who deposed the legitimate prince, became the scourge of the local clergy, and was consequently anathematized by the bishops of Brittany. In local legend, he has survived as a night wanderer, a *bisclavret*, or werewolf, while various churches are dedicated to Sainte Triphine, and to her son, Saint Trémeur, who after his mother's resurrection was safely born and given to Gildas as his godson to be brought up with him in the monastery. Some say Cunmar beheaded him too, and the seventeenth-century votive statue of mother and child in Guern, for instance, shows both saints miraculously carrying their own heads, like Roman martyrs. More vividly, the earlier, medieval frescoes in the church of St Nicholas des Eaux, also in Brittany, which were uncovered in the last century, break down the story into episodes which include Triphine's marriage to Cunmar, his handing over a small key to his castle, her opening a chamber in which seven former wives are hanging, his attempt to murder her – images which anticipate very satisfyingly the fairytale ogre, as chronicled by Perrault. On the main altar in another Breton shrine, a nineteenth-century Triphine is being seized by her hair in readiness for decapitation, an image which reproduces common children's illustrations to 'Bluebeard' (cf. Pl. 22), or the early film treatment by Georges Méliès, who showed the ogre dragging her by her hair up the spiral stairs to the top of a tower.

In this mourning portrait, Elizabeth Basse, Lady Saltonstall, lies pale in her deathbed, with her two children at the side of her husband; her successor, Mary Parker, their new stepmother, sits at her side, with her newborn in her arms. (David Des Granges, The Saltonstall Family, *English, c. 1636–7).*

As Méliès filmed using a dummy (thankfully), she bounces most grimly on the steps as her captor charges up them.

The Bluebeard figure's animus against his pregnant wives has been ascribed to the Oedipal rivalry so often dramatized in mythology: he wishes, like Oedipus' father Laius, to do away with a son before he grows up to threaten him. Or it has been attributed to jealousy: in a European ballad known over a large part of Europe (in French, '*Renaud le tueur des femmes*'), the verses follow the usual plot about the murderous husband, but explain that when he returns, after a long absence, to find his wife has had a child, he suspects her of infidelity: his rage is the unreasoning, maddened response of the man who fears cuckoldry, and believes that a child who is not his is being foisted on him. This trope gives the ballad's tale an affinity with the Accused Queen legends: the ogre's wife, innocent and faithful, is put to the test by a hard and suspicious husband. But this has also been seen from the opposite point of view: Bruno Bettelheim reversed the story's poignant message, that husbands wrongfully accuse wives of betraying them, and analysed the damn spot on the key, the spot on the egg, as the proof of the wife's roaming in her husband's absence.

But the Bluebeard figure's reaction – and his last wife's – could also reveal an experiential truth about marriages in the past, and the fairy tale, with its connections to the legend of the pregnant Triphine, may enfold a stark reality of women's lives, one which listeners and readers today might well miss, as they delve deep into the universal psychological secrets of the story. In this case, again, the seventeenth-century fairy tale can yield most interesting evidence when taken at face value: as stepmothers favoured their own children over the offspring of a previous marriage, or widowed mothers persecuted their sons' wives, as peasants starved but could advance through cunning, so, in the case of Bluebeard, widowers married many times in quick succession because wives died young, and died in childbirth, their infants with them. The fairy tale may attest to serial murderers in the past (Hincmar of Rheims in the ninth century, for instance, wrote that noblemen dealt with troublesome wives by having their throats slit), but it may also enclose a more routine cause of mortality. One of the principal causes of death before the nineteenth century was childbirth, and both child and female mortality was high. In the forbidden chamber, Bluebeard's wife perhaps found herself face to face with the circumstances of her own future death.

The cult of Saint Triphine and her son Trémeur was not specially connected with women's fertility or childbirth, but it is associated with a devotional practice even more revealing. These are saints whose protection extends above all to children and their survival: infants were brought to their shrines when they began taking their first steps. The first steps, taken around ten months to a year old, marked, in times of high infant mortality, an improved degree of safety, a march stolen on death.

For many children did not live to walk, nor did their mothers survive their births. The wife of the English poet John Donne, for instance, died at the age of thirty-three, in 1617, soon after the stillbirth – of their twelfth child. She had borne a baby every year of their marriage. In Westminster Abbey, London, there are two monuments side by side to the wives of a certain Samuel Morland, put up by him and the dead women's parents: the stark epitaphs, which communicate a genuine, griefstricken note by their very presence, record that Carola, née Harsnett, 'bare a second son October 4/died October 10th/Anno Domini 1674/Aetatis XXIII'; and that her successor 'Ann [née Filding] died February 20th/Anno Domini 1679/80/Aetatis XIX'. Nothing is said of the children's survival. During the time in which fairy tales like Perrault's '*La Barbe bleue*' were being written, childbirth did indeed present a very real danger.

Christian moral philosophy laid down that the child came first – so that it could be saved by baptism. Caesareans were performed, and no mother survived this surgery before the discovery of anaesthetic and antibiotics. The situation improved, but only very slowly. Eugen Weber gives some statistics for rural

France: in 1800 women of Lower Burgundy for instance could expect to live only an average of around twenty-five years; by mid-century, this had risen to almost forty years; by the end of the century, the average female lifespan stood at fifty-two years. Remarriage among widowers was very common indeed in France – 80 per cent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a figure which had fallen to 15 per cent in the nineteenth.

At the cheerful end of Perrault's story, Bluebeard's wife is able to dispose of his unencumbered fortune:

> Bluebeard left no heirs, so his wife took possession of all his estate. She used part of it to marry her sister Anne to a young man with whom she had been in love for a long time; she used more of it to buy commissions for her two brothers, and she used the rest to marry herself to an honest man who made her forget her sorrows as the wife of Bluebeard.

In spite of all those wives, Bluebeard had had no children. A rich man of his sort, and a widower many times over, would not have been such an oddity in Perrault's world or to generations who heard his story later, until the next century and improving rates of infant and female mortality. Perrault, a realist who clothed his witness in fancy dress, spun a tale of reassurance, in which his heroine is spared one of the most present fears of young women in the past: that marriage will be the death of her.

When Cunmar and Bluebeard figure as serial murderers, they may not have been individually responsible in the way their stories suggest to a contemporary audience. When Saint Margaret escapes first Olybrius, then the dragon, and then the fiend 'in the form of a man', and is delivered up safe and sound from the dragon, she may well inspire reassurance in her votaries' breasts as a woman who has escaped the dangers of sex, rather than escaping sex itself. Her many laudatory lives dwell on her splendid resistance to her various assailants, and sometimes qualify as 'apocryphal' the story of the dragon's belly bursting asunder to set her free. Jacobus de Voragine says so, in *The Golden Legend*, and quickly moves on to another topic, almost as if he realizes that this tale of being devoured carries suggestive implications that were better left alone. It is even possible, as one thinks oneself into the mind of a congregation listening to the story in fourteen hundred and something, to imagine that Saint Margaret represented to them a woman forced against her will by not just one man but more, who either miraculously escapes conceiving or, if she does bear a child, is spared the physical dangers and maybe even the social obloquy following rape. Certainly the look on the dragon's face, as he licks his lips looking up at Saint Margaret in the cheap woodcuts that promoted her cult in fifteenth-century Europe, leaves the onlooker in no doubt that his intentions were not merely gastronomic.

II

Fear of death in childbirth may represent one of the story's latent meanings, but it does not figure among its patent messages. Bluebeard is presented as a man of enormous wealth: his castle is filled with treasures, paintings; luxury feasting and entertainments take place be he absent or present, in a veritable potlatch of expenditure. The plot follows the heroine's transition, her passage from her native home to her new marital household, as takes place in exogamous arrangements. The castle possesses the allure and the dread of the strange, other place to which she is going. As in penny dreadfuls and Gothic romances, fairy tales dramatize the beast's castle, the place of foreboding where the heroine will be enclosed.

At the beginning of 'Bluebeard', the heroine's widowed mother, rather like a Jane Austen character, considers him a good match for one of her 'perfectly beautiful' daughters precisely because of his riches. In many Mother Goose tales, money and romance are bound up together, but of the two, money is by far the more pressing problem. Cinderella is deprived of her birthright so that her stepsisters may have larger dowries; in '*Peau d'Ane*' (Donkeyskin), the king sacrifices the magic donkey that shits gold, the source of his wealth, to his illicit love for his daughter. The monetary arrangements at the conclusion of Bluebeard, after the heroine's brothers have galloped to her rescue, are also eminently hardheaded, and include remnants of a now unfamiliar kinship and inheritance system, a modified form of matrilineage which was still practised among the nobility in certain parts of Europe in the early middle ages (and is still common in some parts of the world – among the Ibo of Nigeria, for instance). It gives maternal uncles an important and continuing part to play in their sisters' affairs, in representing the family interests as well as enjoying title to the fruits of their marriages. It also places a woman at the fulcrum of continuing dynastic alliances between families which can be unbalanced for all kinds of reasons of family honour, political and economic, lying quite outside the marriage itself.

If the sanguine and practical dénouement of 'Bluebeard' is taken together with other romantic endings in Mother Goose tales, Perrault's partisanship can be seen: he was the first man to write down fairy tales, though they were women and children's literature, as he was the first to admit. But unlike some of his

colleagues, Perrault was eager to espouse the woman's cause, and in his stories, however frivolous his tone, he took the part of daughters against the arranged marriages of the day, with their cynical ambitiousness for social position and wealth and their disregard for personal inclination. He also issued an open argument, by means of his tales, for the right of women to administer their own wealth.

An early English retelling gives 'Fatima' a strong motive for doing away with her monster husband: a nice lover called Selim. This story ends: 'Selim took possession of the Castle, gave the slaves their liberty, and married Fatima.' By the middle of the nineteenth century, when the story was expanded for English audiences, the same point did not have to be made, as widows could expect to inherit. In one version, Bluebeard's widow is described as a Victorian Lady Bountiful, using her late husband the ogre's goods to benefit the needy:

> Instead of the miserable hovels usually inhabited by the labouring poor, she had annually several comfortable and pleasant cottages built, and to each one she added a large plot of ground ... where there were a family of children, she added to this gift a cow and a few sheep. By this means she enabled them, by their own exertions ... always to secure a humble competence, and in a very short time, every person upon her estate was rendered happy and became her firm friend.

The legend of Bluebeard has inspired an impressive body of works over the last hundred years; something about the much married ogre catches the popular imagination and has also challenged some great artists to reinterpret him and his wives. A late Victorian writer for children, Juliana Horatia Ewing (*d.* 1885), the witty and reforming editor of *Aunt Judy's Magazine*, defended female independence of heart in her variation on 'Bluebeard', 'The Ogre Courting', of 1871. Managing Molly, her Finessa-like subtle heroine, tricks the dull-witted ogre, who has already eaten twenty-four wives at least at the last count ('within the memory of man'), with a series of riddling ruses that take advantage of his meanness; the final straw, for the monster, is the feather bed she insists he fills by 'plucking [the] geese in heaven' – an ancient image of snow used by the Welsh poet Taliesin in the thirteenth century. The ogre shovels snow into the mattress as fast as he can, but of course it melts away; after a night in the cold wet bed, he will do anything to get rid of this new wife with her thrifty ideas, including parting with the dowry he gave her.

British optimism shows through Mrs Ewing's robustly practical story; her comic confidence matches the expansive and prosperous confidence of the Victorian heyday, and even implies the climate that allowed a crucial measure of emancipation for women, the Married Women's Property Act of 1882, which for the first time placed the goods and dowry a wife brought to a marriage securely under her control, and allowed her to retain them after her husband's death.

By contrast, continental Europe's interpretations of 'Bluebeard' reflect the comparatively defeated mood of feminism in France after the betrayal of the Revolution and the profound *embourgeoisement* of the Second Empire. In 1899, the actress and singer Georgette Leblanc inspired her lover, the Belgian Symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck, to write a libretto based on the Perrault fairy tale. They were living in a rented château in northern France at the time, which was also to inspire the crepuscular setting of Maeterlinck's more famous dramatic fairytale poem, set to music by Debussy – *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Leblanc suggested that Maeterlinck intertwine the Bluebeard legend with the quest of Ariadne, who delivered Theseus from the monster in the labyrinth. Thus, in *Ariane et Barbe-bleue*, the wives of Bluebeard become the young Cretan maidens sacrificed to the Minotaur's lust; his most recent bride, Ariane, takes the role of her classical namesake and Theseus combined as she enters the terrifying castle, opens the door to the forbidden chamber and finds that his previous wives are all still there, enduring a living death, in torpor and darkness – and luxury – so many lulled Rapunzels, prisoners of love, like Mélisande herself, who appears as one of their number. Like the prince, Ariane wakes them to the possibility of freedom, of the world outside, of light and action and independence, and they respond, with a powerful chorus of hope. But Georgette Leblanc also proposed from the start that the subtitle of the opera be *La Délivrance inutile,* the useless rescue. In the second act, the wives, after their moment of exultation, cannot be persuaded to leave Bluebeard or his castle; they prefer the chains they know, they cling to and caress the lover with whom they are familiar.

Maeterlinck wrote the play in 1899, and gave it to the composer Paul Dukas to set to music; it was first performed in Paris in 1907, and in spite of its luscious, sparkling cascades of chromatic sound it has rarely been put on since. Dukas himself commented trenchantly on the wives' refusal:

> No one wants to be rescued. Rescue is costly because it is the unknown. Men (and women) will always prefer a familiar slavery to the terrifying uncertainty of the burden of liberty. The truth is salvation is not possible; better to save

one's self. Not only is it better; it's the only possible thing. The women make this very clear to poor Ariane. She didn't know; she thought the world was thirsty for freedom when in reality it only hopes for comfort.

Bluebeard himself hardly utters in the opera; passive, nearly mute, he accepts the collusion of his wives in their own idle, prosperous imprisonment. The last scene shows Bluebeard's willing captives, bedecked in shimmering silks and jewels found in his treasury; the libretto addresses a bitter reproach to those new domestic idols, those housewives happy with the booming department stores of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century France: the frippery represents the desolate extent of the freedom they desire.

Béla Bartók's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* has eclipsed Maeterlinck and Dukas's interpretation in fame and frequency of performance; first staged in 1918, eleven years after *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* was produced, the libretto by Béla Balázs had been offered to one composer in 1910, and Bartók had accepted it in 1911. An extended poetic meditation on the impossibility of love between men and women, it presents Judith, the latest of Bluebeard's wives, as a questor after experience, after intensity, as a woman who has jilted a man to whom she was betrothed in order to run away with Bluebeard to his deep, secret castle. She is given the name of the biblical heroine, to invoke the assassin of Holofernes, the embodiment of lust and sin in secular as well as religious iconography. But Balázs, the librettist, was steeped in fairy tale as well as folk music, and he adds a sinister touch to the heroic moral of scripture, for his Judith is eager to go deeper into adventure, wisdom and sexual knowledge, and be annihilated with her despotic lover, rather than kill him. One by one, to ever more keyed up, swellingly sensual and iridescent music, she opens the doors to the chambers in Bluebeard's symbolic fortress and finds evils behind them, fabulous and tainted treasure, pools of tears, torture instruments, flowers with bloody petals, and finally, three living brides, immured, captives. The opera is enigmatic: the castle becomes a castle of the soul rather than a locale, a symbol of passionate interior striving, of the desperate character of sexual passion, of the doom which all passionate love must suffer. The music suggests voluptuous fulfilment and inevitable separateness simultaneously, and Judith's determination, in the face of Bluebeard's reluctance, to know more, to go further and deeper, does not stand condemned.

This Judith personifies the early twentieth-century's radical revelation of female sexuality and appetite; she can symbolize for us the new woman who desires, and expresses her desires, and Balázs and Bartók used the language of fairytale adventure to create her, for both men were committed to the folk tradition and found in the ballad singers the inspiration for contemporary works which tackled urgent issues. Bartók wrote at the time of composition: 'Women should be accorded the same liberties as men. Women ought to be free to do the same things as men, or men ought not to be free to do things women aren't supposed to do – I used to believe this to be so for the sake of equality ...' He does not go on to retract his opinion, but qualifies it as necessary because repressing women's desires constitutes a graver risk than allowing them equal expression.

The heroines of twentieth-century stories about marriage to a beast no longer reject him: they are shown welcoming the discoveries the union brings them. The opera dramatizes a ritual of an initiation which can never be fully achieved, and its ultimate import, unlike its predecessor's, stresses surrender: Judith meets the fate that the earlier heroines are spared, but she steps into the void fully aware of what she is doing.

III

Of the eight famous fairy tales in Perrault's *Contes du temps passé*, '*La Barbe bleue*' contains the most deeply disturbing adult material beside 'Red Riding Hood' – for unlike Perrault's other ogres, the giant in 'Puss-in-Boots', or the wicked fairy in 'The Sleeping Beauty', Bluebeard is a Jack the Ripper, who perpetrates his evil on young women in their sexual maturity, not on children in their needs. The story can hardly be said to be a fairy tale: the only magic features the fatal key, which Perrault characterizes as *Fée*, with a capital letter, using the word as an adjective (enchanted or fey), for the only time in his work. The key, with its smear of blood which will not wipe off, betrays the errant wife to the ogre on his return: a symbol of her pollution, connected to loss of childhood innocence and of virginity, of irrepressible sexuality.

Bluebeard has entered secular mythology alongside Cinderella and Snow White. But his story possesses a characteristic with particular affinity to the present day: seriality. Whereas the violence in the heroines' lives is considered suitable for children, the ogre has metamorphosed in popular culture for adults, into the mass murderer, the kidnapper, the serial killer: a collector, as in John Fowles's novel, an obsessive, like Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Though cruel women, human or fairy, dominate children's stories with their powers, the Bluebeard figure, as a generic type of male murderer, has gradually entered material requiring restricted ratings as well. (As patriarch, he remains at ease in the nursery.) There are several pornographic film titles which use the name

Bluebeard; more surprisingly, perhaps, the story has appealed to women writers like Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter, both of whom have produced contemporary treatments.

In an essay on the slasher movie, the scholar and critic Carol Clover first put forward the polemical view that the pursuit of the avenging female, who tracks down a murderer and finally 'slashes' him, meting out to him what he wanted to mete out to her, actually acts as a satisfying fantasy for women viewers ('enabling'). She develops her argument from looking at such films through the lens of the Icelandic sagas – she teaches Scandinavian studies – and seeks to understand twentieth-century celluloid gore in the light of bardic mayhem. Saga and fairy tale share certain features: oral transmission and the need to please the crowd. At least – they are – or were – literature to be passed on aloud and experienced in a group. The Bluebeard story can be seen as one of the slasher film's progenitors. But in the earlier versions produced by women, if not directed at them, the threatened heroine resorts to the ruse as well as the axe or her brothers' brawn to save her skin. The passage from the page (and the voice) to the moving image has profoundly affected the reception of the material; paradoxically, the visual becomes literal, imprinting the imagination and the heroine; the oral excites visualization, giving the imagination semi-free play, with hallucinatory effects, especially among children. But the dominance of imagery over word in storytelling today has pushed verbal agility into the background; even the fast-talking, wisecracking, insult-trading entertainment of 1930s thrillers like *Double Indemnity* have ceded to almost wordless narratives. Deeds of fantastic efficacy and often extravagant violence have replaced cunning and high spirits in the most popular vehicles for revenge fantasies and triumphs over adversity.

The excessive, heightened, sadistic side of fairy tales has made them even more compelling in the last decades of the century, especially among adults who value more highly than ever the imagined pristine clarity and depths of childlike fantasy.

An uneasy amalgam of different sources and the resulting non-sequiturs intensify the nastiness of the Grimms' version of 'Bluebeard', 'Fitcher's Bird', and it has rarely been retold in the single, illustrated children's format of postwar publishing of fairy tales. Recently, however, the artist Cindy Sherman illustrated it for the art publishers Rizzoli's, in New York. Sherman has specialized in an atmosphere of menace in her work and frequently picked out sex crimes as a particular area of interest. Her photography began with remarkable impersonations of *film-noir* heroines, featuring herself, alone, in black and white pretend stills. Her metamorphoses collapsed to an alarming degree any claim to irreducible or certain personal identity, as she is able to look like ... anyone. This effectively produces an eerie, baffling mood of impending danger for all: since she can occupy anybody's persona, she becomes a kind of cautionary Everywoman. But her metamorphoses do not struggle free of the grip of the assailant, as in the fairy tale, but serve to underline the crisis of subjectivity.

'Bluebeard' was a natural story for Sherman to enter, because the seriality of the dead wives also marks their anonymity, their interchangeability, the failure of stable subjectivity. Sherman followed her fake film stills with huge Cibachromes, using their unearthly, keyed-up colours to add a lurid edge to a series of new poses, some of them simulating police shots of crimes against women. In the latter, she again connected with cinematic fantasy: some of her *mises-en-scène* capture Hitchcock or De Palma visions of sexual assault and female mutilation. An unusual choice, therefore, for a children's illustrator, but one which intuits the nature of the fairytale material, especially in the Grimm Brothers' often cruel redactions.

Her collages for 'Fitcher's Bird' are only partly successful, however. Through ghoulish, fragmented, highly lit shots of wax models, using real feathers, hair, jewels and basketry, the sequence does reproduce effectively the jangling, lurid, incoherent violence of the Grimms' original, but Sherman's stock-in-trade of irony and kitsch cannot pass for the child audience, since it needs reference points – the thriller movie, the piece of forensic evidence – against which to play its own meanings. Here the art language Sherman parodies is that most commonly found in museum tableaux using waxworks, real clothes and props. Children learn this language at an early age, in theme parks where crimes are re-enacted in *tableaux vivants*, as in the Chamber of Horrors in Madame Tussaud's, London, and it speaks to them directly of actual events and real people, without irony, in a spirit of apparent admonishment and latent prurience. Sherman's photography annexes this double and dubious pleasure to make the Grimms' fairy tale real and present to the mind, uninflected by urbane irony. Needless to say, the story, in this version, misses altogether the redemptive mischief of L'Héritier's 'Finessa' or the comic high spirits of Calvino's 'Silver Nose'. Sherman's love affair with horror captures one interpretation of narrative power in this fin de siècle: hair-raising, rather than laughter, has become the motive of the teller, and damage the key motif of the tale – and anyone who escapes damage is lucky.

The seduction of difference: the Beast gazes on Beauty in Jean Cocteau's classic fairytale film. (Jean Marais and Josette Day, La Belle et la bête, *1946.)*

CHAPTER 17

Reluctant Brides: Beauty and the Beast I

I never may believe
These antic fables, nor these fairy toys.
Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends ...
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to aery nothing
A local habitation and a name ...

A Midsummer Night's Dream, V, i

The first Beast of the West was Eros, the god of love himself. In the romance of Cupid and Psyche, Eros/Cupid makes love, unseen in the dark, to a mortal Beauty – Psyche – who rivals his own mother Venus in seductiveness; Psyche is forbidden to look at him. When she can resist no longer and breaks the prohibition, lighting a candle to look at her lover while he sleeps, he vanishes, and with him all her enchanted surroundings. But Eros, mysterious, unknown, feared, exceeds all imaginable degree of charm when Psyche sees him in the night:

> There lay the gentlest and sweetest of all wild creatures ... his golden hair, washed in nectar and still scented with it, thick curls straying over white neck and flushed cheeks and falling prettily entangled on either side of his head ... soft wings of purest white ... the tender down fringing the feathers quivered naughtily all the time. The rest of his body was so smooth and beautiful that Venus could never have been ashamed to acknowledge him as her son.

Psyche's failure to trust, and to obey, has cost her his adorable presence and his love.

Apuleius' tale is the earliest extant forerunner of the Beauty and the Beast fairy

tale in Western literature, and a founding myth of sexual difference. It includes episodes the fairy tale '*La Belle et la bête*' has made famous, from children's versions and films: the mysterious menacing lover, the jealous sisters, the enchanted castle where disembodied voices serve every wish and 'nectarous wines and appetizing dishes appeared by magic, floating up to her of their own accord'. It echoes stories of Pandora and Eve when it relies on female curiosity as the dynamic of the plot, and the overriding motive force of the female sex. Punished for her disobedience, Psyche then has to prove her love through many adventures and ordeals; pregnant by Cupid, she struggles through one test of her loyalty after another until, finally, this Beauty is reunited with her Beast and adapts him, the god of love, to the human condition of marriage, and they have a daughter, called Voluptas – Pleasure.

The role of Eros/Cupid in the second-century romance echoes the manifestation of beast bridegrooms in much more ancient stories, not only in numerous classical myths of metamorphosis, but also in Chinese and Indian tales, like 'The Girl who Married a Snake', from the *Panchatantra*. Its progeny are numerous, scattered in all the great Renaissance collections like Straparola's and Basile's and the translated *Arabian Nights*; though entertainingly heterogeneous, the tales still bear a strong family resemblance. Such a divine erotic beast as the hero of the popular fairy tale has offered writers and other artists – painters and film-makers – a figure of masculine desire, and the plot in which he moves presents a blueprint for the channelling of erotic energy – both male and female – in society at any one time. Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* manages both to guy this romance of enchanted love, with Titania and Bottom at the very extremes of beauty and beasthood, but at the same time to extend and deepen the reach of the fairy tale of benign metamorphosis in all its serious, spellbinding powers.

In Apuleius, which was one of Shakespeare's sources, it is Psyche who has to strive, just as it is Titania who is deluded. 'Cupid and Psyche' represents Eros biding his time, waiting for his bride to prove herself and earn him. The story is her journey, she has to expiate her error; like the knight in the fairy tale of the Sibyl's cave or the enchanted mountain, she has experienced love and lost it. Unlike that tale, however, in which the fairy wife proves a false image, an occasion of sin to be resisted, Psyche's suspicions turn out to be groundless. Her lover is no beast, but only concealed from her, and she is wrong to fear him. Her journey towards true knowledge of her hidden lover became perceived as the journey of the soul towards the concealed godhead, '*deus absconditus*', in the writings of the Neoplatonists who adopted the story as a form of secular gospel; fairy tales have carried this philosophical interpretation into domestic settings. Psyche remains in the foreground, as the protagonist who functions as the chivalrous questor. It is her activities which catalyse the plot – at first harmfully, at last triumphantly. Though she is lachrymose and given to the vapours (as are all the heroines of Greek romances), she nevertheless voyages purposefully to recover the object of her desire.

The tale consistently leaves in place the Eros figure as the goal, again, in a reversal of the more expected pattern of chivalry. In widespread contemporary popular quest narratives, it is still more common to find knights errant rather than maidens in pursuit of their loves. The Super Mario Brothers computer game gives the two heroic plumbers from Brooklyn the dominant motive of rescuing a damsel in distress in all their adventures.

Psyche's false perception, gradually modified, finally arrives at the truth: the radiant beauty of the god of love. In many ways, the inner structure of the Beauty and the Beast tale reverses the roles defined by the title: she has to learn the higher (human) wisdom of seeing past outward appearances, to grasp that monstrousness lies in the eye of the beholder, while the beast turns out to be irresistibly beautiful and the highest good. The Beauty and the Beast story is a classic fairy tale of transformation, which, when told by a woman, places the male lover, the Beast, in the position of the mysterious, threatening, possibly fatal unknown, and Beauty, the heroine, as the questor who discovers his true nature.

Apuleius' storyteller, the 'drunken and half-demented old woman' whom the author adopts as his mouthpiece in this exemplary and hopeful section of his comic romance, gives him authority in the traditionally female preserve of romantic or sexual expertise. But it also achieves, almost by accident, a crucial switch of viewpoint: the unknown is seen from Psyche's point of view. Cupid, the god of love and the personification of the masculine erotic principle, appears as a fantasy, a monster, a powerful threat. The postulated crone storyteller makes this vantage point seem logical in a way that the narrative voice of the hero Lucius or the author himself would have failed to do. Apuleius shows more storytelling wiles later: he first confirms the message of his fairy tale, telling how the abducted bride Charite escapes the horrible torments proposed by the bandits and is reunited with her lost husband, but he then undermines this happy ending, and metes out violent deaths to both bride and groom. Charite (Love/Grace) in the larger novel mirrors Psyche in the tale as a smitten heroine beset by troubles, and in her subsequent tragedy Apuleius perversely reopens the potential tragic outcome of romance in his real-life story as opposed to an old wives' tale. In this,

he gainsays the normative, controlling aspect of the fairy story, which gives the male Beast the *beau rôle* and blames his female lover's folly for nearly ruining everything.

The perspective of Psyche/Charite nevertheless chimes with the female story-telling voice, and offered an opportunity to many women writers who identified themselves with romantic heroines through the medium of the scorned old gossip's advice. They too seized on Apuleius' mask to reverse the thrust of such shafts and deal with the question of opposites, embodied in the male. The beast stood for the crucial choice in a growing woman's life: to leave family (as the word implies, the familiar) for the unknown and unfamiliar. The question of exogamy, or marrying out, and its accompanying dangers lies at the heart of the romance. For boy heroes, leaving the father's house to find a princess to marry, as in so many fairy tales, like 'Puss-in-Boots' by Perrault or the Grimms' '*Die drei Federn*' (The Three Feathers), there is no anguish, only adventure, and reward. But daughters' leave-takings inspire powerful and contradictory passions, which 'Beauty and the Beast' explores.

Fairy tale as a form deals with limits, and limits often set by fear: one of its fundamental themes treats of a protagonist who sets out to discover the unknown and overcomes its terrors. 'The Tale of the Boy who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was' (*'Märchen von einem, der auszog, das Fürchten zu lernen'*), about a hero who knows no fear, one of the Grimms' most famous fairy stories, sets out the theme in its stark simplicity: after various ordeals in which the boy plays cards with corpses, bowls skulls at skittles with skeletons for playmates, meets and subdues various hell-cats and ghouls, he at last encounters the princess, and in bed with her learns how to shudder when she tips a pail of live fish over him – perhaps a metaphor for the overwhelming power of physical passion. (In the compelling Freudian interpretation, shuddering euphemistically replaces orgasmic spasms.)

When women tell fairy stories, they also undertake this central narrative concern of the genre – they contest fear; they turn their eye on the phantasm of the male Other and recognize it, either rendering it transparent and safe, the self reflected as good, or ridding themselves of it (him) by destruction or transformation. At a fundamental level, 'Beauty and the Beast' in numerous variations forms a group of tales which work out this basic plot, moving from the terrifying encounter with Otherness, to its acceptance, or, in some versions of the story, its annihilation. In either case, the menace of the Other has been met, dealt with and exorcized by the end of the fairy tale; the negatively charged protagonist has proved golden, as in so many fairy tales where a fierce bear or loathsome toad proves a Prince Charming. The terror has been faced and chased; the light shines in the dark places.

As a female pilgrim's progress, a common rite of passage, with a heroine moving at its centre, the tale of the feared animal groom has attracted numerous women interpreters. They form a long and distinguished line which includes *ancien régime* rakes, French governesses, English bluestockings. In Victorian England, women were specially attracted to the fairy tale: Mary Lamb published a version of 'Beauty and the Beast' with her brother Charles in 1806; the fairy painter Richard Doyle illustrated his sister Adelaide's translation of around 1842 (it was not published until this century), and in 1889, *The Blue Fairy Book*, edited by the scholar and enthusiast Andrew Lang with the help of his wife Leonora Alleyne, disseminated Miss Minnie Wright's splice of two French texts, the one by Mme de Villeneuve and another by Mme de Beaumont, to create the most widely read version in English. An interesting case has been made for *Jane Eyre* as a variation on Apuleius (Rochester as blind Cupid) inspired by the Brontës' reading of the *Blackwood's Magazine* publication of the Latin tale. In film, too, women have been strongly represented, with screen-writers like Ruth Rose (*King Kong*), Caroline Thompson (*Edward Scissorhands*) and Linda Woolverton (the Disney *Beauty and the Beast*) taking different approaches to various monster bridegrooms. More recently, the artist and writer Leonora Carrington (*b.* 1917) and her younger contemporary Angela Carter have continued, in a spirit of Surrealist devilry, exploring the erotic possibilities for the heroine.

But it was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the French fairytale writers invented the pattern familiar today, and from it cut dozens of different, inventive variations. The story of Cupid and Psyche was well-known in courtly circles: *Psyché*, a spectacle with song and dance, commissioned to celebrate the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle of 1668, was performed for the king three years later; tepid stuff, it shows little of the deft hands of its creators, a remarkable trio – Molière, Corneille and Quinault. La Fontaine produced a punchier version, filled with deliciously malign shafts at the follies of the age, in *Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon*, a novel, which was published in 1669. Writers and friends of Mlle L'Héritier like Henriette-Julie de Murat and Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, contemporaries like Mlle de La Force and Mlle Bernard, struggling against prevailing Christian conceptions of women's contagious lustfulness, against the traditional blaming of Eve, adduced in women's defence certain social exactions upon them: they especially attacked the custom of marrying off daughters at very young ages (fourteen or fifteen was not uncommon) to strangers. In this regard, women of

high rank suffered from total powerlessness, and there was not much change in matrimonial matters until the Revolution ushered in a new era of comparatively free choice.

When Perrault sprang to the defence of fairytale romancing, he specifically joined battle over the question of love-in-marriage, writing heatedly:

> I don't doubt at all that several people of the higher ranks find it strange that I deem it such great happiness to enjoy conjugal friendship, those who ordinarily only regard marriage as a path towards establishing themselves in society, and who believe that if you must take a wife in order to have children, you must pick a mistress in order to have pleasure.

The ancient fairy tale of Cupid and Psyche had become a secular myth, held in common, which could be used to contest or elaborate ideas about choice and eros, modern love and romance.

Beneath the literary wrangle in the capital lay a vital moral issue, about the character and purpose of marriage and the different needs of women from men, and the different experiences of women within the institution. Conjugal friendship was not an aspect of many women's lives, the testimony of fairy tale would seem to be telling us. Romance – love-in-marriage – was an elusive ideal, which the writers of the *contes* sometimes set up in defiance of destiny. As Gillian Beer has so succinctly put it: 'Revolution is one function of the romance.' When the revolutionary situation is past, readers then come to interpret the subversion it expressed in its texts in a spirit of docile nostalgia. The fairy tale of Beauty and the Beast assumed a female audience on the whole who fully expected to be given away by their fathers to men who might well strike them as monsters. The social revolution which has established both romantic and companionate marriage as the norm has irreversibly altered the reception of such romances, and ironically transformed certain women's examination of their matrimonial lot into materialistic propaganda for making a good marriage. The partial eclipse of those fairy tales which criticize marriage in favour of ones which celebrate it has arisen partly from the new, comparative freedom to choose a partner – or partners. The pact with the Beast at the beginning of the fairy tale, when Beauty's father hands over his daughter, actually narrates a common circumstance, and Beauty's wholehearted obligingness in the matter was increasingly emphasized. But the fading of fairy tales in which Beauty or her counterpart resists the arrangement her father has made on her behalf also follows from the growing control of printers, publishers, editors and writers who were themselves fathers and husbands, and may have felt threatened by the earlier redactions' forthright attacks on male tyrants. And, thirdly, the changing value of the Beast as a symbol, and the displacement of the animal as the chief site of a hostile and repressed Other, has also contributed to an important degree to the changing meanings of the tale.

The historical and social context of the printed versions alters the message and the reception of the lovers' perennial conflict and quest; remembering the changing background in which the tellers move constitutes a crucial part in understanding the sexual politics of the tale. The theory of archetypes, which is essentially ahistorical, helps to confirm gender inevitability and to imprison male and female in stock definitions. By contrast, attitudes to the Beast are always in flux, and even provide a gauge of changing evaluations of human beings themselves, of the meaning of what it is to be human, and specifically, since the Beast has been primarily identified with the male since the story's earliest forms, what it is to be a man.

II

Tales of animal bridegrooms hold out the dream that, although the heroine's father has given her into the keeping of a Beast, he will change – into a radiant young man, a perfect lover. At the start of the story, the Beast rampages in various misshapen and monstrous forms, demonic, ogreish, cannibal. His reluctant brides deal with him to different ends, sometimes by recognizing his inner qualities (so that he does not need to be changed), sometimes by effecting his disenchantment, but now and then by outwitting him, and even on occasion by doing

Joining a Madame Récamier-like Beauty for an elegant supper on his empire style furniture, a huge Beast pleads for love. (In Popular Tales of the Olden Time, *c. 1840.)*

Beauty comes flying back to the Beast's side just in time as he sprawls near death in longing for her. ('The Absence of Beauty Lamented', in Charles and Mary Lamb, (attrib.), Beauty and the Beast, *c. 1811.)*

away with him altogether and living happily ever after with the prince of their choice.

Far harsher stories than today's rosy romances were circulating in the eighteenth century, collected in *Le Cabinet des fées*, and translated and distributed beyond France, appearing in English in the editions of Robert Samber and other printer-publishers before they fade from view in the nineteenth century, giving way to reassurances about male conversion, future love and happiness. In these tales, the Beast's savagery is no illusion, but an aspect of his nature which the heroine has to confront.

One dominant curve can be discovered in the retellings from the seventeenth century to the present day: at first, the Beast is identified with male sexuality which must be controlled or changed or domesticated through *civilité*, a code chiefly established by women, but later the Beast is perceived as a principle of nature within every human being, male and female, young and old, and the stories affirm beastliness's intrinsic goodness and necessity to holistic survival. The variations in the ways of telling 'Beauty and the Beast' offer us a text where this fundamental change of *mentalité* can be deciphered; the representations of the Beast circulating in other forms, in films and toys for instance, especially teddy bears, also illuminate one aspect of what the historian Keith Thomas in *Man and the Natural World* has termed one of the most profound changes in human sensibility in modern time: the re-evaluation of animals.

Happy endings have also come to be expected of children's stories. Red Riding Hood's father – or a passing huntsman – now regularly springs her and her grandmother safe and sound out of the wolf's belly. Changing ideas about children's sensitivity may be yet another reason for the fading of Beauty and the Beast stories which end badly for the Beast. Notions of decorum for young women affected the selection of editors, too: the process by which the Grimms gradually made their heroines more polite, well-spoken, or even silent, from one edition to the next, while their wicked female characters become more and more vituperative and articulate, was replicated in mass children's publishing of the nineteenth century, and tales of plucky or disaffected young women who baulk their suitors, defy their parents or guardians and generally offer opposition to their lot often had to wait until, in the renewed feminist mood of the 1970s and 1980s, they were reclaimed by pedagogues with other views of appropriate female conduct.

Of the women writers of fairy tales represented in *Le Cabinet des fées*, Catherine Bernard and Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier were almost the only ones who, in the years of severe state censorship and autocratic controls, managed a quiet and private life. Neither married, and both found aristocratic female patrons to support them in their writing. Their colleagues, however, had much more troubled careers.

Henriette-Julie de Castelnau, born in 1670, married to the Comte de Murat at the age of twenty-one, caused a stir when she arrived in Paris from her native Brittany and showed a preference for Breton peasant costume, thus anticipating Marie-Antoinette's peasant make-believe. But Murat was acting in a different spirit, for she was writing fiction based on her own origins, and challenging her own peers and superiors. She penned a squib about the courtesan Rhodope that clearly targeted the king's pious mistress, Mme de Maintenon, and her former husband, the poet Scarron, and in 1698 Murat was summoned as '*une femme déréglée*' by the police, and ordered into provincial exile; she managed to resist – until 1702, when her family collaborated in putting her away as mentally disturbed. The rumours of her *dérèglement* included, from the angle of the purified, Maintenon court, blasphemy and lesbianism; it is very difficult to assess the truth of these accusations from this distance. However, Mme de Murat continued to raise eyebrows during her exile in Loches, by wearing a red riding hood to church and announcing loudly and exuberantly that she lived for pleasure. She had to wait until the death of Louis XIV and the Regency of Philippe d'Orléans before she was released and allowed to return to Paris, but she died soon after, of chronic kidney trouble, in 1716.

Murat's misfortunes were not unusual in the climate of courtly despotism. Charlotte-Rose Caumont de La Force (1650–1724) married the son of a highly

placed official, the Président Briou, without the latter's consent; the marriage was immediately broken by his family. Later, she was also dismissed from court, where she was a *dame d'honneur* or lady-in-waiting to the queen and the dauphin, after she wrote some blasphemous poems; she had to face penury, as her pension was cut off, or enter a convent. She chose the latter, and wrote fairy tales from her exile in the nunnery, publishing them in the same year as Perrault's *Mother Goose Tales* (1697).

Like Mlle de La Force, Henriette-Julie de Murat wrote volumes of tales, as well as novels, while living in detention in the country; they often convey her bitterness about love and her caustic view of society. In one, even a powerful fairy cannot hold the love of her husband after she has grown old; in another, *'Le Palais de la vengeance'* (The Palace of Vengeance), Murat turns today's fairytale conventions upside down by warning that even unions born of love can turn sour. The evil enchanter Pagan had abducted the lovers and imprisoned them together in a delightful crystal palace, where they want for nothing; but after a time, the moral declares, 'Pagan made them discover the unhappy secret, / That happiness itself can become a bore.'

The three interpolated fairy stories of *Les Lutins du Château de Kernosy* (The Goblins of the Castle of Kernosy), Murat's comedy of manners, set in Brittany, reveal how such material was made up or retrieved, embroidered and reworked in leisured company in the countryside to while away long evenings. The heroines are two sisters under the chafing tutelage of their aunt, the *châtelaine* of Kernosy, who, while looking for a lover for herself, is enjoying the wealth of her two orphaned charges. The two young women are desperately confined and indeed bored until the provident arrival of two young men: the company grows gayer, and rounds of dancing, musical entertainments and games of forfeits ensue, with each member of the company completing *bouts rimés,* writing sonnets, and telling stories. A certain M. de Fatville (*fat* meaning booby) who is a *conseiller* at the local *parlement* arrives: the abusive *vicomtesse* has picked him as a suitable match for one of her nieces because, it turns out, she owes him a debt of money he is prepared to waive in return for Mlle de Saint Urbain's charms. M. de Fatville bears the brunt of the author's *précieuse* distaste for the bourgeois, the businessman, the uncouth and unlettered. For his part, he reveals his dreadful limitations in two ways: out hunting with the gallant party, he insists on taking up a gun and shoots at something moving – his prey turns out to be a black Breton milch cow. But above all, he betrays his limited nature when one of the young men begins to tell the tale of *'Peau d'ours'* or 'Bearskin', and he wants to know if it is a true story. Otherwise, he says, he is going to bed. He was assured, Murat continues, 'that he could in all certainty take himself off to bed'.

A fairy tale to the *académiciens* was a vulgar amusement of old folk and children; to a writer like Murat, appreciating its qualities was a sign of temperament, intelligence, fineness and eligibility. A man who cannot see the point of a fairy story is a man who might well mistake a milch cow for a stag and shoot her.

The tale of 'Bearskin' creates a double reflection *en abyme* of the situation in which the novel's heroines find themselves – threatened by an arranged marriage to a monster. M. de Fatville, the unwanted suitor, takes the fearsome features of the King of the Ogres, Rhinoceros, who sends his ambassador to the neighbouring kingdom and demands the hand of Noble-Epine – Hawthorn – the princess. He declares: 'That if he [the king] didn't give his daughter away, Rhinoceros himself would come at the head of a hundred million ogres to lay waste the kingdom and eat the whole royal family.' The king – grief-stricken of course – parts with Hawthorn his daughter. However, when Rhinoceros goes off to catch two or three bears for his wife's supper, the princess's selfless and resourceful servant, Corianda, sews her up into one of the bearskins lying about, and, magically, she is instantly transformed into 'the prettiest she-bear in this world'. She is eventually captured by a Prince Charming out hunting (as in an earlier Basile story, 'The She-Bear'), and after a few vicious turns of the screw, when Rhinoceros behaves like the evil stepmother of other traditional tales, all ends happily.

One aspect has faded from view in the popular recensions of this type of fairy tale today: the beauty is the beast – at least she is also changed into a beast, and the metamorphosis leads to her escape from a tyrant father as well as a tyrant husband. In a female protagonist's case, shape-shifting also shifts the conditions of confinement: this principle does not obtain for men enchanted into animal form, like the monstrous Rhinoceros himself, or the more traditional Beast of the cycle. As a she-bear, Princess Hawthorn acquires more freedom of movement than as a young woman, and more freedom of choice. In animal form, she enjoys a tender and even abandoned flirtation with her prince:

> More enchanted than ever with his she-bear, Zelindor ordered that she was to be looked after with the greatest care, and gave her a delightful rocky grotto surrounded with statues; inside there was a bed of well-tended grass where she could retire at night. He came to see her at every possible moment ... he was crazy about her.

It is a curious instance of fantasy turning out to be less fantastic than it appears that Charlotte-Rose de La Force, following the young husband from whom she had been forcibly separated, disguised herself as a bear and hid among a group of entertainers' dancing bears in order to gain entrance to the castle where he had been sequestered by his father.

III

The writer of fairy tales whose private vicissitudes reflect most dramatically of all the romantic and social tensions of the age of despotism was the prodigiously gifted, successful *femme galante*, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy. Among the group of women who practised the genre, D'Aulnoy is the least connected to the court of Louis XIV; she is also one of the least veiled in her allusions to despotism's frailties and caprices. None of Mlle L'Héritier's effusions on military triumphs or simpering *hommages* to the king's progeny fall from her witty, inventive pen. D'Aulnoy had put herself beyond the pale, and at the same time, it seems, secured a different source of revenue. Before she took up fairy tales, her career had been even more rackety than Henriette-Julie de Murat's. The copious and rococo tales she composed correspond to the violent upheavals in her own life, as well as responding, in a spirit of revolt, to the political conflicts and social constraints of her times.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, she featured prominently in publishers' lists, but in 1855 the impresario J. R. Planché, who translated many of the tales, and adapted others as fairy extravaganzas for the stage, baulked at her casual frankness about sex and violence, and her prevailing cynicism. In a preface he admitted he had dropped two stories, which 'could not, without considerable alteration in their details, have been rendered unobjectionable to the English reader'. For encrypted in Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's many variations on the Cupid and Psyche plot lie the prevailing conditions of unhappy, forced unions between incompatible mates. And when the story of her own marriage is told, the many husbands who are beasts in her stories lose their fairytale outlandishness and become metaphorical, darkly humorous reflections on the circumstances of her life.

The details of her youth are difficult to verify, as a mixture of hearsay, false memory, self-justification, writerly inventiveness and hyperbole have stirred a rich brew, but the story that survives describes how she was fifteen or sixteen when she was married to the Baron d'Aulnoy, who was thirty years older than her. He was a sidekick of the dissolute Duc de Vendôme, in whose service he had accumulated enough money to buy himself land and a title. The union was arranged by Marie-Catherine's father: she may have been abducted by arrangement from the convent where she was being educated to live with a man she had never seen, though just to complicate the picture further, her *Memoirs* in which the story appeared are probably by Henriette-Julie de Murat.

But M. d'Aulnoy did not have a monopoly on *ancien régime* raciness, and the match soon disintegrated: in 1669, when Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy was nineteen or so, she and her mother, the Marquise de Gadagne, became involved in a personal scandal: they conspired with their lovers, or so it was alleged, to bring a charge of high treason against M. d'Aulnoy for speaking against the king. He had been overheard swearing in public against the taxes that had been imposed. In mid-seventeenth-century France, this amounted to *lèse-majesté*. Had M. le Baron d'Aulnoy been found guilty, he would have been executed.

The attempt to defame him failed, and failed catastrophically for his accusers: after three whole years in the Bastille, M. d'Aulnoy managed to convince the court of his blamelessness, and bring charges in retaliation against his wife and her mother. Both the women's alleged lovers were tortured; they confessed, and were executed. The archives of the Bastille provide reliable evidence for these accusations and counter-accusations, but the repercussions become more mysterious: the Marquise de Gadagne fled to England, and a warrant was served for Mme d'Aulnoy's arrest. She managed to escape the officers by jumping out of the window at their early-morning summons, and hiding in a church under a convenient bier. Or so one version has it. She may have then lived as an *émigrée* in Holland, Spain and England, working as a spy with her mother on behalf of France. This period of her life becomes very shadowy indeed. However, in 1685 she was allowed to return to Paris, perhaps as a reward for services rendered. Her mother was given a pension by the Spanish king and stayed on in Madrid. Mme d'Aulnoy began to receive in her house in the rue St Benoît, and her salon became one of the leading social gatherings of Paris; cultivating the polite arts, she and her friends told fairy tales and, over raspberry or gooseberry cordials and hot chocolate, dressed up to play the parts. She began to contribute significantly to literary life: the *Recueil des plus belles pièces des poètes français*, a spirited and enlightened anthology which appeared in 1692, was edited either by her or by that sceptical sympathizer with the women's party of the Moderns, Fontenelle. She also published a series of travel memoirs, giving the 'inside' story of court life in Madrid and London – significantly, not Versailles. Written with persuasive eyewitness immediacy, they enjoyed a huge success, and made D'Aulnoy money she badly needed to run her household and bring up her three fatherless daughters (not all

born during her marriage). Her memoirs of court life have however been shown to be largely plagiarized and partly fabricated, so her real activities during this period remain a mystery. It is not entirely impossible that all her travels took place in the arms of the West Wind, as in her first fairy tale, 'The Isle of Happiness'. But in the memoirs, unlike the tales, she assumed a first person voice to lend authenticity to her narrative, gossiping about kings and courts like an intimate.

The make-believe in her recollections, in the tales and in the salons concealed the continuing realities of life and matrimony against which her extravagant romancing was protesting: in 1699, her friend Angélique Ticquet was beheaded in the Place de Grève after she had influenced a servant to make an attempt on her husband's life. The servant, who had shot at Councillor Ticquet and wounded him badly, was hanged. The councillor had married her, a young and orphaned heiress, without her having a say in the union; he then maltreated her and she had retaliated, allegedly abetted by Mme d'Aulnoy, who was therefore fortunate not to be found guilty of being her accomplice.

The tumult of Mme d'Aulnoy's circle reflects how difficult it was for a woman of independent spirit in the *ancien régime* to disencumber herself of a husband; and it is significant that both Mlle L'Héritier and she wrote fairy tales in which the heroine sets out alone in disguise on a quest like a man. The romancing of the salon involved contact with fancied means of illicit power – Circean powers of metamorphosis – which she craved. Here again, in a pervasive negative image of the lower-class woman, the gossip and the witch, the fairytale narrators found a sympathetic ally. But the theme to which Mme d'Aulnoy returned, almost obsessively, in a score of variations on beauties and beasts, was the animal bride and animal groom.

Rams, serpents, boars, yellow dwarves, white cats, blue birds, frogs, hinds, shape-shifters of all sorts crowd her pages: Mme d'Aulnoy seized the opportunities which the mythological theme of animal metamorphosis offered her to create a world of pretend in which happiness and love are sometimes possible for a heroine, but elusive and hard-won.

When Mme d'Aulnoy treats of beast husbands, she often offers them no quarter. In '*Le Mouton*' (The Ram), the eponymous beast proves himself most delicate, during his union with the princess: subtle *bisques* and *pâtés* rain down in his gardens, he appears heaped in jewels and eats sherbet and plays shuttlecock with his courtiers like any noble prince. The Ram develops the *Lear* theme of the king who casts out the youngest and best-loved of his three daughters; the original folk tale that inspired Shakespeare ended with a reconciliation between the king and

A reluctant bride takes a pair of magic scissors to her proposed husband's diabolical beard. ('The Yellow Dwarf', after 'Phiz', Grimms' Goblins, *London, 1861.)*

his daughter, but Mme d'Aulnoy, unlike Shakespeare, follows and extends her triumph in hyperbolic style: the beautiful young Princesse Merveilleuse actually ascends to her father's throne by his side as his queen, and while the coronation is taking place the forsaken Ram her animal bridegroom expires of a broken heart.

The last lines of the story comment with some acerbity: 'Now we know that people of the highest rank are subject, like all others, to the blows of fortune ...' The author then adds a rhymed morality, which twists the tail of the story against its audience:

> How different from our modern swains!
> Even his death may well surprise
> The lovers of the present day:
> Only a silly sheep now dies,
> Because his ewe has gone astray.

The princess sobs over his body, and 'felt she would die herself'. But unavailingly, in this case; her tears do not revive him, or transform him.

It would be crude to make a direct comparison between the stormy biographies

of Mme d'Aulnoy, her mother and her friend, but nevertheless the insouciance the storyteller first shows to the Ram, then the contrast she makes with spouses of her own time cannot be overlooked: there is a bitter challenge in those final lines. The dénouement itself patently proposes – against Salic Law and the French practice – the right of daughters to inherit their patrimony rather than be handed over into another man's keeping as his childlike dependant.

'The Ram' is filled with D'Aulnoy's touches of knowing humour and deadpan heartlessness, bedecked with details of worldly frippery and dainties, and slowed down by its pleasurable reiteration of sophisticated games and pastimes; the combination achieves a slightly sinister atmosphere, the authentic recipe of frivolity, dreaminess, blitheness and sadism that we now recognize as the essential tone of fairy tale.

In another of D'Aulnoy's blithe tales of wreckage, the heroine tries to free herself from her promise to marry the Yellow Dwarf, as we have seen, but fails, and dies in the attempt; in '*Prince Marcassin*' (Prince Wild Boar), the eponymous monster marries – and murders – two sisters before the third outwits him. These tales play on the Bluebeard theme; in '*Le Dauphin*' (The Dolphin), the injustice takes a different direction and a haughty princess, Livorette, disdains her ugly suitor, until he changes himself into a canary and becomes her pet. Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's more optimistic variations on the Beast, in which she does restore him to full, innocent, erotic humanity, still illuminate the woman's lot within contemporary marriages. '*Le Serpentin vert*', recently translated as 'The Great Green Worm' by A. S. Byatt, directly revises 'Cupid and Psyche' by Apuleius, but D'Aulnoy dreamed up ever more protracted and atrocious torments for her Psyche-like heroine before she allowed, in this case, a happy ending to the lovers. Interestingly, it is in this story of a fulfilled love between a Beauty and a Beast that the author also emphasizes, at numerous points, the importance of equal conversation between men and women, as proposed by the *salonnières*.

Her heroine is cursed at birth with 'perfect' ugliness by the wicked fairy Magotine; as a result, she is dubbed Laidronette (Little Ugly One, Hidessa) and shunned, even by her family. She withdraws from the world, and in her solitude amuses herself by writing 'several volumes of her thoughts'. (Costiveness was not a problem Mme d'Aulnoy understood.) When she returns to pay a visit to her parents, they are celebrating her beautiful sister's wedding, 'but when they saw Hidessa, everyone looked upset'. Mme d'Aulnoy catches accurately the pathos of being unlovely in the marriage economy of the time; it is regrettable that her many exquisite princesses have obscured her ill-favoured heroines in the circulation of her tales.

Back in her forest fastness, Hidessa meets the Green Serpent of the title; but his sighs are hisses, and his own looks so frightful she runs from him, until advised by a good fairy not to trust in appearances, but to discover the inner spirit of her lover. He transports her to the enchanted realm of Pagodia, where the inhabitants, the pagods, wait on her hand and foot as in Cupid's castle, and provide her with every ornament and diversion, including the most spicy conversation, plays by Corneille, and, yes, stories like 'Cupid and Psyche', 'retold in elegant words by a fashionable author'. Meanwhile her mysterious suitor remains invisible, a disembodied voice speaking amorously only at night, until she becomes bored with the constant round of pleasure in the day and longs only for his sweet words in the dark. So she agrees to marry him; in return he imposes the condition that she must not give in to curiosity, like Psyche, and look at him.

Of course she fails in the test, and sees the horrid Green Serpent with his long, bristling mane ... she faints, everything vanishes, and her ordeals begin. Forced by the evil fairy Magotine to wear tiny iron shoes, spin spiders' webs, wear a millstone and climb a mountain in order to gather water from a bottomless well in a pitcher full of holes, as well as fill a basket with four-leafed clover, she eventually – with the help of a good fairy – succeeds in these impossible tasks and is rechristened Queen Discretion for her pains. She still remains exiled, however, in a grove full of beasts. They have all been changed from their former, human, state by the fairies as a punishment: tattlers have become parrots, those who mocked their friends, monkeys, hotheads have been changed into lions and, most significant of all, a jealous lover who 'overwhelmed [his sweetheart] with unjust accusations' and 'beat her so cruelly as to leave her almost dead in the arms of her waiting-women' was at last changed into a wolf by fairies who appeared before him to stop him assaulting her again. Thus, in the pages of her own narrative, Mme d'Aulnoy opens up one set of meanings that fairytale animal metamorphosis expresses: this wolf has not been unjustly persecuted like the Great Green Worm; nor does his beastliness present a test of a true heroine's goodness and trust, as in 'Cupid and Psyche' and its direct descendants. Rather, it makes his inner nature manifest as an outward shape, like the parrot prattlers and the monkey jokers, or the sinners in Dante's *Inferno* with their congruous punishments. In the same way, the companions of Odysseus whom Circe enchants have been made to own up to their own swinishness and folly.

At last, when the three years of her solitude have elapsed, Hidessa returns to

Magotine with her cribbled pitcher duly full of water, her basket brimming with four-leafed clover, the millstone, the iron shoes. A few more vicissitudes intervene, but finally she is reunited with the Green Serpent and finds him to be a splendid prince. With heroic optimism, Mme d'Aulnoy comments, 'And whatever Magotine's powers, alas for her, what could she do against the power of Love?' Her ugly heroine's true beauty is restored, but only after the prince has committed himself to his staunch, chivalrous girl who has learned to love him and has crossed so many bridges of knives for him.

Perseverance wins Hidessa her happiness, after showing the cruelty of society towards unattractive young women, and their loneliness; Mme d'Aulnoy spiritedly fantasticates on the scale of female heroism.

D'Aulnoy's Beauty and the Beast fairy tales precede the classic tale actually entitled '*La Belle et la bête*'. Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot Gallon, known as Mme de Villeneuve (1695–1755), included it in her novel *Les Contes marins ou la jeune Américaine*, in 1740, and it was reprinted as a discrete narrative in *Le Cabinet des fées* some fifty years later. Angela Carter has made the point that while it exhibits connections to the ancient cycle of animal bridegroom tales, it must be seen as 'a literary fairy tale of the same order of invention as the stories of Hans Christian Andersen or Oscar Wilde'. Nearly a hundred pages long, intricately plotted in a series of episodes spoken by different characters in turn, which nest one inside another (*mise-en-abyme*), this founding text of one of the most popular fairy tales of the modern world has defeated almost all readers; it has hardly ever been reprinted uncut, or unrevised. Jack Zipes, in his anthology *Beauties, Beasts and Enchantment* of 1989, provided the first full translation into English.

Villeneuve portrays the Beast as the victim of an aged and malignant fairy who laid the terrible curse on him when the handsome youth turned down her amorous advances; the story encrypts the corrupt and vicious intrigues of court life, of fortune-hunting and marriage-broking, pandering and lust in the eighteenth century, and, like so many of the first literary fairy tales, campaigns for marriages of true minds, for the rights of the heart, for the freedom of the true lovers of romance. At one point Beauty muses, 'How many girls are compelled to marry rich brutes – much more brutish than the Beast, who's only one in form and not in his feelings or his actions?' She conjures up a dream place, the Fortunate Island, where everyone, 'even the king', is allowed to marry 'according to their inclinations'. The force of this wishful thinking tends to be lost on the reader today.

The surface moral of the fairy tale offers the enchanted victim of a cruel fairy redemption from his degraded, mute, coarse animal condition: he learns to speak in the gracious cadences of 'The Land of Tenderness'; he begins to act as a human being, to express the motions of his heart and mind; in other words, to love. The condemned Other returns to Selfhood, and recovers his 'I'.

Until the most recent, twentieth-century revisions of the tale, the Beast was in fatal exile from the human, and his plight was terrible. The animals chosen for his punishment constitute a diabolical bestiary: snakes, frogs, cats, donkeys are traditional witches' familiars as well as the ingredients of their potions, their love potions at that. They are guises of the Devil: the subtle serpent from Eden, and the priapic ass of antiquity. The fairies – good and bad alike – control these metamorphoses, for the supernatural shares something in common with the animal; in early modern fairy tale, both categories converge in the realm of the monstrous.

In Mme de Villeneuve's 'Beauty and the Beast', she even devises an aetiology for their connection: according to fairy law, her principal good fairy informs her audience, a fairy must be a thousand years old before she can dispute the orders of her elders, unless – and this is where the power of the uncanny proves superior even to those who can call upon it at will – a young fairy submits to a change of shape and lives as a snake or a bear. 'We call this condition the "terrible act" because it is fraught with danger,' she explains. Surviving the animal condition, however, increases a fairy's powers, as it can a human heroine's, too.

The ambiguous position of the Beast confers mastery of magic. The surface moral of the tales offers the enchanted victims redemption from their reduced, animal condition: as in a Christian miracle play or saint's legend, the heroine vanquishes the tempter, triumphs in heaven after heroic resistance, or converts him. On awakening, he is somehow the better for his ordeal; that the Beast has learned something is often the underlying message of the tale. In Villeneuve's 'Beauty and the Beast', the Beast falls into a mortal swoon when he thinks she has abandoned him for ever; Beauty then revives him by pouring water on his face. He comes to, and his disenchantment takes place only on the morning after their wedding night; not for this scrupulous lady the erotic escapades – the pregnancy! – of Psyche before her wedding.

Villeneuve's hint at the saving waters of baptism was taken up and fully developed in the concise, popular epitome which Mme Leprince de Beaumont published in 1756 and which became one of the widely distributed sources of the famous fairy tale. There, the Beast returns to 'his proper figure' (as the 1818 English translation puts it) when Beauty pours the water from a stream on his forehead. He is released from evil to emerge a new man, fit to be loved and to give love in return, like the cleansed soul after the sacrament.

IV

Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont (1711–80) included her polished abridgement in an anthology for young people – a pioneering work of the kind – called *Le Magasin des enfants*; it is this version of the tale that has become canonical (it inspired Cocteau's classic film, for instance). Beaumont published it in London, during the fourteen-year spell she worked as a governess (a Mam'zelle) in England. She had left an unhappy marriage in France ten years before. The arranged union with M. de Beaumont, 'a dissolute libertine', had been annulled after only two years – fortunately – and in England she found a second husband, and had several children. Industrious and very high-minded, she issued a stream of pedagogical writings, often translating her own French into English for the edification of an aristocratic female pupillage under the age of eighteen. When she returned to her own country, in 1762, she produced no less busily – her bibliography numbers more than seventy volumes.

In the case of Mme de Beaumont, the figure of the élite, lettered lady of the salon merges with the proverbial storyteller of the nursery for the first time on the social plane, when she ceases to be a member of the idle nobility and becomes a working woman in a household commanded and owned by another.

Beaumont composed her stories with her pupils in mind, and sometimes invited their collaboration. The results appeared in English collections such as the *Young Ladies' Magazine or Dialogues between a Discreet Governess and Several Young Ladies of the First Rank under Her Education*, published in four volumes in 1760. Describing her teaching methods, the governess defended with the heated asperity of a Miss Jean Brodie her girls' capacity to think for themselves:

> they will tell you very gravely of a book they are reading: 'The author has taken leave of his subject; he says very weak things. His principle is false; his inferences must be so.' What is more my young ladies will prove it. We don't frame a true judgement of the capacity of children; nothing is out of their reach … Now-a-days ladies read all sorts of books, history, politics, philosophy and even such as concern religion … They should therefore be … able to discern truth from falsehood.

With such determination, it is not surprising that many of the stories are openly didactic, very far in atmosphere from D'Aulnoy's flippant perversity, or even Villeneuve's intricate romancing. Mme de Beaumont holds out rewards and punishments: she tells of suffering saints, like the put-upon skivvy Saint Zita, a Cinderella of the early thirteenth century, and concludes with overtly Christian messages: in one story, for example, she relates how a poverty-stricken man called Perrin is rewarded when he returns a sack of gold and silver he has come across by accident; his beneficiary makes him a gift of a farm in return for his honesty. She also adduces the terrible case of Mme Angélique Ticquet, Mme d'Aulnoy's friend who attempted murder against her brutal husband. She blames her unequivocally, saying that even though she was a rich heiress, she was covetous of wealth, and thought her husband much wealthier than he was when he gave her a diamond spray brooch as a wedding present. When she discovered her error, she conceived a hatred for him, and fell for '*un cavalier fort aimable*' – one thing led to another, to the (almost) fatal pistol shot, and her beheading. 'You see, my children,' writes Mme de Beaumont, after this partial and improving account, 'the terrible extremes to which the passions may carry us!' This example from recent history, occurring so close to home, is cited in an imagined conversation, which uses fables, cautionary tales, allegory – and fairy stories – to tutor the moral sense of her girls.

It is easy to catch, in Mme de Beaumont, the worried tone of a well-meaning teacher raising her pupils to face their future obediently and decorously, to hear her pious wish that her pupils should obey their fathers and that inside the brute of a husband who might be their appointed lot, the heart of a good man might beat, given a bit of encouragement, that no extreme measures will be needed – no scissors will be used on the Yellow Dwarf. In the altered attitudes to Mme Ticquet, between D'Aulnoy's possible abetting in 1699 and Mme de Beaumont's anxious advice sixty or so years later, between D'Aulnoy's unpredictably resolved tales and Beaumont's exemplary outcomes, it becomes possible to perceive *ancien régime* raffishness on the turn, and the romantic cult of *sentimentalité* and *bonne volonté* taking hold.

Mme de Beaumont, like many before her, tackled the quandary posed by romance itself. She was well read in the English novel, and commented on Richardson and the problems his material posed for a woman concerned with other women's morals and the care of their spirit. In 1774, she wrote:

> The good and honest Mr Richardson, author of *Pamela, Clarissa*, etc., has come to grief, and however much he may want to foster love of virtue, has carried into more than one heart the knowledge of vice – enlightenment that is always fateful (*lumière toujours funeste*). I could go into some great detail, and prove what I say by examples, but it would be falling into the same mistake that I reprove …

Pamela may well have inspired feelings of identification in Mme de Beaumont, for Richardson's heroine is employed like her in an ambiguous position in her pursuer's household, having fallen on hard times and been compelled to seek work as a nursemaid. A painting by Joseph Highmore, *Pamela Tells a Nursery Tale*, made shortly after the book's appearance in 1741, singled out this aspect of the heroine's duties. Mme de Beaumont even undertook the rewriting of *Clarissa*, improving Richardson's original for her pupils.

The sacramental character Mme Leprince de Beaumont gave to the moment of the Beast's redemption was therefore no accident: he is transfigured, as the civilized, pretty, moral fairy tale of this sort transfigures the teller from a witch to an angel, and brings her back within the pale. By crossing the Channel with the fairy tale, Beaumont also echoes the change from élite women's pre-revolutionary protests in France to comparative acquiescence, after the revolution in England, among *émigrées* and natives alike, and the comparable shift in the use of such stories from the social arena of the salons to the domestic interior of the home, the nursery and the schoolroom. We can see foreshadowed, already, the Victorian angel of the house, whose task it is to tame and gentle male lust and animal instinct. We also see an intelligent governess preparing her charges for this wifely duty, readying them to find the male spouse a beast at first, but, beneath the rough and uncivilized exterior, a good man. The fairy tale emerges in its modern form, as an instrument of social adaptation, spoken and circulated by women to cast themselves as civilizers in the tabooed terrain of sexuality, turning predatory men into moderate consorts. The mischief and wantonness of Psyche's troubles and discoveries, still captured by D'Aulnoy's bizarreries, fade before the moral enterprise of the Enlightenment. The stories begin to attempt to console young women beset by fears of marriage, of ogre husbands who might bring about their destruction in one way or another. And these functions – of steadying and training the young – have gradually gained ground over the critical and challenged rebelliousness of the first generation of women fairytale writers and become identified with the genre itself, establishing its pedagogical, edifying character.

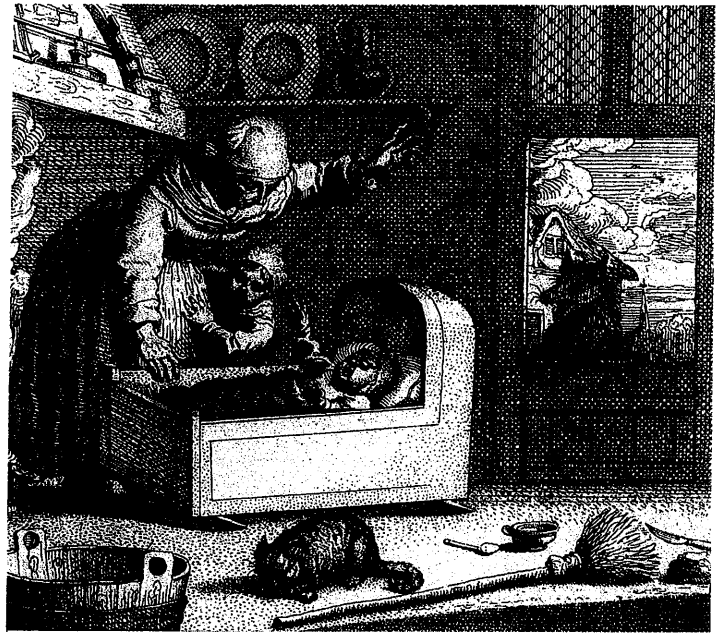
Didactic intentions have influenced fairy tales increasingly strongly since the nineteenth century; the Brothers Grimm led the way, as they re-edited and reshaped successive editions of their famous *Household Tales* to improve their message. Their predecessors had been less anxious about the possible effect on children of tales of incest, adultery or murder, with the exception of Mme de Beaumont who had anticipated their anxieties. For in her lessons, we can also perceive cross-identifications, that the terror of the Beast – carnality, transgressive nature – lies in the mind of the beholder, female as well as male. The fairy tale told by women acts optatively to undo all such prejudice.

In the anonymous, characteristic version of 1818, Beauty delivers a truly Christian speech to the Beast:

> 'You are very obliging, (answered Beauty;) I own I am pleased with your kindness: when I consider that, your deformity scarce appears.' 'Yes, yes, (said the Beast,) my heart is good, but still I am a monster.' 'Among mankind, (says Beauty) [note 'said' changes to 'says', from the past tense to the universal present], there are many that deserve that name more than you, and I prefer you, just as you are, to those, who, under a human form, hide a treacherous, corrupt, and ungrateful heart.'

Beauty's goodness inspired some idealistic lessons; fairy tales, with their generic commitment to justice, frequently enclose a simple notion of retribution.

When men adopt this material, they often introduce special pleading on their own behalf; Cocteau's entrancing film, of 1946, for all its delicacy and dreamlike seductiveness, concentrates on awakening Beauty to consciousness of the Beast's goodness (p. 272). *He* does not have to change at all, except in outward shape; *she* has to see past his unsightliness to the gentle and loving human being trapped inside. The film presents a trial of her limits, not his. Christian Bérard's designs intensify the Beast's poignancy; he is not an animal, but a hairy anthropomorphic changeling, a Quasimodo, a pitiful Elephant Man whose male desire deserves to kindle a reciprocating love if only women would listen to the imperatives of the heart, not the eye. King Kong is one of his lineage too, as the last words of the film make plain: 'It wasn't the airplanes, it was Beauty killed the Beast.' This strand in the history of Beauty and the Beast consists of variations on the theme of the *femme fatale*, on men's anguish in the face of female indifference, on the tenderness of masculine desire and the cruelty of the female response, rather than women's vulnerability to male violence. Ironically, such interpretations make Beauty guilty of fixity, in a story that began as a narrative of a woman's passionate progress. Underlying the static serenity of Josette Day's La Belle in Cocteau's film lies the Symbolist fetishization of impassive femininity, as defined by Baudelaire, of Beauty who speaks of herself as '*un rêve de pierre*' (a dream of stone), with a granite breast on which men (poets) wound themselves and discover love '*éternel et muet ainsi que la matière*' (eternal and mute as matter). Psyche/Beauty, as woman, is material, made flesh, however cool and otherworldly her appearance; Jean



In the Aesop story, a nurse threatens a crying baby that she will hand him over to the wolves; a passing wolf rejoices to hear this, but soon meets his death when he is discovered at the door. (F. Barlow, 'The Nurse and the Wolf', Aesop's Fables, *1723.)*

Marais' Eros/Beast in the film belongs to the spirit world, and his enchanted castle, with its spellbinding moving sconces and speaking furniture, emanates from the higher realm of imagination, the dimension of dream and fantasy, where poets – like Baudelaire, like Cocteau himself – are sent through the love women inspire in them.

Cocteau, as a Surrealist, was reinterpreting Symbolist doctrine of the feminine's role in creativity. Not for nothing had the *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme* attributed to Baudelaire their definition of *La Femme*: 'She who casts the greatest shadow or the greatest light into our dreams.' The inflexion on 'our' here is obviously masculine. This does not prevent Cocteau's *La Belle et la bête* from spellbinding a female spectator – the film profoundly affected Angela Carter, for instance, who specially remembered the way the Beast smouldered – literally – after a kill. But its masculine sympathy does divert the story from the female subject to stress male erotic hunger for beauty as the stimulus to creativity, as the vital principle. The ravishing aestheticization of the whole film, from the flying laundry at the start to the twilit luxuries of the castle magic, extends the function of the feminine as the Beast's necessary lifeblood. And at the end, in an enigmatic twist, the disenchanted Beast turns out to have the same human face as Belle's ne'er-do-well, aspiring lover Avenant, whom she rejected kindly, but firmly (the actor Jean Marais plays both). So *La Belle et la bête* traces a promise to male lovers that they will not always be rejected, that human lovers, however profligate, can be saved, and it withdraws at the last moment any autonomy in love from Beauty herself.

For their intentionally instructive film *The Singing Ringing Tree*, a family product made in the former German Democratic Republic in 1958, the screenwriters Anne Geelhaer and Francesco Stefani (who also directed), drew on different tales in the Grimm Brothers' collection. It blended a 'Beauty and the Beast' type tale with another familiar figure: the Haughty Princess who considers herself too good for her flock of suitors. Princess High-and-Mighty's punishment is ugliness: the live action film animates the grotesque collapse of her beauty and follows her slow and painful lessons in kindness, humility and love as she cares for the magical creatures she once spurned – a giant goldfish, a golden-maned and golden-antlered horse and a flock of doves. Her pilgrim's progress eventually succeeds in freeing her mentor the prince, who himself has been changed into a bear by an evil magician. Once she has learned to love, her beauty returns.

As fairy tales begin to aim more and more exclusively at the young, their stock-in-trade becomes more didactic. Disapproval of improper romancing feeds the ambivalence towards imaginative literature for children; but, as its popularity goes on growing, the chief effect of this anxiety is to make writers attempt to turn the unsuitable into the improving, the exciting into the punitive. Lullabies that threaten babies ('Hushabye Baby on the tree top ... / When the bough breaks the cradle will fall ...'), nurses who warn that the wolf is at the door (left), have their counterpart in Enlightenment variations on the ancient romances, which teach the limits of a growing girl's hopes. But it was that sensible and kindhearted governess, Mme Leprince de Beaumont, in the mid-eighteenth century who pioneered the use of the fairytale form to mould the young in this way. Her vision of female love and sympathy redeeming the brute in man has made 'Beauty and the Beast' one of the best-loved fairy tales in the world, and it has not stopped inspiring dreams of experiencing love's power in little girls – and little boys.

Linda Woolverton's script sensibly sets such patriarchal analysis aside, and instead provides subplots to explain away the father's part in Beauty's predicament, as well as supplying Beauty herself with all the wilfulness and determination to make her mistress of her own fate. The Disney studio, sensitive to the rise of children's rights, has replaced the father with the daughter as the enterprising authority figure in the family. The struggle with patriarchal plans underlies, as we shall see, the plots of many other familiar tales.

In popular versions, 'Beauty and the Beast' offers a lesson in female yielding and its satisfactions. The Beast stirs desire, Beauty responds from some deep inner need which he awakens. (There are echoes here of 'Sleeping Beauty' too.) The Beast, formerly the stigmatizing envelope of the fallen male, has become a badge of the salvation he offers; Beauty used to grapple with the material and emotional difficulties of matrimony for young women; now she tends to personify female erotic pleasures in matching and mastering a man who is dark and hairy, rough and wild, and, in the psychotherapist Robert Bly's phrase, in touch with the Inner Warrior in himself.

In her encounter with the Beast, the female protagonist meets her match, in more ways than one. If she defeats him, or even kills him, if she outwits him, banishes or forsakes him, or accepts him and loves him, she arrives at some knowledge she did not possess; his existence and the challenge he offers is necessary before she can grasp it. The ancient tale of 'Cupid and Psyche' told of their love; apart from the child Pleasure whom Psyche bore, their other descendants – the tales in the Beauty and the Beast group – number among the most eloquent testaments to women's struggles, against arranged marriage, and towards a definition of the place of sexuality in love. The enchantments and disenchantments of the Beast have been a rich resource in stories women have made up, among themselves, to help, to teach, to warn.

CHAPTER 19

The Runaway Girls: Donkeyskin I

The pagan father ...
Began to think about his daughter night and day.
His fears were so great
That he decided to have a tower built,
A tower more beautiful than any ever seen.

Gautier de Coinci

The law forbidding sex between mother and son, father and daughter, brother and sister, holds universally in human society; it is sometimes extended to include cousins and god-siblings within its interdiction, but it always remains a founding binary opposition on which the structural foundations of society are laid. Because storytellers finger the heathen and the apostate, separate the saved from the damned, the well-behaved from the badly behaved, the transgressor from the insider, the tales that a 'Sibyl-nurse' traditionally passes on pinpoint differences between good and evil in matters of faith and doctrine and custom. In setting riddles which clarify such matters, the Queen of Sheba, for example, not

After her father's proposal of marriage, the daughter takes flight in disguise. Catherine Deneuve as Peau d'Ane in The Magic Donkey, *directed by Jacques Demy, 1971.*

only foreshadows the figure of the storyteller herself, but also embodies the function of the tale itself, as the arbiter of family relations and social order, conveying and instructing the audience, especially the young audience, in what is licit and illicit, what will earn praise and reward, and what will forfeit it. It was to fulfil this function that so many of her riddles circulating in fifteenth-century Europe focussed on the rules of exogamy and the incest taboo. Myths and folklore wrestle with defining and conveying its importance: the mother–son prohibition underlies the story of Oedipus, a founding myth both in its Sophoclean, tragic form and in its potent Freudian afterlife. Incest between father and daughter has not dominated Western mythology or mythological analysis to the same degree; but it makes a strong showing in fairy tale.

Giambattista Basile included in the *Pentamerone* the first modern variation on one of the most familiar fairy tales in Europe. His story is called *'L'Orsa'* (The She-Bear): 'There was once a King of Roccaspra,' it begins, 'who had for his wife the very mother of beauty, but he lost her early, for in the gallop of life she fell from the horse of health and broke her life …'

The couple have a daughter, called Preziosa, Precious. On her deathbed, her mother demands on the pain of horrible curses that her husband should never marry again, unless he finds 'another woman as beautiful as I have been'.

He swears; she dies; he rails with grief and weeps rivers of tears. But, as Basile says – and in Naples cynicism was an essential of survival – 'the ache of the widower is like the ache in the funny-bone, sharp, but brief'. So he soon begins looking around him for a new wife to replace his beloved, and give him an heir – a son. He holds a contest, has candidates summoned from the four quarters; but none will do. Then the thought strikes him, 'Why should I seek [high and low] when Preziosa, my daughter, is made in the same form as her mother? I have this lovely face by me at home, and yet I go to the ends of the earth to find another like it?'

He puts the matter to the girl, but she reproaches him bitterly. He explodes: 'Make up your mind to tie the marriage knot this very night; for otherwise your ear will be the biggest bit left of you!' When Preziosa hears this, she goes to her room in desperation and an old woman, a servant who 'used to bring her mercury' for her toilette, appears and comforts her. She also gives Preziosa practical advice, handing her a little stick and telling her to put it in her mouth when her father 'wants to play the part of a stallion, though there's more of the ass in him'. She promises her, 'You will then immediately become a bear, and can run away …'

The wedding feast takes place that night; the bride is summoned to her father's bed. There she does as the old woman had told her, and escapes from her terrified father in the shape of a bear. As she wanders in the forest in this disguise, a prince out hunting spots her, and captures her. One day, when passing the den in the palace gardens where the bear has been confined, he sees a young woman combing her golden hair. Preziosa the she-bear has taken the stick out of her mouth and become a girl again, thinking no one was looking. He falls in love with the mysterious stranger and, finally, after many vicissitudes, discovers that she and the bear are one and the same, and marries her. The prince's mother, on hearing Preziosa's story, extols her as a good, virtuous girl. Basile concludes, optimistically, 'Thus Preziosa was the sounding rod to the balance of human judgement, which declares that "To those who do good, good always comes."'

Some of the elements in this happy and reassuring story are very recognizable: the disguised princess whose virtue and beauty are at last acknowledged and properly rewarded by union with a prince, after an older woman has helped her escape her troubles, relates Basile's *'L'Orsa'* to the Cinderella cycle of folk tales. But the story differs in obvious ways from the classic fairy tale, the version told by Charles Perrault. There, of course, Cinderella is not wronged by her *father*, but by her stepmother and her daughters, Cinderella's stepsisters. The more familiar story enfolds within it, not like a worm in the bud, but like the hollow in the core of an agate pebble, the motif of incestuous desire.

The she-bear variant, which itself appears in hundreds of metamorphoses in Western texts and imagery, deals with tensions that arise from possessiveness, rivalry, ownership, procreation and usurpation, in the triangle composed of mother, father and daughter, and its historical changes themselves reflect the way different moments have dealt with this central question. The wronged daughter in the folk tale known as 'Unlawful Love' embodies many of fairy tale's crucial functions, including speaking of the unspeakable and negotiating a rite of passage through story. She also takes on herself the character of an enchanted animal, and, as a she-beast, she carries very different meanings from her male counterparts.

Perrault spun a tale of the she-bear type, and it was one of the first fairy tales he wrote. *'Peau d'Ane'* (Donkeyskin) was written in verse, a kind of jaunty doggerel, and was published in pamphlet form in 1694, three years before the famous group of fairy tales in *Contes du temps passé*. It remains the least reproduced fairy tale from Perrault's much-loved and much reproduced oeuvre; it was not included in his collection until 1781, when a much less sprightly prose version made its first appearance, a paraphrase by another, anonymous hand which inflates the ornament at the same time as flattening the wit (this is still the usual version to be reprinted).

In his preface to the story, this *académicien*, scholar, courtier and defender of the Modern school of French literature against the Ancients' emulators, confided to his readers that there were times when '*le grave et le sérieux*' (serious, weighty matters) were not as valuable as '*agréables sornettes*' (pleasant trifles): he was wrapping himself in jocularity as in a magic cloak. With his nonsense-rhyme style poem, Perrault was tackling a stock fairy tale – a *conte de Peau d'âne* – about a father who wants to marry his daughter. But he braided this material with another, durable folk motif: a magic animal whose excrement is made of gold (below). Among the bestiary available from his sources – fish, geese, cows all produce magic fortunes in fairy tales – Perrault chose a donkey.

The donkey that drops golden dung, like the goose that lays the golden eggs, is a familiar dream in folk tales, which Perrault adapted for 'Donkeyskin'.(Amsterdam, sixteenth century.)

Perrault may have lighted upon the reference to the father as ass in 'The She-Bear', and his immediate source for the tale of the ass that shits gold may have been another of Basile's tales from Naples. (No critic or scholar has been able to decide whether Perrault had a copy of Basile.) However, the donkey served his purposes. Throughout his career, Perrault's work had alternated between the overweeningly pompous and the jest: he could apostrophize the timbre of his beloved's voice, and write sonnets on her being afflicted with a cold, but when he was a young man he had also composed a mock version of Aeneas' descent into the underworld, as in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, and in 1653 had written *Les Murs de Troye*, an absurdist essay on the origins of burlesque as a form. By introducing the magic donkey into the story of the unlawful love of a father, Perrault mocked, in the style of the Milesian tale, the atmosphere of enchantment.

'Once upon a time there was a king, the greatest king there ever was on earth,' begins Perrault's '*Peau d'Ane*', already slyly teasing fairy tale's love of hyperbole. This king has everything kings have, but in addition he keeps in the royal stables a donkey which every day provides a fortune in gold dung. But the king does suffer

*The moment of epiphany: when her finger fits the ring she had cunningly slipped into the only cake the sick prince could eat, the skivvy in her filthy ass hide is recognized to be the radiant girl for whom the prince is languishing. ('*Peau d'Ane*' (Donkeyskin),* Le Cabinet des fées, *Paris, 1785–9.)*

one of fate's blows: his beautiful and charming wife falls ill, and on her deathbed she asks him to swear that he will only marry again a woman who is more beautiful than she. He does so gladly. Time passes, and he searches high and low. Only one woman meets the conditions of his vow: his daughter. But she is reluctant, and seeks out her godmother, a marvellously powerful fairy, who does her best for the distressed young girl. Three times, on her godmother's advice, the daughter asks her father for an impossible gift: a dress the colour of Heaven, another the colour of the Moon, a third the colour of the Sun. Each time, in his unfailing potency, the father produces it, until, at last, the fairy advises the princess to demand something the kingly father surely cannot part with: the hide of the magic donkey, the source of his wealth.

Of course, the king does not refuse his daughter: to her utter dismay, he goes ahead and kills the donkey, and offers her the skin as his clinching wedding gift. She has no alternative: she must marry her father, or flee. Her godmother advises flight, in disguise, so she wraps herself in the stinking pelt, dirties her face and hands till she looks like the lowest slattern.

She wanders, meets with abuse and insult, and eventually takes a job as a skivvy in the laundry and sty of a neighbouring prince's castle. She is known only by her nickname, '*Peau d'Ane*', until one day, when she thinks nobody is looking, she tries on one of her magic dresses in secret in her pigsty, and is glimpsed through a chink by the prince. One thing leads to another, and after various ordeals Donkeyskin is recognized to be a true princess (p. 323), and she marries her prince. Her father comes to the wedding, purified of his *odieuse flamme* (his odious passion), and Perrault concludes first that virtue will be rewarded, and second, in his throwaway *mondain* manner, that bread and water are quite sufficient to a young person's needs – as long as she has some pretty clothes.

Donkeyskin's disguise confers on her the particular long-suffering character of the jennet, or she-ass, described in medieval bestiary lore, the popular *Physiologus*, as putting up with work and 'almost unlimited neglect'. But, interestingly, Perrault specifies that the enchanted, gold-producing animal is a jackass. Perrault often identifies the transitional stage of his main character with a reverse sex name: as Marc Soriano has pointed out, Cendrillon, for instance, ends with a common masculine form – *on*, rather than our Cinderell*a*; by contrast, Noël du Fail, in his *Propos rustiques* of 1547, mentions the tale '*Cuir d'Asnette*' (Little Donkey Leather) as one of the repertory of stories told at the *veillées*, the evening gatherings of rural France; *Asnette* is the feminine diminutive.

Perrault picked the ass for effect; he was well acquainted with the vast Aesopian folklore about the jackass as fall guy in the market economy of the fabulist's harsh world. In 1699, Perrault was to translate into French verse the sixteenth-century Latin anthology of Gabriel Faerno, who had drawn on Phaedrus as well as Aesop, and included nearly a dozen of the famous harsh tales in which the donkey loses to the fox or the lion. In one, particularly bitter vignette, the pack-ass in question has open saddle sores to which a crow fastens itself and pecks savagely, and will not be shaken off by the poor howling, kicking animal. A muleteer, passing by, witnesses the scene and laughs wholeheartedly at the donkey's antics; a wolf, observing, envies the crow which provokes only merriment whereas he, the wolf, is always reproached when he shows his nature.

Her disguise degrades his heroine utterly: Perrault writes that the donkey was

La beste en un mot la plus laide
Qu'on puisse voir après le loup.

[In a word, after the wolf quite the ugliest animal one might ever see.]

And her predicament invites the ridicule of all around her:

On la mit dans un coin au fond de la cuisine
Où les Valets, insolente vermine,
Ne faisaient que la tirailler,
La contredire et la railler;
Ils ne savaient quelle pièce lui faire,
La harcelant à tout propos;
Elle était la butte ordinaire
De tous leurs quolibets et de tous leurs bons mots.

[She was put in a corner at the back of the kitchen where the valets, that insolent vermin, did nothing but plague her and cross her and mock her; they could never decide what trick to play on her next, harassing her at every turn; she was the usual butt of all their witticisms and clever jibes.]

But her day will come, whereas for the ass of fable there is usually no hope, aside from canonization in the Christian fellowship of paragons. The fairytale princess wears a skin of shame, but the pathetic degradation of her condition contains a kind of Christian grace of humility, forbearance and lack of vanity, like the fool who wears asses' ears because he knows himself to be a fool. Like the fables, which by ironic and invisible subtexts take the part of the ass, the fairy tale often feels for the least of all – A. A. Milne's Eeyore stands in direct line of descent from this classically pathetic figure of fun.

The absurd priapism of the jackass is not altogether obscured in the fairy tale, however, but underlies Perrault's choice of beast. For in this early fairy tale, he marks the daughter with her father's sin: the sign of the donkey conveys his lust. She becomes a beast, after her father has behaved like one. In 'Beauty and the Beast', the father and the Beast bridegroom collude to dispose of the heroine's desires; in the 'Donkeyskin' cycle, her rebellion means she chooses between father and lover, and they do not conspire.

Significantly, Perrault published '*Peau d'Ane*' with '*Grisélidis*', a sister parable of female degradation and forbearance rewarded, which Perrault also treated with flippant irreverence. Both tales belong to two immense groups of traditional stories: Patient Griselda is another type of Accused Queen, related to the historical stories of medieval heroines and saints like Geneviève de Brabant, Godelive of Bruges, Elizabeth of Hungary. To the wider circles of this group of tales also

belongs the seminal story of the False Bride, of which '*Berthe aus grant pié*' is only one variation. 'Donkeyskin' also sits in another great tangled web of stories spun in the middle ages around the figure of the loving daughter whose father loves her 'unlawfully' in return and who is then abused or rejected by him.

The late-antique romance of *Apollonius of Tyre* circulated in many different editions from the tenth century onwards, as well as being told again and again, in poems, plays and hagiography. John Gower's *Confessio amantis* of around 1390, a thesaurus almost as plundered as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, contains a version which, for instance, inspired Shakespeare's incestuous pair at the beginning of *Pericles* – King Antiochus and his nameless daughter. Chaucer based his 'Man of Lawe's Tale' about Constance on the story, though he disinfected it of the initial overtures of incest. The *Vita* of Dympna, a virgin martyr who became the patron saint of the insane in the fifteenth century, could have inspired Perrault, as he was interested in hagiography. According to Marian Cox, the folklorist who at the turn of the century collected 345 variants of 'Cinderella', a sermon of 1501 given in Strasbourg referred to a story called '*Peau d'Ane*'; Noël du Fail mentions the tale '*Cuir d'Asnette*', as we have seen, in 1547; Straparola's collection of 1550 includes the tale of Doralice, daughter of the Prince of Salerno, who escapes from her father shut up in a wooden wardrobe and cast adrift on the sea, only to meet with horrendous misadventures and horrors at his hands in England, until she is at last spared and vindicated. Bonaventure des Périers, writing in the 1570s, gave a different spin to the story, but called it 'Of a Young Girl named Donkeyskin and how she got married with the help of little ants'. The reference to the ants returns us to Apuleius as an early origin, for in the tale of Cupid and Psyche, Venus sets Psyche the impossible task of separating grains of millet and wheat and is furious when she accomplishes it overnight – with the help of ants. The chapbooks of the *Bibliothèque bleue* included, from 1641 onwards, numerous issues of '*Le roman de la belle Helaine*', yet another variation on the tale, in an abbreviated form. In the British Isles, the fugitive's favoured disguise is more often a coat of rushes or a catskin, and her story is told in forms other than prose narrative, including chapbooks and ballads.

It is not impossible, however, that Perrault knew the story from hearing it himself; Pierre de La Porte wrote in his *Mémoires* that Louis XIV's nurses had lulled him to sleep with '*contes de Peau d'Ane*', one of Molière's child characters offers to tell it to her father, and La Fontaine, who never wrote a version but in many ways hovers as the inspiration of Perrault's tongue-in-cheek moralizing, implies that he had heard it as a child:

Si Peau d'Ane *m'était conté*
J'y prendrais un plaisir extrême.

[It would give me the utmost pleasure / If 'Donkeyskin' were told to me.]

In 1812, the Grimm Brothers published the oral version they had collected, from Dortchen Wild, '*Allerleirauh*' (All-Fur), in which the heroine escapes from her father in a coat made of the skins of all the creatures in the world. This is a magical dress, which hides her successfully until she finds a king she can love. 'All-Fur' may represent a storyteller's ingenious and trenchant solution to the confusing discrepancies about bears and donkeys and other fauna whose fur and form the heroine takes.

The extreme peculiarity of the tale and its breaching of taboo made it appeal to the Surrealists. It was mentioned in the First Manifesto of the movement, in 1924, when André Breton lamented that children are weaned from the *merveilleux* (the wonder) of fairy tales like '*Peau d'Ane*', and then writes: 'There are tales to be written for grownups, tales which are still almost blue.' 'Donkeyskin' is indeed almost blue, and has been considered on the whole suitable for adults only.

II

A 'childish intellectual puzzle', as Edmund Leach has written, lies at the heart of myth: how is it that incest forbids relations within families, yet at the beginning there were only Adam and Eve who were flesh of their flesh? Leach comments:

> Every human society has rules of incest and exogamy. Though the rules vary, they always carry the implication that for any particular male individual all women are divided by at least one binary distinction, there are women of our kind with whom sex relations would be incestuous, and there are women of the other kind, with whom sex relations are allowed. But here again we are immediately led into paradox. How was it in the beginning? If our first parents were persons of two kinds, what was the other kind? But if they were both of our kind, then their relations must have been incestuous, and we are all born in sin.

The nub is that mating with your own kind is considered the lesser evil to mating outside your kind, however that is defined: pure ancestry corresponds to pure minds and hearts in the Judaeo-Christian perspective. The beast must turn into a

man, the enchanted cat into a princess, because permitted sexual relations must take place between members of the same species who are not close kin; the drawing up of definitions of interdicted degrees constitutes, in Lévi-Strauss's striking formula, the 'first writing' of society. This writing produces some of the first and hence oldest stories as well as the stories of human origin in myth, from Christian to Aborigine.

In Genesis 19, Lot's seduction follows upon an enigmatic sequence of events that take place in Sodom itself: two angels enter the city and meet Lot who is sitting by the gate; he begs them to be his guests, and they decline, but he presses them to come home with him and at least have a meal, which they do. Before bedtime, the men of the town, young and old, surround the house and call to Lot to send out his guests 'so that we may abuse them' (Gen. 19: 5). Commentators have always taken this to mean that the Sodomites wished to violate the two angels in the manner of their name. Lot, in order to spare his guests according to the law of hospitality, offers his rowdy visitors his virgin daughters instead, 'to treat as it pleases you' (Gen. 19: 8).

The biblical narrative is disjointed and fragmentary, but it seems that this offer enrages the crowd, who berate Lot for a 'foreigner' and beat at his door to break it down. The angels blind the attackers, who then 'never found the doorway', and they recommend to Lot that he leave, with his daughters and their future husbands, as Yahweh is angry and they, his angels, are to destroy this place.

At dawn, the angels take Lot by the hand and lead him out of Sodom with his wife and his daughters. (The future sons-in-law do not believe in the danger – in spite of the angels' manifest power to blind – and remain behind.) Yahweh rains fire and brimstone on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Lot's wife looks back on the destruction, though the angels have forbidden it, and, in consequence, she is turned into a pillar of salt. Lot then looks out over the cities of the plain and 'lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace' (Gen. 19: 28). Later, after Lot has been living with his daughters in a cave, the elder confides her worries to the younger: 'Our father is old, and there is not a man in the earth to come in unto us ... Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father.' On the first night, the elder daughter conceives Moab, father of the Moabite tribe; on the second night, the younger does likewise, and she becomes the mother of the Ammonites. The progeny – enemy tribes of Israel – remain equivocal, though the daughters' act is not proscribed as such in Genesis.

The biblical narrative moves through a series of flouted prohibitions: the

Lot's daughters ply their (willing) father with wine as they prepare to seduce him for the benefit of the human race. (Hendrik Goltzius, Lot and His Daughters, *1616.)*

Sodomites demand a breach of hospitality when they ask Lot to hand over his guests; though Lot holds firm to his obligations as a host, he panders his own virgin daughters in exchange; his wife disobeys the angels' command; he himself is violated in turn in his drunken sleep. Severe penalties follow almost all these transgressions: blindness for the Sodomites, followed by incineration, death for the unbelieving sons-in-law who stayed behind in Sodom, metamorphosis for Lot's wife who, it is implied, regretted their leaving their home and its annihilation. The only sin that is not blasted is the incest: the nameless daughters succeed in their avowed intention to perpetuate the human race.

None of these relations conjugate according to the prevailing rules of sexual conduct. In the small space of the narrative, no one even achieves congress at all,

until Lot and his daughters lie together. Structurally, the various elements function in the baffling manner of a riddle, in which nothing makes sense until the solution is found. Clues in riddles also occupy two areas of meaning, simultaneously, patent and latent, and the answer changes the way the question reads and uncovers the hidden metaphorical meaning. A riddle contains negative terms that turn into positives as soon as they are decoded: riddling means to defy logic in peculiar couplings of like and like. In family relations, incest becomes an analogous activity.

The family of Lot mirrors the condition of the riddle, and so can become itself material for riddling, because the members in the group occupy two distinct sites of meaning: Lot is father and spouse, in the same way as in a riddle a distaff is a distaff, but the unspeakable other thing as well. Mutually exclusive terms become one in the verbal game. It is a form which abolishes linguistic logic, just as incest cancels kinship law.

The most celebrated myth of incest begins with a riddle, which Oedipus solves: the Sphinx's rather simplistic question, 'What goes on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon and three feet in the evening?' Oedipus' ability to give the correct answer, A Man, does not save him from becoming himself a term in a riddle, a son who is a husband too. It is interesting to set the father–daughter incest of Lot's family in Genesis beside the Oedipus myth: Oedipus is a parricide; Lot's wife necessarily dies before her daughters sleep with their father; plague devastates Thebes on account of the sinner in its midst, as the oracle informs the Thebans; the biblical cities of the plain are destroyed by God's anger against their unnatural vices; the son, Oedipus, is accounted responsible for his desire for his mother and the myth presents her as the passive partner; the daughters actively seduce their father in full consciousness while he – in the texts at least – lies lost to the world.

Even more significantly, the Oedipal tragedy begins with an episode that is not usually cited, because it does not figure in the Sophocles trilogy. It is, however, referred to by Plato: Oedipus' father Laius, before Oedipus was born, fell in love with Chrysippus, the young son of his host Pelops, and abducted him. The boy committed suicide out of shame, and his father cursed his seducer Laius that he should either die childless, or be killed by his own son. Hera, as goddess of marriage, heard the father's grief, and sent the Sphinx in retaliation to prey on Thebes, Laius' kingdom. Plato refers to this, in the *Laws*, when the Athenian, talking to two non-Athenians, mentions 'that law which held good before the days of Laius, declaring that it is right to refrain from indulging in the same kind of intercourse with men and boys as with women'.

The Oedipus story, in one of its variations, thus gives an aetiological myth for homosexuality: like the story of Lot and his daughters, the consequences of sodomy are destruction on the one hand, incest on the other. The structures are not identical, of course, even enantiomorphically – in mirror reversal – for the daughters do not kill their mother; she brings death on herself by her own disobedience, her inability to let go, her hankering, which is a form of desire and of curiosity, the vices of Eve. Yahweh is a judge, he metes out revenge on sinners, according to a punitive moral code, unlike the Greek gods who oversee Oedipus' tragic destiny from the moment of his birth, speak through the oracle of his double crime and predestine him to the full atrociousness of his fate, regardless of his ignorance and his innocence. Incest in Lot's story is open-eyed on the part of the daughters, but blind in Oedipus' (and Jocasta's, in Sophocles, at least); in the Bible, it is rewarded by healthy progeny and the participants apparently survive unscathed. Both stories, however, convey the premise that desire for the prohibited parent will flourish when unchecked, either through ignorance, as in Oedipus' case, or through a lack of decorum, an instinct for species survival, a conscious flouting of taboo, as in Lot's daughters' case.

The folktale material continues the traditional association of incest and riddling. The dying queen's demand that her husband should never marry anyone who is not her like in beauty and goodness itself constitutes a riddle: this Other he can marry must be her like. The only figure who can collapse this contradiction is the forbidden daughter, the solution which cannot be proposed. Shakespeare literally dramatizes the ineffability of this correct answer, when he opens *Pericles* with the riddle of the incestuous king, Antiochus. On pain of death, anyone who wants to marry his daughter must answer this enigma she puts to them:

> I am no viper, yet I feed
> On mother's flesh which did me breed.
> I sought a husband, in which labour
> I found that kindness in a father.
> He's father, son, and husband mild;
> I mother, wife, and yet his child:
> How they may be, and yet in two,
> As you will live, resolve it you.

Pericles the suitor sees the answer, that the daughter who speaks lives with her

father the king as his wife. He flees the court in horror, before Antiochus can seize him to kill him like his predecessors for the princess's hand.

In *Pericles*, the father–daughter incest also takes place in full cognizance of the guilty pair; and the daughter again is represented as consenting, even keen. But the sacrilege of their union, which opens the romance, inaugurates a story in which the proper love of a father and daughter – of Apollonius and Tarsia in the medieval romance; in Shakespeare, of Pericles and Marina – can unfold; it is as if the tale first sets out the worst case, then makes reparation by overstitching the rents and wounds on the social body it has disclosed. Riddles again play a crucial part in establishing structural relationships between the characters; in the romance, when the long-lost daughter and her father at last meet again by chance, they remain strangers to each other until Tarsia begins setting him riddles. These are ostensibly intended to rouse the bereft and wandering king from suicidal despair, but they are organized in a sequence which cryptically relates his own story to himself, or at least stirs memories of its stages, and this access of memory ultimately unleashes the moment of peripeteia, the happy mutual recognition between them. Unknotting the puzzles she poses guides them both to solving the secrets of their own identity and kinship. Shakespeare does not close his plot with the riddles, but he does arm his orphaned daughter with verbal wit which actually succeeds in protecting her against all comers in the brothel where she is placed. The language of the imagination, in *Pericles* as well, acts as the guardian of real bodies, and cerebral logic, encrypted in enigmas, deflects improper conjunctions in the world of sexual relations.

The earliest manuscripts extant of *Apollonius of Tyre* date from the ninth century, but it was circulating before that in written as well as recited forms. Its vanishing from the collective body of European story constitutes one of the most glaring examples of thinning in our culture. Meanwhile, another celebrated incestuous trope – Roman Charity – with similar, long roots into ancient folklore, has survived more vigorously from the version of Valerius Maximus into the iconography of the seventeenth century of much favoured Northern artists. This prurient anecdote develops a narrative of virtuous incest which also titillated: a father who has been condemned to death by starvation is saved when his daughter visits him and feeds him at her breast through the bars of his prison. In the Italian folk tradition, this story acquired a riddling element, too: the daughter challenges the king who has condemned her father to answer the puzzle she sets him. Like the Queen of Sheba, she puts a hard question to him, on condition that if he cannot reply, he will free a prisoner of her choice. She asks:

Oggi è l'annu mi fu patri
Ed aguannu mi fu figghiu
E figghiu chi nutricu
e maritu di me' matri.

[A year ago he was my father, and for a year he has been my son, and the son whom I am nursing is the husband of my mother.]

This king's wisdom does not suffice, and her father is set free.

The American critic Lynda Boose has perceptively commented:

> The daughter's struggle with her father is one of separation, not displacement. Its psychological dynamics thus locate the conflict inside inner family space. Father–daughter stories are full of literal houses, castles, or gardens in which fathers such as Danaë's or Rapunzel's ... lock up their daughters in the futile attempt to prevent some rival male from stealing them. The motif also occurs through riddles of enclosure ... which enclose the daughter in the father's verbal labyrinth and lure her suitors to compete with and lose to the preemptive paternal bond.

Several of the fairy tales by L'Héritier, Murat, D'Aulnoy and others of their generation include these metaphors of patriarchal control: Lackadaisy and Loquatia come to grief with the wicked Richcraft in spite of their father's best efforts in 'The Subtle Princess'; the orphaned princess Starlight is imprisoned by her guardians, but manages to be reunited with her beloved Izmir after he has found her by solving a riddle.

The prevalence of these plots suggests that it is frequently and even generally supposed that desire between father and daughter is stirred as it were by nature if the ban on incest is lifted or somehow effaced, intentionally or not. In post-Reformation paintings of Lot and his daughters, both Catholic and Protestant – the subject does not figure at all frequently before the sixteenth century – the unspecified lapse of time between the destruction of the cities of the plain and the daughters' seduction of their father merges into the selfsame moment; their lascivious attentions unfold against an infernal backdrop of fire and brimstone and represent the daughters like wantons in a brothel with a client past his prime. More popular in the Netherlands and Germany than in Italy, the theme inspires appetitious meditations on the wiles of women while pretending to warn against

the calamities of war: it offers a perfect excuse for pleasurable puritanical reproofs. In the two versions Lucas van Leyden painted, the burning town, the foundered vessels in the bay, the bivouac where Lot besports himself, the drinking jars and brazier are realistically rendered in contemporary early sixteenth-century detail: the daughters resemble camp followers and the image warns against the penalties of vice. Hendrik Goltzius, in 1616, stresses with histrionic sensuality the guilt of the women (p. 329): he includes an emblematic vixen appearing from behind a tree with a suitably crafty look as Lot succumbs, fully awake, to the lusciously rendered flesh of his offspring.

What these paintings reveal is that, in Christian family structure, exogamy, or marrying outside the clan, is functioning as a far more forceful imperative in early modern Europe than keeping the bloodlines pure and the family impregnable as in biblical Judaic family culture. The exemplary parable of Lot and his daughters, as they survive while 'foreigners' are blasted, as they mate against inclination for the good of their family, begins to preach an entirely different lesson: against incest. And fairy tales, adapting different materials which also tell of transgressive family unions, encode a story of cultural and social change in this respect as well as contributing profoundly to its establishment as the norm.

First in the middle ages, and then in the literature of the *ruelles* in the seventeenth century, the emphasis in incest tales shifts from the daughter's responsibility to the father's, the point of view revolves to consider her actions, her motives and her rights in a most interesting proto-feminist way. Genesis 19 portrays the daughters of Lot doing their duty by patrilineage and sustaining their father's line by bearing his children; medieval and later incest stories by contrast strike a new note. They uphold the daughter, by dramatizing, often violently, her refusal to become a term in the riddle, to consent to be knotted into the skein of the paternal family, to be held prisoner in the verbal labyrinth. These stories mark awareness that a young woman may step out from paternal control and be praised for it. Such texts become important documents of social history, incorporating prevailing prejudice and morality and opening fundamental questions about them.

CHAPTER 20

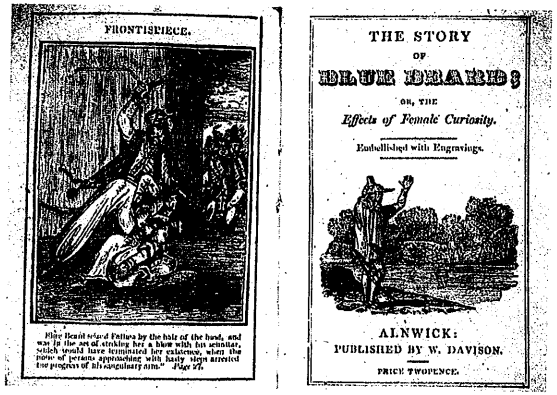
The Silence of the Fathers: Donkeyskin II

I besought him to remember his promise, which was, never to force me against my will, to marry any. Will (said he) why your will ought to be no other than obedience, and in that, you should be rather wilfull in obeying, than question what I appoint ... if you like not as I like, and wed where I will you, you shall never from me receive least favour, but be accompted a stranger and a lost childe ... Who is this fine man hath wonne your idle fancy? Who hath made your duty voide? Whose faire tongue hath brought you to the foulnesse of disobedience? Speake, and speake truely, that I may discerne what choice you can make, to refuse my fatherly authoritie over you.

Mary Wroth

Saint Dympna is a seventh-century princess, the daughter of a king of Brittany, Britain, or Ireland, and of a beautiful mother who inevitably dies. A splendid polychrome sculptured altarpiece in the Northern Flemish high Gothic style, finished by Jan van Wavre in 1515, and still preserved on the high altar in the church

Saint Dympna, like a virgin martyr, holds the instruments of her passion: the sword with which her father beheaded her and crouching in chains at her feet, the hobgoblin devil who inspired his perverted passion. (Cult statue, Geel, fifteenth century.)



Bluebeard in turban, brandishing a scimitar finds 'his sanguinary arm' halted by the arrival of his wife Fatima's brothers in the nick of time. (Alnwick, early nineteenth century.)

of St Dympna in Geel, Belgian Flanders, illustrates the sequence of the saint's misadventures and subsequent glory (Pl. 22); her life is a fairy tale, except in the matter of the ending, yet her cult has been kept fervently in this part of Catholic Europe since the fourteenth century at least, spreading from there through Belgium, Holland and Westphalia.

The official *Vita*, or Life, of the saint was written in Cambrai, Flanders, around 1237–48; it tells how Dympna was secretly baptized a Christian, and dedicated herself to her heavenly spouse. But soon, as is only to be expected in such a story, her lovely mother dies, having extracted the usual riddling promise from the king never to remarry unless his bride comes up to the standards of beauty and goodness that she has set in her own person. The king is griefstricken, but his courtiers – evil counsellors, inspired by the Devil – plead with him to remarry for the sake of the kingdom. He refuses, until he notices that his daughter resembles her lost mother in every way. This remarkable likeness inspires, as is traditional in the narrative cycle, the 'unlawful passion' in her father, and he declares his desire to marry her. Dympna then consults her confessor, Gerebernus, who advises flight. He is a saintly and very old man – in case there should be any misunderstanding of an ulterior motive. With the help of the court fool and his wife, they disguise themselves as travelling minstrels, since 'under the guise of jongleurs, they could set out more secretly'. They embark, and eventually, owing to God's providence, they cross the Irish Sea and the Channel safely and drift ashore in Belgium, near Antwerp. There Dympna makes her way deep into the forest, and, on the outskirts of the village of Geel, with her companions, clears a space and builds a hut of trees and branches, in order to embrace the sweet solitude of the hermit's life.

But in her absence, her father's passion does not abate. He sends after her, and his spies track her down when an innkeeper remarks that the coins they are using are the same as she was given earlier by a young woman and her party – an interesting piece of material and circumstantial evidence in the fanciful tale. Once she has been traced, the king her father arrives in pursuit, and repeats his demand. She

An unbeliever who insists on denying the faith, Dympna's father sometimes appears as a Turk, like Bluebeard, as he prepares to kill her; in the background, one of his men despatches her confessor. (B. Janssens, Geel, 1935.)

refuses, and he orders his men to kill her, together with her priest. They obey, in the case of Gerebernus; but they cannot bear to touch Dympna. So her father beheads her himself.

Dympna does not metamorphose into animal shape, or put on filthy animal hides to escape her father's demands, but she does choose to be exiled from society as she knew it, to be disguised as a lower – and consequently more mobile – member of court society, a jongleur in the company of a fool, whose cap of bells often sported asses' ears (pp. 140, 352). Her forest hut symbolizes this voluntary outcast state and corresponds to the fairytale heroines' various disguises, all of them natural in different ways: the rashin coatie of Scotland, the wooden cloak of some Italian sources, the bear, the ass, the many-furred creature of the Grimms' version.

But of course in one prima facie aspect, the hagiographical story alters the folk source: animal disguise, animal metamorphosis, controlled until the moment has come to make the act of self-revelation, form the prelude to a *mariage d'amour* in the folk tales, as collected by Basile and Perrault; in the related life of Dympna, the only wedding takes place after torture and martyrdom with the Son of Heaven as bridegroom.

The author Peter of Cambrai, known in Flemish as Petrus van Kamerijk, was a canon regular of the church of St Aubert in that town. He expressly declares in his preamble that he is basing the story on vernacular sources: '*olim vulgari idiomate scripta*'. This Life was given a critical edition in 1680. Saint Dympna's *Vita* was retold by the Jesuit Pedro Ribadeneyra in his *Flos sanctorum*, first published in Madrid in 1624, then translated and reissued no fewer than six times in French, including an edition in 1686 in the widely distributed *Compagnie des Libraires*, which is where Perrault could have come across it. Before Perrault wrote his burlesque fairy tale, the related perils and ordeals of Saint Dympna were thus being related in a story which enjoyed a wide circulation in different languages and was directed at audiences of different social registers and occupations, from the tavern to the parish church. This migration, from the vernacular to Latin and back again, itself casts doubt on glib distinctions between high and low culture, and warns against notions about Latin's chronological priority. The scholars were working up folk materials to add gravitas; they were annexing highly flavoured legend to make it serve pious ends. The fairy tales do not represent degraded remnants of a lost high epic. The court jester who helps and accompanies Dympna, and who suggests she runs away disguised as one of his kind, presents a most interesting, unusual, and revealing clue: he figures in the story as an eye witness, the storyteller who was there when the great deeds, fair and foul, were done, and who survived to relate them afterwards in songs and stories. He appears, with his lute, sitting in the boat with Dympna, in one of the carved panels of the polyptych altarpiece in Geel, and again, in a painting, helping to build her forest hut on the shrine: he represents a hyphen in the tale between the sacred exemplum and the fairytale romance. When Dympna chooses his occupation for her escape, she is in effect concealing herself in a riddle, the image of an artist skilled in just such word puzzles.

Both the polyptych by Jan van Wavre and the shrine unfold the saint's dramatic story with mannered delicacy and luxuriousness, belying the macabre and violent incidents portrayed and the unworldly moral of her life. In the panel depicting her father's proposal of marriage, Dympna appears with the lofty shaved brow, wimple and diapered full high-waisted dress of courtly fashion in the late fifteenth century, while her aberrant father turns as slim a waist and as trim a hosen leg as any delectable hero of chivalric legend. Similarly, the two episodes which occupy the focal point of the entire construction strike a secular note: the king is shown discovering from a mounted spy the whereabouts of his runaway child, while above, the artist evokes the fugitives' rustic existence in their hiding place – an odd emphasis in a hagiographical narrative, drawing the viewers' attention away from the edifying aspects of the tale to its secular character, its turbulent plot, its tricksters and its villain, in the manner of the minstrel lay rather than the sermon.

The cult objects associated with the town of Geel redress the balance, borrowing motifs from routine iconography of virgin martyrs. A fifteenth-century statue in the church, for instance, shows Saint Dympna with a sword in her hand, with a monster chained at her feet (p. 335). Dympna thus carries the weapon that won her the crown of martyrdom, and holds captive the sin of her father – incarnate in devilish form. Beast in body, goat-horned, with long canines and a tail, he represents the demon who took possession of her father, and bears a close resemblance to other furry creatures of the wilds, personifying satyriasis and other sexual evils. As a conqueror of sin, in its particular aspect of concupiscence, Dympna has many counterparts: Saint Margaret, who overcame the fiend, Saint Catherine of Alexandria, who withstood the lechery of the emperor Maxentius and tramples his beastliness under her righteous feet in many a medieval statue and illumination.

Saints are sometimes given certain areas of supervision for skittish reasons: Saint Barbara became the patron of barbers, with porcupine quills, combs and brushes for her emblems, through a pun on her name; Saint Blaise was deemed to cure sore throats because he freed a wolf from a ticklish fishbone. But in Dympna's case, she became the patron saint of the insane.

This leap, from the father–daughter incest tale to the care of the mentally ill, arises from a profound medieval perception of the affinity between mental distress and incestuous transgression. Not based on a poor pun like Barbara's sphere of interest, not quite related to her life by direct cause-and-effect, Dympna's patronage of madness reveals imaginative associations at work in the minds of her votaries. On account of the mad, diabolical lust of her father, who wanted his daughter and then killed her, Dympna was allotted the care of 'demoniacs', as the mentally ill are called in her *Vita*. Incest in her tale does not belong in a tribal chronicle about appropriate partners for carrying on the line. Nor does it inscribe a philosophy of fate and divine justice. It tells of a private fantasy of omnipotence which does harm; the passage of the story about an incestuous father into a healing cult represents a vital moment in the history of attitudes to such passions. Migrating from folklore into religious cult, the story of the fugitive daughter gained a material reality which also cancelled any residue of jocularity and fancy from the fairy tale. This is a case of fairy tale passing over into hagiography and

thence into belief with effects on the lives of real people and the developments of history. Dympna is still venerated; she is popular in Ireland, for instance, as well as among the Irish Catholic community in the United States, and a special prayer, for use by those distressed in mind, invokes her protection.

The bodies of Dympna and Gerebernus were allegedly unearthed in Geel some time in the thirteenth century; her relics remained miraculously rooted to the spot where the church dedicated to her name was founded. Building began around 1450. Gerebernus' relics on the other hand were stolen and taken to Xanten on the Rhine, where they are still kept. Stone fragments of their sarcophagi are preserved in Geel, as well as Dympna's bones, which are enshrined in the wooden funerary monument, raised on stone columns and painted with scenes of her life, which stands behind the altar. Her relics brought about numerous cures in a specialized area – of epileptics, schizophrenics and other mentally sick pilgrims, who were brought to the shrine. Jan van Wavre's altarpiece of 1515 also represents the procession during which Dympna's relics were displayed, and the miracles and acts of mercy attendant upon it.

The Gospel reading for her feast day (15 May) is taken from Matthew 25, on the Seven Acts of Mercy, because her cult was socially concerned from the start. In the fifteenth century, a *Sieckkammer*, or sickroom, was incorporated in the church itself, in a chamber on the south side, which can still be seen. But as numbers swelled, a hospital grew up to house the patients, and Augustinian canonesses of St Norbert nursed the sick, and were painted at their task in 1639 by an anonymous artist (p. 341). They are shown operating on the stone, trepanning skulls and otherwise relieving – or attempting to relieve – mental distress. One large surviving *ex voto* depicts a patient, one Peter van Put, who in the eighteenth century was miraculously cured, the grateful inscription relates, of his deaf and dumb condition. In effect, the town of Geel was operating as an open asylum for the mentally ill; it still practises home care for the sick who are registered at the hospital, but lodged with families in the town. Though Catholic clergy and nuns help with the patients, the hospital was taken over by the state in 1850 after abuses were discovered (however shining the intentions of the shrine, the 'mad' were being exploited as free labour, and many were seriously neglected). The Augustinian canonesses moved away to a small building trimmed to their present needs.

By far the most famous patient at Geel was a certain Henri K., who fell in love with a parrot because it had been given to him by the woman he loved and could say her name. As his wits turned, his obsession deepened, and he came to believe he had become a parrot himself; he roosted in a tree and could only agree to come

A hospital for pilgrims looking for cure, or at least solace for their mental problems, grew up next to St Dympna's church. Here, nuns are caring for patients by bleeding and trepanning and other measures. (Flemish School, The Hospice at Geel, *1639.)*

down when a parrot cage was produced. He was then sent to the Maison de Santé in Geel; Flaubert read the account of his capture in the paper, and drew on it for '*Un Cœur simple*' about Félicité and her parrot, whom she sees at the end in a kind of ecstasy, transfigured into Christ her beloved.

Child abuse could be placed under Dympna's patronage too. The Epistle reading for her Mass comes from the First Letter of John, the one that repeatedly invokes his listeners as 'God's children'; Dympna acts as a symbol of child innocence, and of the sinlessness of the simple-minded. Her cult gives us an interesting insight into compassion and understanding in the medieval past. Incest connected with madness; the Devil was at work exciting the impulses of fantasy, and the victims could suffer death. Derangement could be a contagion, like temptation; it affected both perpetrator and victim. Her cult, whatever its deficiencies in practice, admits that such an 'unlawful passion' happens, has consequences for all around it, that it cannot be quarantined and causes acute distress; that the object of the passion cannot but be involved in its madness, however much s/he pulls away. The factor of relationship is recognized by implication in the imagined power of Dympna's intercession; her story acknowledges the harm done and constitutes an early attempt – weak, inadequate, wishful – to repair it.

II

Perrault dedicated '*Peau d'Ane*', his fairy tale about a runaway daughter, to the Marquise de Lambert, one of the noblewomen in whose house in the rue Colbert were regularly gathered philosophically-minded men and women, to discuss just such issues as the obligations of love and the freedom to choose a partner. She herself was to write advice manuals to her children, and Perrault judged that his jaunty squib at the expense of an overweening father would coincide with the interests of the marquise and so please her.

The '*Peau d'Ane*' fairy tale dramatizes the subjection of daughters to their fathers' authority, and under the pretence of flippancy Perrault delivers a harsh critique of current abuses in the area of matrimony. His story even bears traces of the earlier, medieval clerical campaign to preserve the dignity of marriage through love. The Church paradoxically gave its fervent support to men and women's autonomy in desire – principally because virginity usually conflicted with dynastic interests, but also because they struggled against expedient annulments and remarriages. Besides the *Vita* of Saint Dympna, there were dozens of supposedly edifying stories about young women who resist their family's plans for them. Without firsthand knowledge of these materials, it would be hard to credit the ferocity of Christianity's opposition to the biological family's claims, the intensity of the otherworldliness hagiography proposes. When cults today point to the Bible in support of their 'kidnapping' of young adepts, they act within a fully attested, mainstream Christian tradition which envisaged a life dedicated to Christ in violent conflict with familial and social interests. The daughters who disobey in the name of faith include Saint Christina, whose Life was written in verse by the Benedictine Gautier de Coinci around 1218. Gautier could be charming, as in his *Miracles de Nostre Dame*, but Saint Christina stimulated the sadistic side of his imagination and he describes her prolonged torments at the hands of her father, who 'felt a deep love for his daughter, /And could not spend a day without kissing her eyes and her face'. He builds a tower to enclose her (to hide her, to encipher her), but when she persists in her sacred vow of virginity, he begins a series of public tortures, which culminates in throwing her out to sea with a millstone round her neck. It turns light as a feather, and she survives, only to face another round of persecutions, at the hands of the Roman emperor's representative. Her breasts are cut off, she is bitten by serpents, burned on a pyre, and finally has her tongue torn out. She throws the mangled piece at her torturer; and it pierces him in the eye. A symmetry is here implied, between her subversive tongue and his transgressive eye, and she has the last word, of course,

Daughters defy family arrangements in the name of Christ in many legends of the virgin martyrs: Saint Barbara is another who provokes murderous rage by her recalcitrance. (Peter Paul Rubens, Saint Barbara Fleeing from Her Father, 1620.*)*

as the tale is hers, and hers the body, which in death becomes even more richly wonder-working.

Gautier's *Life of Saint Christina* includes another remarkable scene, when her mother intercedes, frantically – and touchingly – pleading on her breasts which nourished her daughter that she should not be so obdurate. Mothers rarely make any kind of appearance in these father–daughter stories, except in the opening deathbed scene, and Christina's highminded rejection of maternal love brings home powerfully the force of her story's ascetic message.

The legend of Saint Barbara also illustrates the social significance of fairytale sources as resistance to patriarchal tyranny and to marriage. In 1405, in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Christine de Pizan gave this account of Saint Barbara:

> Because of her beauty, her father had her shut up in a tower ... [He] sought a noble marriage for her, but she refused all offers for a long time. Finally she declared herself a Christian and dedicated her virginity to God. For this reason her father tried to kill her, but she was able to escape and flee. And when her father pursued her to put her to death, he finally found her, and brought her before the prefect, who ordered her to be executed with excruciating tortures ...

After appalling cruelties, which Barbara resists with miraculous strength, her father, as in the case of Dympna, beheads her himself.

Besides being the patron of barbers, Saint Barbara also has care of thunder and lightning, and of artillery and cannon, because as he was returning home from his crime her father was struck down by a thunderbolt, and reduced to ashes.

Christine de Pizan mentions that Barbara's father wanted a *noble* marriage, that the prefect ordered the torture because she had disobeyed her father. Unlike the legend of Dympna, which focusses on incest, Barbara's concentrates on authority; Barbara's refusal makes a bid for autonomy. The folk tales in which a daughter resists her father and is then punished may contain memories of actual bodily violation. But the narrative is often presented in such a way that the independent integrity of the victim as the inheritor of the family wealth becomes the issue, not her chastity. The stories focus on the daughter revolting against her father, and develop a plot to justify her action; the rebel is presented as a virtuous heroine rather than an unfilial child. In order to achieve this, the father's act must be seen to be an outrage precisely because daughters were decreed to obey their fathers by the fourth commandment. To be vindicated, the disobedient daughter must be wronged. The father's transgression against the universally held taboo against incest furnishes a sufficiently shocking pretext, as does, in a medieval context, his attempt to force a pagan husband on a Christian girl.

An episode which took place during the Wars of the Roses in England gives precious historical evidence that, when such pressure was put upon young marriageable women by men in authority over them, stratagems were adopted that, echoing the motifs of the fairy tales, help us to read the experiences in which they originate. When Richard, Duke of Gloucester, the future Richard III, showed a desire to marry Lady Anne Nevill, daughter of the Earl of Warwick and the heiress to a great estate, his brother the Duke of Clarence tried to prevent the match. Clarence was married to Anne's elder sister and he feared – rightly as it turned out – that Richard had designs on her portion of the fortune as well. 'Such being the case,' wrote the chronicler in 1471,

> he caused the damsel to be concealed, in order that it might not be known by his brother where she was ... Still however the craftiness of the Duke of Gloucester [Richard] so far prevailed that he discovered the young lady in the City of London disguised in the habit of a cookmaid; upon which he had her removed to the sanctuary of Saint Martin's ...

Here, in Lady Anne, Richard III's queen, we find a real-life girl of the fifteenth century, flying from an abhorred union by being disguised as a servant. The chronicler talks of her as a pawn in the hands of great men; but it is possible that she was a willing accomplice. Her reasons may have been different from her father's; Warwick wanted to control the family wealth, not to pass it on to a son-in-law whom he could not command.

Perrault makes this fundamental point when Donkeyskin kills her father's source of wealth – the magic donkey – and refuses to marry him at the same time. When she runs away, she literally takes her father's fortune with her.

Such coincidences between concealed heiresses and fairytale princesses support the argument that such tales as Beauty's and Donkeyskin's and Cinderella's are women's stories; they can be seen to reflect women's predicaments and stratagems from their point of view. The dissemination of fairy tales and the virtual disappearance of the gory martyrdoms of saints like Dympna from any widely circulating Catholic literature has coincided with a softening and sweetening of the character of the Beast whom the heroine flees, as in the case of the much more popular fairy tale 'Beauty and the Beast', as we saw. 'Donkeyskin' has proved the least-known of Perrault's tales; the Catholic stories for many complex reasons are no longer related with the intense admiration that Christine de Pizan – who was no credulous masochist – brought to their retelling. The ferocious father, the lustful suitor, have been transformed or made to disappear; the Cinderella stories we are familiar with now portray the father as virtuous and dead, or weak and henpecked, as we shall see, and she radiates feelings of dutiful and tender loyalty towards him.

Neither '*L'Orsa*' nor '*Peau d'Ane*' portrays the heroine's plight as deserved, and both tales rejoice in her escape from her father. However, at the end of Perrault's tale he is handsomely forgiven rather than pilloried. The Frenchman's romantic assertion of the goodness of choice and love in marriage conforms to the principles the women in his literary circle were struggling to establish.

Their efforts coincided with the wide distribution of a semi-erotic, semi-scientific manual by Nicolas Venette, called *Tableau de l'amour conjugal*, published in French in Amsterdam in 1686, and in English as *The Mysteries of Conjugal Love Revealed* in 1703. This volume of practical advice gained immense popularity very quickly; it was a pioneering work, partly because Venette did not concern himself at all with vice or vice's penalties like venereal disease, did not linger on prohibitions against incest, but concentrated on the naturalness of the sexual urge, the healthiest ways to assuage it and find happiness, and throughout accepts, without

reproof, women's desires as equally forceful as men's. In the opinion of Roy Porter, the historian of medicine, Venette's book constitutes a watershed, because he was able to acknowledge for the first time 'the empire of love' over the human being, and to articulate the need to translate the chaos of passion into the social order of matrimony in order to achieve sexual gratification for both man and woman. 'Conjugal caresses are the ties of love in matrimony,' he wrote, 'they make up the essence thereof.' This was published around the same time as the first romantic fairy tales about princesses finding true love with the prince of their liking.

The filial action of Lot's daughters, when they conceive by their father in order to perpetuate the species, becomes superannuated under the new covenant that a fairy tale like '*Peau d'Ane*' proclaims. In a cluster of stories – hagiography and fairy tale – there recurs a figure of a wronged daughter, a young woman in flight from the unwelcome desire of a man, who is her own father or otherwise a man in power, an emperor, a prefect, a tyrant. The tenor of the stories never questions the status of the plot as truth: it is a characteristic of the fairy story or wonder tale that the material is presented as matter of fact, however fanciful. Do the fantasy transformations, the saints' miracles, the wild swerves and unlikely incidents, the alternation of secrets and disclosures register at the same pitch of veracity as the incest motif? Basile's asides about human nature being the way it is often return his wild fabulations to a circumstantial setting of recognizable behaviour; in comparison, Perrault's blitheness tends to subsume everything into a gay nonsense rhyme: the magic donkey, the wicked lust, the fantastic palace, the happy ending. His final verses declare:

Le conte de Peau d'Ane est difficile à croire,
Mais tant que dans le Monde on aura des Enfants
Des Mères et des Mères-grands
On en gardera la mémoire.

[The tale of Donkeyskin is hard to believe, but as long as there are children, mothers and grandmothers in the world the memory of it will not die.]

But even Perrault does not quite level all the story's elements to the same plateau of implausibility; his last words, that mothers and grandmothers will continue to tell the tale of Donkeyskin, imply that there is something of absorbing consequence to tell.

'Grandmothers, mothers and children' could accept an incestuous father placed centre stage in full view, till the eighteenth century. But then he begins to stir anxiety in the disseminators of fairy tales, and this anxiety leads to tinkering, and eventuall, to evasions and suppression.

In the prose version attributed to Perrault, but which appears only in 1781, the father comes under the evil influence of a 'Druid', who persuades him that it would be 'an act of piety' to marry his daughter. Perrault makes a passing mention of a *casuiste*, which the paraphraser seized on to absolve the father of some responsibility. Later, when the father comes to the wedding, this author has him safely married off to a 'very beautiful widowed queen' with whom, moreover, we are told there is no likelihood of offspring. The story of a father's unlawful love begins to fade from collections of fairy stories as well as from narratives dealing with actual experience. At the same time, stories of fathers' excessive control of their daughters are also softened. The Cinderella story itself contains at its heart an unexplained mystery about her father's role in her sufferings. Why does Cinderella's father do nothing about her predicament? His part remains unspoken – neither complicity nor protest: a lost piece of the puzzle. In retellings of the fairy tale today, from pantomime and books, he either features as dead, so the women are wreaking havoc in the absence of male authority; or he too is suffering, yet another of the wicked women's victims: the dear old duffer Baron Hardup or Baron Stoneybroke of the English Victorian stage, who is much too nice to stand up to the horrid schemers he has taken under his roof. George Cruikshank even puts him in prison as a result of his wife's gambling debts.

But as recently as Jacopo Ferretti's libretto of 1816 for Rossini's *La Cenerentola*, Cinderella's poltroon of a stepfather, Don Magnifico, dreams, in a broad hint at the story's progenitors, that he is a most tremendous ass, '*un bellissimo somaro, un somaro, ma solenne*' (a beautiful ass, an ass, but dignified). This exuberantly comic opening aria again homes in on the lubricious associations of the donkey, and retains the social critique of Perrault against tyranny. Earlier 'Cinderella' variations also connect to the 'Donkeyskin' cycle – the daughter is too beautiful, she must be punished, she is dirty, she must be cast out. The most dainty and urbane retelling, Perrault's '*Cendrillon*', recalls the sexual plot of the related tales of wronged girls when, as we saw, he gives his heroine's nickname as Cucendron (Cinder-bottom), and adds that the kinder of her sisters softened it to spare her.

Wicked fathers gradually drop from view in the fairytale tradition. The Grimm Brothers for instance collected a variation on '*Peau d'Ane*' in their gruesome tale

'The Maiden Without Hands'. (It had been dramatized in Philippe de Beaumanoir's verse novel *La Manékine*, in the thirteenth century, and resumed, with a smitten brother in place of the unlawful father, by Basile in the *Pentamerone*.) In both these tales, the heroine – Joie – finds the day of her incestuous wedding approaching. In acute distress, she goes to the palace kitchen, and sees there a great carving knife: 'With a single stroke of this knife, you could have severed a swan's spine, even if it had been of an extraordinary size.' Joie seizes the knife, puts her left hand on the window sill, and cuts it off. It falls into the moat, where a fish swallows it. (Later, it will be miraculously restored to her by the same fish, served up on another kitchen table, in another place, under another knife.) Here maiming takes the place of the travesty in other tales – with a savage accent on the role of hands in sexuality.

The Grimms' version of 'The Maiden Without Hands' describes the young girl mutilating herself in order to escape the claims of the Devil. The father acts like a villain and a coward, and offers his daughter to the Devil in order to save his own skin; he also willingly cuts off her hands himself when the Devil asks him to. But she weeps on the stumps so that they are too clean for the Devil to touch, and he has to give up the bride he desired. Only horribly disfigured in this way can she become inviolable and so resist on her own account, uncoerced by her father, just like her predecessor Donkeyskin. John Ellis has analysed the different editions of *Die Kinder- und Hausmärchen* to show how in their treatment of 'The Maiden Without Hands' the Grimms erased the motive of the father's unlawful love from their source, because they simply could not bear it; they were too squeamish for the motive, though not for the mutilating itself.

Similarly, the Grimms' telling of '*Aschenputtel*' includes unexplained pursuit and cruelty on the part of her father, who, using 'an axe and a pickaxe' together, hews to pieces the dovecote in which the prince tells him she has taken refuge; similarly, he cuts down her hiding place in a pear tree the second night. This Cinderella hides from both prince and father, though why the latter should pursue her so savagely has been scrambled and fallen out of the tale. Such silences help the stories to reverberate, however, as the father's crazed conduct sends shivers through the listener or the reader.

From romance to Romanticism, a well-known shift of interest takes place: the interior motions of characters in fictions become salient. With a motif like incest, a romance like *La Manékine* simply takes the father's passion for granted; the narrative focus holds the pattern of events in view, the swift shuttle figuring forth motifs in a rich peripatetic and picaresque weave, the structure of social disorder and the ensuing restoration of due order. Passions leading to adultery or murder or incest are dealt with often with compassionate intensity – as in the scene when Apollonius finds his daughter again – but the texts do not question and probe motive or seek to justify the developments on grounds of plausible and consistent character. This is obvious, but it is worth restating it here because it bears profoundly on the disappearance – the comparative disappearance or partially successful repression – of the '*Peau d'Ane*' fairy tale and the whole cycle of the Apollonius romance from our culture. When interest in psychological realism is at work in the mind of the receiver of traditional folklore, the proposed marriage of a father to his daughter becomes too hard to accept. But it is only too hard to accept precisely because it belongs to a different order of reality/fantasy from the donkeyskin disguise or the gold excrement or the other magical motifs: because it is not impossible, because it could actually happen, and is known to have done so. It is when fairy tales coincide with experience that they begin to suffer from censoring, rather than the other way around. They are not altered – or even dropped – by editors and collectors to shear them of implausibilities and foolish notions, but this pretext is invoked to justify changes which constitute responses to profound, known threats. Dympna's situation, Peau d'Ane's predicament are at one and the same time ridiculous, unsuitable extremes of invention which will give children ideas, and at the same time veracious and adult, and children are no longer to be exposed to such knowledge.

The history of Freud's momentous change of mind about the status of paternal incest echoes, in thought-provoking ways, the gaps in transmission of the Donkeyskin fairy tale. In 1895, in his study of the 'hysteric' Aurelia, Freud purposively changed her molester from her father to her uncle for reasons of discretion. She was one of four cases in his *Studies on Hysteria*, but she was different from her three counterparts: Freud could write about her, 'it was a lovely case for me', because he was able to heal the young woman's trouble (solve her riddle) in the course of a single conversation in August 1893. Aurelia Kronich, whom Freud called 'Katharina', was the daughter of a servant at a mountain inn in an Alpine valley where Freud stayed in the summers, and he fell into conversation with her, according to his account, when she told him she was suffering from nervous attacks. Prompted by Freud that she might have seen or heard something that 'embarrassed' her, she described how she had come upon her cousin Barbara in her father's room, with her father lying on her. She had fallen ill after this, vomiting for three days on end. Further prompted by Freud, Aurelia then recalled that her father had acted in a similar way with her four years before.

After these admissions, Aurelia's face changed; 'her eyes were bright, she was lightened and exalted'. Aurelia's story – and her lightening after unburdening herself – became a crucial vertix where Freud's newly developing theory of sexual trauma, memory, hysteria and talk therapy converged. In a letter, he described how 'in the girl's anxiety was a consequence of the horror by which a virginal mind is overcome when it is confronted for the first time by sexuality' – the very passage which the Donkeyskin fairy tale negotiates.

The singleminded emphasis on the sexual encounter in Freud's account does however ignore the disruption of the Kronich family life after Aurelia told her mother, the guilt that the daughter felt at her part in the marriage's breakdown, her fear that her father might take his revenge on her for the disclosure, as well as the possible anger of the mother both on behalf of and possibly against her daughter – all reactions which arise in other documented cases of incest. Nor did Freud give a full explanation of his evasion in 1924 when he admitted in a footnote that he had changed the abusive father into a molesting uncle. He made other alterations, as Peter Swales has discovered through patient research. Moreover, in the years between 1895 and 1924 he was developing the Oedipal theory and was eventually to concede the ground of his 'seduction theory' and decide that, in some cases, his patients' accounts of paternal incest might be fantasies in their minds, stirred by their Oedipal desires, because memories and fantasies in the unconscious could not be disentangled. The later development of his thinking led him to propose that memories of incest tended to be rooted in forbidden, repressed desires. Nevertheless, he did not retract his account of Aurelia's real abuse, nor throw suspicion on her truthfulness. She remains a contradictory figure in his case histories: an actual incestuous child. She offers a telling reminder of the connective tissue that binds personal experience with fantasy narratives.

In between, Freud had also written his personal – and moving – meditation on *The Theme of Three Caskets*, which conveys, using the fairytale marriage test found in *The Merchant of Venice*, his own choice of the lead casket, the least and youngest daughter, and his yearning for her, only to find that she heralds his own death. Freud's denial, in psychoanalytic terms, of the father's incest in the case of Katharina/Aurelia, speaks volumes about the sensitivity of the issue for him.

The distortions that Freud's interpretation of incestuous testimony have introduced cannot begin to be straightened out here. But it is not squaring the circle to say that the 'Donkeyskin' type of story yields a common insight into minds and experiences of young women growing up, and into erotic fantasies on both sides, the father's and the daughter's, conscious as well as unconscious. And that, at the same time as reflecting Oedipal desires, the fairy tale expresses fears of actual incest and actual violation, and that the disquiet it still can produce arises from its closeness to what the Chinese call speaking bitterness.

Perrault, from a circle of campaigning women, argued for the new ideal of companionate marriage and filial autonomy; the fairy tale has since mutated again, with female tellers – of fact as well as fancy – discomfiting male hearers to varying degrees by stirring uneasy identifications and distressed denials.

The history of transmission through literary texts shows intermittently more embarrassment than the oral tradition (though this has been recorded in literary media, too, and is never pure). Nevertheless, Chaucer, who knew the plot from Gower, preferred, as noted earlier, to keep the incest motif out of sight in 'The Man of Lawe's Tale'; Shakespeare challenged it with the alternative version in *Pericles*, and transformed it into tyranny in *Lear*, both of them preceding the pedagogical anxiety of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries over any open admission of the theme.

The oral evidence, in which I include cinema and television, evinces less reluctance. Jacques Demy made a film of *Peau d'Ane* in 1971 (*The Magic Donkey*), which retains the father–daughter plot without apology (p. 319). Whimsical, pretty, and all the more unsettlingly amusing for its sugared almond appearance, it catches the perversely skittish spirit of Perrault's original verses, while its sequences of bizarre, dreamlike enchantments pay homage to Jean Cocteau's brand of cinematic poetics – the lover-father sits on a stuffed white cat for a throne, the slattern who puts Donkeyskin to work spits toads and serpents when she speaks. Catherine Deneuve's sculptured angel face turns Donkeyskin herself into a fairy-tale vision to rival Josette Day's ethereal Belle in the Cocteau film, and Delphine Seyrig as Donkeyskin's godmother, the Lilac Fairy, brings a certain elegant and worldly irony to her counsels. Jacques Demy himself first presented fairy tales in a puppet theatre he had as a child – and he heard them from his grandmother.

The Storyteller, a recent series of television films produced by Jim Henson and written by Anthony Minghella, also included a vividly realized variation on the tale, called *Sapsorrow*. Interestingly, the series framed each tale within a traditional storytelling scene – the actor John Hurt as an old man with his talking dog (live animation by Henson); the device enabled the film-makers to interpolate moral comments on the material they were showing, in order to muffle the shock of such a demand from a father. These however are rare contemporary versions that remain faithful to fairy tale's power to speak of the unspeakable through its dreamlike distancing of the story with fantastic strokes of magic, articulate

beasts, and fantastic settings. The Italian children's edition of '*Pelle d'asina*' – an illustrated booklet with accompanying tape – is characteristically toothless: it merely opens with an offer of marriage from a horrible man who is much too old for the heroine.

Not all storytellers suffer from the scruples – or the anxiety – shown by the Grimm Brothers over the tale of 'The Maiden Without Hands' or Freud in the case of 'Katharina'. They do not rub at the tracing in the dust to obscure what it shows, but hold fast to the matter-of-fact tone of the fairy tale; the voice of the narrator is issuing to the circle of listeners a familiar warning, and a reassuring prohibition, as they use the tales to inscribe the laws of kinship in the minds of their audience. Perhaps the very presence of the narrator guarantees the possibility of survival: this person, who speaks of these things, has not been silenced. The American novelist Lynne Tillman, in 'The Trouble with Beauty', created a bitter tale: her heroine retreats into autism after her father, having used her sexually, hands her over to his friend, the Beast. In this Tillman follows the fairy tale's rite of passage, through disfigurement and degradation, but in her case Beauty does not achieve revolt or reconciliation.

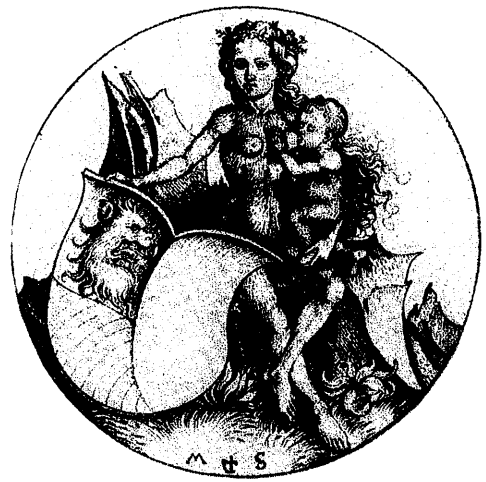
A much heartier Italian version, still told today, called '*Maria di legno*' (Wooden Maria), begins with the familiar device that the daughter must take her dead mother's place; her nursemaid helps her to set various conditions, but the king manages to meet them, and announces, 'There's no more time to lose, my daughter. In one week we will get married.'

But the nurse makes Maria 'a wooden outfit which covered her from head to toe', and in this coffin she casts herself into the sea to escape. She floats away. Later, in the country she reaches, she finds work as a goose girl; later still, she sets a prince riddles. He falls madly in love ... The final riddle, the one he manages at last to solve, opens the box in which Maria is enclosed and he finds her – 'the beautiful stranger' – inside combing her locks. This tale itself floated to shore in Rome at the beginning of this century, was discovered and transformed and shaped later by Italo Calvino and proves to have preserved safe and sound inside its resilient structure many magical elements from a very old story about unlawful love, which touches on experience in different but profound ways.

Saint Dympna disguised herself as a jongleur, or jester, to make her escape. Stories and songs offer hiding places for troubles, and 'La Sote' *(The She-Fool) is danced off by the reaper last of all. (Paris, 1508.)*

CHAPTER 21

The Language of Hair: Donkeyskin III



What joy it is to see hair of a beautiful colour caught in the full rays of the sun, or shining with a milder lustre and constantly varying its shade as the light shifts. Golden at one moment, at the next honey-coloured; or black as a raven's wing, but suddenly taking on the pale blueish tints of a dove's neck-feathers ... oh, when hair is bunched up in a thick luxurious mass on a woman's head or, better still, allowed to flow rippling down her neck in profuse curls! ... unable to restrain myself a moment longer, I now planted [there] a long passionate kiss.

Apuleius

Whereas male beasts are cursed by some malignant force, the heroines of fairy tales are willingly bound by a spell; they frequently agree with alacrity to the change of outward form, in order to run away from the sexual advances of a father or other would-be seducer. Their metamorphosis changes their problematic fleshly envelope, which has inspired such undesirable desire, until a

A medieval nymph, in all other respects a candidate for the angels' ranks, reveals her kinship with animality in the down that covers her baby's body as well as her own. (Martin Schongauer, Wild Woman, *Augsburg, late fifteenth century.)*

Punished with baldness, Blonda learns to forgo caprices and is rewarded by the return of her thick, long, golden hair. (Image d'Epinal, France, reprinted Kansas City, c. 1900.)

CHAPTER 22

From the Beast to the Blonde: The Language of Hair II

Crack the glass of her virginity; and make the rest malleable.

Pericles, IV, vi

Something momentous would have taken place, it would be clear – that there had been a revolution – if a presenter on Iran television pulled the kerchief from her head and showed her hair to us, or if one of the mullahs, by the same token, unravelled his turban, shaved his beard, and appeared in a silvery brush top, *à la* Clinton. Joan of Arc died for cutting her hair like a boy's, among other things. The charges of witchcraft were dropped as they could not be proven, but her heretical cross-dressing and close-cropping were there for all to see, and she refused to renounce them. Frida Kahlo in her paintings presents her irreducible identity through protean selves, adorned as well as despoiled: when her husband Diego Rivera left her, she cropped her hair, put on his suit, tie, spread her legs in a sitting posture, and made a self-portrait with the clippings strewn around her, looking uncannily snaky. As in an inscription on a Catholic ex-voto, giving thanks for a miracle cure, or a wish granted, she impersonated his voice with bitter irony, writing over a musical stave as if to a popular song: 'Look, if I loved you, it was for your hair. Now that you are bald, I don't love you any more.'

The language of the self would be stripped of one of its richest resources without hair: and like language, or the faculty of laughter, or the use of tools, the dressing of hair in itself constitutes a mark of the human. In the quest for identity, both personal and in its larger relation to society, hair can help. The body reveals to us through hair the passage of time and the fluctuating claims of gender; strangers offer us a conspicuous glossary of clues in the way they do the hair on their head, for in societies all over the world, callings are declared through hairy signs: the monk's tonsure, the ringlets of the Hassidic scholar, the GI's crewcut, the sans-culotte's freeflowing mane, the flowerchild's tangled curls, the veil.

Hairstyles continually perform a drama about the beastly and the human selves

present within each individual, and mark off degrees of identification and repudiation in a form of animal mimicry. Our capillary arts borrow and build on the physiology of hair, which we humans share with other creatures of fur and fleece. The affective behaviour of our pelt inspires dramatic variations: the stiff spikes of punk styles imitate the bristling of aggression, and reproduce literally the hair-raising thrills of terror, both given and received: these are hackles, raised in emphasis. Peroxide blondes, like Marilyn Monroe in her winsome dumb babyish act, recall the fluffy down of some children's heads, or baby chicks, or ducklings. The conflict between this pretence at innocence and knowing sexiness creates the special effect of the Hollywood blonde, the woman in the picture, the motive in the plot. Madonna provokes one of her perverse frissons by simultaneously mimicking the blonde bombshells of Hollywood in all their rampant, in your face sexuality, and at the same time singing from the position of a little girl, who is still only on the verge of womanhood, with the pale golden hair of childhood in glaring contradiction to the emphasized thighs, breasts, crotch.

Blonde hair shares with gold certain mythopoeic properties: gold does not tarnish, it can be beaten and hammered, annealed and spun and still will not diminish or fade; its brightness survives time, burial, and the forces of decay, as does hair, more than any other part or residue of the flesh. It is hair's imperviousness as a natural substance that yields the deeper symbolic meanings and warrants the high place hair plays in the motif repertory of fairy tales and other legends. For although it is one of the most sensitive registers of temperature, and a single human strand is used in museum hygrometers in order to measure humidity for the purposes of conservation, hair does not register pain, except at the roots. It can be cut and curled, sizzled with hot tongs, steeped in chemicals and dyes without apparent suffering, and will go on growing, even abundantly in some cases, and is not even stopped by death. This phenomenon, noted in the case of great heroes like Charlemagne (*d.* 814) and Saint Olav, King of Norway (*d.* 1030), stimulated the cult that grew up round their tombs.

Such quasi-magical properties make it a symbol of invulnerability, and have helped to nourish the rich mythology of hair as power, as in the stories of Samson, and also, as we have seen, in 'Bluebeard' to a lesser degree. Above all, its imperishability must count as the intrinsic and material quality of hair that most inspires its symbolic meanings. Hair is organic, but less subject to corruption than all our organs; like a fossil, like a shell, it lasts. (We know the colouring of some pharaohs, of their queens and – even – their slaves.) In spite of its fragility, lightness, even insubstantiality, hair is the part of our flesh nearest in kind to a carapace. Its mythic power, its centrality to body language, and its multiplicity of meanings, derive from this dual character: on the one hand, hair is both the sign of the animal in the human, and all that means in terms of our tradition of associating the beast with the bestial, nature and the natural with the inferior and reprehensible aspects of humanity; on the other hand, hair is also the least fleshly production of the flesh. In its suspended corruptibility, it seems to transcend the mortal condition, to be in full possession of the principle of vitality itself.

As such, hair is central to magic; clippings have long been effective in curses and love charms alike. In Britain, the Devil could be kept at bay by offerings of pubic hair, because he has no power to straighten it. In some fairy tales, plucking hairs from the Devil's head gives power over him. Hair partakes of the body and transmits that body's special powers: Dindraine, in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, has vowed herself to a life of chastity. Only she can weave a girdle strong enough for Galahad to use to wear the sword of Solomon: from her hair she makes a belt for his blade. Together in chastity, both their sexual energies converted into an invincible holy syzygy.

Like a fetish, hair can be used to represent loss: it has been used the world over in rituals of fertility and of mourning. The Greeks cut locks or tufts to throw them on the funeral pyre; hair relics of Charles I after his beheading were set in rings by the disconsolate, and among the Trobriand islanders, a widow in full mourning wears a necklace of balls woven from her husband's hair, while her own head is shaven and braided into a gorget. Knotted in bracelets and lockets, it also pledges indissoluble love: La Fontaine mentions a gage of a bracelet of hair, the Victorians set their dear ones' hair into lockets and rings and exchanged them as tokens of eternal plighting, and as recently as in the Western *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, Clint Eastwood's girl, the loving young daughter of pilgrims from Kansas, gives him a watchchain she has woven from her hair to bind him to her – it is indeed fay, and proves effective. These ornaments possess the power of the uncanny: neither dead nor alive, they make the beholder's flesh creep, like the human remains incorporated into sorcerers' wands, or the straggling locks still adhering to the shrunken heads of the Jivaro Indians' enemies.

The variety of profane, ritual uses to which hair has been put possibly helped ban it from the catalogue of Christian relics. For although every kind of remnant of the Virgin, Jesus and the saints was venerated, the colour of Mary's or Jesus' hair has not been demonstrated by firsthand evidence.

Characteristically, though, the hair in Victorian tokens and memento moris was braided or coiled or otherwise set to rights. In hairdressing, whether on the

scalp or off it, dishevelment is always at issue, and the magic of hair seems more closely directed, controlled and contained when the hair is groomed than when it is unkempt (wild). Liberty characteristically wears her hair loose, Order pins it up. In Mendocino, in northern California, an anonymous sculptor carved from a redwood trunk a remarkable work of folk art, representing a variation on the theme of Death and the Maiden. Father Time does not seize the modest young woman to rape her or otherwise snatch her away, in the style of Hans Baldung Grien or Holbein, but instead stands calmly behind her, braiding her hair, like a good father sending his young daughter off to school. Here, hair stands for the flow of life, and plaiting it stands for the delimitations imposed on the human course by the hand of time.

Maidenhair can symbolize maidenhead – and its loss too, and the flux of sexual energy that this releases, as we know from fairy tales, like Persinette/Rapunzel who pulls her lover up her hair into her tower (right). There is a German proverb, 'A woman's hair pulls stronger than a bell rope', or, 'A woman's hair is stronger than a hempen rope', and in the story, in the punning manner of dreams, Rapunzel enacts this belief literally. Similar cascades of golden hair dominate illustrations of fairy tales from the late nineteenth century onwards, tumbling in unselfconscious, golden superabundance from the heads of hundreds of exemplary Victorian heroines. One of the inspirations of the Dada movement's name was a hair cologne from Zurich, which showed on the label a young girl with a luxuriant mane of golden waves that stirs in the breeze as she holds up a bottle of the magic stuff called Dada; it guarantees just such crowning glory – to men as well as to women, no doubt (right).

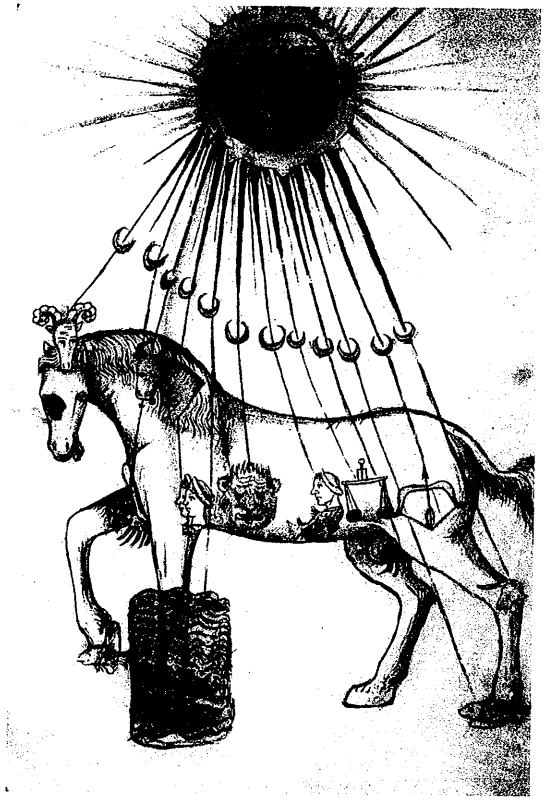
II

The astrological sign Virgo also appears blonde; as the symbol for August to September, she is connected with the season of harvesting in the Mediterranean, where the first representations of her as a young woman occur. Comparative iconography can help to decipher the obsessive persistence of this sign of value; by comparing the traditional virgin martyr and the fairytale heroine with the sign Virgo, some clues emerge to develop the meaning of this dominant motif in the representation of valuable feminine gender.

Artists frequently create a correspondence between the maiden's hair and the corn she carries, emblematic of the chief star in the constellation, Spica (Wheatear). In a manuscript of the influential Arabic astronomical treatise by Abu Masar, finished before 1403, the plaited shape of the wheatear echoes the braids

Dieses unübertreffliche und zur Haarpflege sehr empfehlenswerte
fetthaltige 197
Haarwasser
ist à Fr. 3.— erhältlich in besseren Coiffeurgeschäften sowie in der Parfümerie
Bergmann & Co., Zürich
Bahnhofstrasse 51

Rapunzel is enclosed in a high tower, but she lets down her hair – literally – to find a way out and a new life; in Zurich, the Dadaists's name picked up a local echo of the fin-de-siècle adoration of hair. (H. J. Ford, in Andrew Lang, The Red Fairy Book, *London, 1890* LEFT; ABOVE *Dada, hair lotion advertisement, Zurich, c. 1917.)*



In a manual on the care of horses, the star sign of the Virgin can be seen in the centre, ruling over the belly, or site of the womb. (Bonifacio di Calabria, Libro de la Menescalcia, *Venice, 1400–15.)*

around her head; in a later, richly gilded illumination from a northern French book of hours of the early sixteenth century, the same gold pigment has been used for the wheat on the threshing floor as for the hair and aureole of Virgo behind them – the artist's brush moved from one to the other without hesitation in applying the precious paint to those three different elements in the image (Pl. 19). The abundance and ripeness of her hair promises fertility: she is Virgo in the pagan sense of nubile, eligible, and young ('*almah*, as the girls were called in the harem of King Solomon in the Bible), rather than immaculate and impregnably celibate, like the virgin goddess Athena. The sun, source of light, has ripened the gold of her body into goodness. At the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, the sign Virgo may have been assimilated to Proserpina, goddess of spring, in the humanist circle of the court of the d'Este, and again, her tumbling golden hair flickers with vitality like the unruly wheatsheaf in her hand (Pl. 15).

In astrological microcosmic schemae, Scorpio rules over the genitals; Libra over the lower abdomen, and intestinal functions; and Virgo over the upper abdominal region, where the organs of gestation were believed to lie. The early medieval treatise on the zodiac shows the star signs linked to the areas of the body which they influence. Virgo is attached, almost by an umbilical cord, to the figure's navel, the last vestige of the mother on every human body. Even a fifteenth-century manuscript on the care of horses shows the signs arranged in their spheres of influence on a horse's body: the sequence from genitals to womb runs Scorpio, Libra, Virgo (left). The famous astrological microcosmic man of *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry,* painted at the beginning of the fifteenth century, disposes the signs in similar fashion, with Virgo emblazoned in the centre of his body. The male gender of the youth himself can distract us from the connection clearly made by the sign between parturition and virginity. The Limbourg Brothers' Virgo, as shown in the miniature in the margin, could be a female virgin martyr, with her long blonde hair, and her palm fronds of glory.

The sight of uncovered hair at this period and later in Western Europe signifies innocence on the one hand, youth and its promise. Eligibility follows closely from these qualities in a woman: the blonde maiden promises herself. The Dance of Death in Simon Vostre's Book of Hours, defines the departed women's station in life by their demeanour and their dress, but above all by the styling and concealment of their hair, as noted in Chapter Three. Only the bride – *la espouse* – at the top, who wears a garland of flowers, *la fille pucelle*, or virgin girl, and *la jeune fille*, the young girl, at the bottom of the ladder of life, have their heads uncovered and their hair loose (right).

Maidenhair is loose and long and promises plenty: 'La fille pucelle' *(The virgin girl) shows her state in the fashion and abundance of her hair.(Paris, 1508.)*

Typologically, the maidenhair of Virgo and young unmarried girls corresponds to vegetation. Hair is to the body as flowers and other growth are to the earth. In a peculiar group of fairy tales, hair and good fortune are dramatically connected in a magic way, as we saw. George Peele's *The Old Wives' Tale*, with its cantrip rhymes, dramatizes the harvest of golden sheaves and precious jewels that fall from the hair of the three heads in the well. Mme de Villeneuve, in one of her fairy stories, described how the bad sister grew stinking weeds and rushes on her head ever after her refusal to do as the heads asked. Italo Calvino collected a variation on the story in which the sister who was kind to an old woman finds that, whenever she combs her own hair, roses and

jasmine pour down one side, pearls and rubies down the other. 'You shall be beautiful,' says the old woman. 'Your hair shall be golden ...' She returns home rich, with a star on her forehead. The wicked sister rushes off to seek a similar fortune, but treats the old woman roughly; she grows a donkeytail on her forehead, and whenever she cuts it it grows longer.

The reward matches the favour asked: when it is a drink of water, the visitor from the other world grants a boon to the mouth of her or his benefactor, or a curse, the diamonds and toads. When the kindness consists of combing and grooming, as the peasants performed on one another at Montaillou, and as we see in Dutch seventeenth-century paintings of mothers delousing their children's hair, the benefit falls from the same place.

In stories like 'Three Heads in a Well', hair's connotation with luxuriance and fertility becomes material wealth, literal gold and jewels and riches. Fertility used to be considered a treasure of great price, valuable to society as its future prosperity, valuable to the family too. Blondeness, a particular manifestation of hair, with its much noticed sensuous association with wholesome sunshine, with the light rather than the dark, evoked untarnishable and enduring gold; all hair promised growth, golden hair promised riches. The fairytale heroine's riches, her goodness and her fertility, her foison, are symbolized by her hair.

In both Basile and Perrault, the moment of epiphany occurs when she abandons her animal disguise and is seen combing her hair. Basile specifies her *trezze d'oro*, her golden tresses. In Perrault, Donkeyskin has been summoned by the prince. The court is ready to scoff at the mere sight of her, but then she appears: the ladies of the court are instead roused to joyful marvelling by

> *... ses aimables cheveux blonds*
> *Mêlés de diamants dont la vive lumière*
> *En faisait autant de rayons ...*
>
> [Her lovely blonde hair intermingled with diamonds, whose lively light turned it into a sunburst of rays.]

Perrault uses the adjective '*blond*' in only one other place in the same tale, embedded in a similar vision of dazzling light: when he is describing the magic donkey. In an exact reflection of the sight of Donkeyskin shooting rays of light from the gems mingled in with her golden hair, he describes the magic donkey's stall each morning:

> *il ne faisait jamais d'ordure*
> *mais bien beaux Ecus au soleil*
> *Et Louis de toute manière,*
> *qu'on allait recueillir sur la blonde litière*
> *Tous les matins à son reveil.*
>
> [He never made manure, but only very beautiful golden Sun coins and Louis of all kinds, which were gathered from his blond litter every morning when he awoke.]

In the engraving illustrating the appearance of the restored Peau d'Ane in *Le Cabinet des fées*, her breasts are bare, her hair loose, to emphasize her unsullied promise of plenty.

Perrault's version discloses the value of the heroine: her status as the repository and security of her father's wealth. Her golden hair reveals to the prince that she is not the beast – the she-bear – or the slatternly donkey everyone knows and despises; she becomes available to him as a bride, she sheds her animal lowness to become his equal. When she marries him, she consigns her worth to his care: as we saw in Chapter Twenty, she takes her father's fortune with her, in the form of the asshide that used to excrete his fortune every morning, and she makes it over to the prince she marries. Ideas of eligibility and female fertility and women's worth are once more entangled together. Her blonde hair becomes the symbol of her status as treasure, safely transferred from the control of one paternal household to another, marital home. Perrault was taking the side of his friends, the *précieuses* who wanted control of their own fortunes, legacies, dowries. But the story reads differently in a context where that issue is no longer pressing. The literary fairy tale reinterpreted Christian ascetic teaching about young women's rights to withhold their fertility, and reformulated the chivalrous ideal of emotional and erotic fulfilment with a partner of their choice. The old battles now look like materialist ambition and romantic naivety; the passing years have blunted the radicalism of Perrault and his friends among the women writers who were attempting to redraw the map of tenderness to give themselves a stake in it, materially as well as emotionally.

In the case of the virgin martyrs, their choice of bridegroom also sets a seal of approval on their conduct: they have kept their treasure safe for another reaper. Virginity literally cannot scatter paternal wealth, but locks it up. The iconography of the sign Virgo also enfolds this social, and earthly, meaning: for Virgo presides

over the threshing of the corn, the process that gathers up the useful part of the harvest, as can be seen in any number of illuminations, like the Book of Hours painted by the Master of Guillebert de Metz in Flanders around 1450–60. This particular aspect of virginity, nuanced towards production, positioned with regard for the harvester rather than the tiller, lies concealed within the immediate erotic appeal of the virgin's bridal blondeness. In another, French manuscript, of 1480–85, the imagery remains constant; however, here the Zodiac sign of Virgo stands, like a saint, with the bound sheaves on either side of her. They are standing to dry in the fields before being threshed. Like the corn that will feed human beings, she promises fruit, nourishment and wealth. Her purity guarantees that the riches will not be scattered.

The bridal connotations of blonde hair persist, and in surprising places. Bakers tend to offer wedding cakes with exclusively fair brides to this day – in Los Angeles, for instance, where the population is mainly dark, a leading catalogue of wholesale cake ornaments offered, in 1988, page after page after page of blondes. In this the wedding confectioners were conforming to an ancient canon of beauty and the conventions of bridal iconography, which has carried into fairy tale. Only one page, called 'Ethnic', represented the brides and grooms as dark-haired and dark-skinned.

The banishment from the contemporary Angeleno wedding cake of the dark-haired bride corresponds to certain historical forgettings we also find in folklore and hagiography – disjunctions between experience and symbol, the breeding ground of ignorance and bigotry. In Joan of Arc's familiar story, several attested historical features – her rebellion against her parents, her attempted suicide and, as we have seen, her short boy's hair – are usually omitted, and she is presented instead as an exemplary female saint, devout daughter, unshaken believer; in this, her historiography corresponds to the loss of certain topoi in the 'Donkeyskin' cycle of folk tales, like the father's incestuous desire. When such stories are aimed at a reading rather than a listening public, and angled at children especially, they no longer seem suitable material, and undergo alteration in order to edify and instruct and elevate. Historical circumstances, Joan's dark colouring, Lady Jane Grey's griefstricken baldness, are lost in the retellings.

Two current fairy tales offer eloquent illustration of the changes in the genre. Goldilocks, as we saw in Chapter Ten, begins life in print as an old woman: the antic behaviour of the old is reproved and the young audience trained that decorum and caste must be observed. However, the child called 'Silver-Hair' and eventually Goldilocks enters the tale and takes the old woman's place to drive home without question the specific lesson against curiosity in little girls. To deserve her name, this blonde beauty should be good. Similarly, the cautionary tale of 'Blonda', another *image d'Epinal* from the turn of the century, reprinted as an American strip cartoon in the 1900s, illustrates the moral enterprise of the fairy tale, conveyed again through the symbol of a potentially good (blonde) child (p. 370). Set in a medieval countryside, with a shift to a sixteenth-century palace, 'Blonda' draws on the illusory authenticity of a fictive past; and by creating a heroine who belongs to fairy tale and to pious literature, the story is intended to provide a lesson for its contemporary youthful audience.

Blonda's fairy godmother, whose name is Caprice, grants the beautiful young girl every wish, but warns her that for each one she will lose a hair of her head. Blonda is wicked, and asks only for riches and vanities, luxuries and follies, till she hasn't a single hair left. Then she repents, and begins to do good. Her hair grows back, one strand at a time. She works hard at home, at household tasks. The medieval cauldron, a must in the life of a Cinderella, makes its appearance with Blonda scouring it. At last, she regains her lost glory; one day, when she takes off her cap, she sees that her hair has grown as heavy and long and blonde as it was before. So she marries a nice boy and grows up in wisdom and kindness with her children around her: a naughty beauty who has learned into whose keeping she should consign her golden hair.

The literary fairy tale mixed hagiography with romance to pioneer a new heroine, a proto-romantic champion of the truth of the imagination and the holiness of the heart's affections. But this kind of tale, which D'Aulnoy and L'Héritier perfected in the late seventeenth century, no longer issued any kind of challenge to the established code of femininity in the nineteenth-century nursery. By forgetting that fairy tales interact with social circumstances, we miss seeing how the copybook blonde princess becomes instead a stick with which to beat young women, as in 'Blonda'. The conventions of fairy tale, including the shining beauty and goodness of the heroine, become clichés, used by moralists to enforce discipline (and appearance) on growing girls. Good behaviour earns a reward: beauty, sex appeal, the very desirability the stories used to dramatize as so painful and problematic. In Blonda's baldness, we find the *derogatory* equivalent of Cinderella's rags, Donkeyskin's hide, the she-bear's animal metamorphosis, Rashin Coatie's coat of grass. Blonda regains her loveliness only by giving up Caprice. In this nineteenth-century version of a type of ancient story, the heroine is crowned with the outward sign of her return to obedience, the garland of her newfound conformity: the blonde hair of the goddess of love.

III

Blondeness as a trophy has been worn with knowing mockery, since the 1920s, while the hairiness of the Beast has exercised greater and greater appeal, not only as the alluring opposite (as in Chapter Eighteen) but as the alter ego of the female subject. The Surrealist writer and painter Leonora Carrington (*b.* 1917) returns again and again to the theme in her perverse and comic fairy tales of the late 1930s and early 1940s; her contemporary, the artist Meret Oppenheim, was also possessed by hairy motifs in fairy tales from the German tradition to make her own feline assaults on convention.

Carrington was writing her tales chiefly between the ages of seventeen and twenty from the midst of a circle of writers and artists in France centred on André Breton and Max Ernst, and she responded to their Surrealist dreams of young women – *femmes enfants* – as the innocent, and therefore pure, mediums of erotic power. She voices the movement's dream of sexual freedom for men and women, intertwining the macabre English nursery-rhyme tradition with avant-garde transgressiveness in a sequence of replies – retorts – both written and painted, which challenge the male Surrealist idea of women's place.

Max Ernst's collage novels of the 1920s and early 1930s folded together the matter-of-fact tone of the German fairy tale with the florid style of penny catechisms and other improving literature. In *La Femme 100 Têtes* (The Hundred Headed Woman) of 1929, he gleefully adopts the Lustucru emblem that the best woman is all body, no head, and consequently tongueless; in *Une Petite Fille rêve d'entrer au Carmel* (A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil) a year later, he took the motif of a nun's sacrifice of her hair, and made clever mischief of its erotic undertones: the pope calls to little Marie-Madeleine, 'Baldness lies in wait for you, my child!' The Holy Father needs her hair, he beseeches her, for his own sumptuous, yet invisible, adornment. She protests, she begs him not to touch her hair, but he insists: 'Dearly beloved child, heaven is covetous of your hair.' One of the most resolved formal images of the novel then follows, showing the hair of the heroine sailing away, '*majestueusement*'. Throughout the work, Ernst plays on the analogies of hair with water, with flux, with turmoil and erotic outpouring. When, later, the lost hair addresses the little girl, he uses the phrases of the wolf from 'Red Riding Hood', embodying the threat – the delicious, pleasurable threat – of being engulfed. The artist was also mocking, with brilliant economy, the preceding generation's obsession with female hair, with tentacular, suffocating, prehensile locks of the *femmes fatales* of Gustav Klimt, or Aubrey Beardsley, or Edvard Munch.

The third of these profane fables in pictures, *Une Semaine de bonté* (A Week of Kindness), followed in 1934, three years before Leonora Carrington and Ernst met. It adopts with glee penny-dreadful commonplaces of women mauled, ravaged and possessed by various winged and monstrous hybrid beasts, finding in misogynist excess a potent weapon against bourgeois decorum (above). Ernst drew on steel engravings from lurid serials and stuck them together with cut-out scientific illustrations in imitation of the savage couplings and violence of the Victorian serial.

Surrealism satirized at the same time as relishing the lurid fantasies of popular illustrated narrative. Leonora Carrington RIGHT *with a mermaid at St Martin d'Ardèche, c. 1937–8, explored animal metaphors in her writing and art, identifying strongly with a range of hybrid beasts;* LEFT *Max Ernst, 'Le Lion de Belfort', in* A Week of Kindness, *1934, where he dramatized erotic dreams.*

Carrington's tales respond in kind, but take the monstrous figures for her own purposes, and conjure equally fierce, hostile matings of her feral heroines and their lovers. In 'As they rode along the edge … ', the heroine, Virginia Fur, lives in a forest and travels at the head of a procession of a hundred cats, riding on a wheel. She has a huge mane and 'enormous hands with dirty nails', and 'one couldn't really be altogether sure that she was a human being. Her smell alone threw doubt on it – a mixture of spices and game, the stables, fur and grasses.' Virginia makes love tempestuously with Igname, a boar, after he has presented himself to her in apparel worthy of a wooer: 'a wig of squirrels' tails and fruit hung around Igname's ears, pierced for the occasion by two little pikes he had found dead on

the lakeshore. His hoofs were dyed red by the blood of a rabbit ... He hid his russet buttocks (he did not want to show all his beauty at one go).'

In this world of the imaginary the conventional hierarchy of values is turned upside down in a spirit of rebellion: the animal (hairy) world is seen as wild, sensual and free and is valued higher than the world of civilized, indoor humanity. Unbridled sexuality itself becomes a mark of liberty – setting aside the consequences for the women themselves.

Significantly, the Carrington heroine's beast friends and partners are not always male: in the most famous of her macabre, witty tales, 'The Débutante', the Beast is a she-hyena, with whom the heroine makes friends at the zoo. Something of an alter ego, the hyena goes to the heroine's coming-out ball in her stead after eating her maid in order to borrow her face (the only bit left of her) and take her clothes. The Beast within is a good beast, but he isn't only male; he can live within Beauty too. In a self-portrait, painted around the same time, she shows herself with a tousled mane of black hair, attended by two animal familiars – a hyena leaking milk from her swollen dugs, and a white horse leaping out of the window of her room behind her. The wildness and freedom of horses made them the creatures she identified with most closely, but she also returned to their bridling, taming, and even killing: her novel *Little Francis* describes how the heroine, abandoned by her lover, metamorphoses into a young horse – a colt – whose head is cut off in a solemn public ritual; Carrington also painted herself as a horse.

Leonora Carrington's stories throw important light on the development of the beast symbol in the literature of women, for women. Generally speaking, her beast represents the inner dynamic of desire, creativity, self-expression inside her heroines' spirits, which is so often crushed by conventional forces. In 'The Oval Lady', a story later dramatized for the stage as well as interpreted on canvas, Lucretia's father rages against her love of Tartarus, a rocking horse that comes alive, and eventually storms up to her nursery and strangles him. This force within, in the manner of post-Freudian optimism, is erotic in character: in the wake of early utopian revolutionaries, the Surrealists believed that the liberation of sexual energy would lead to wider freedom and fulfilment.

Meret Oppenheim was born in 1913 in Berlin, the daughter of a doctor who practised in Zurich and attended sessions at the Jung Institute in nearby Kusnach. He influenced his daughter to record her inner fantasies, waking and sleeping, in journals – a habit she kept most of her life; her grandmother wrote and illustrated a folk tale which is a children's classic in Switzerland. Thus Meret Oppenheim was raised in the German folklore tradition on the one hand and in the Jungian field of dream symbolism and archetype on the other; later, in Paris, she became part of the Surrealist circle and friends with Carrington and Ernst, amongst others. Her work reveals a richly imaginative use of the fabulous, continually questioning the relation of humanity and nature, of the cultivated and the wild, the tame and the savage, the tranquil and the violent. Some of her quick, nervous drawings of the 1930s also introduce herself in the persona of a child spectator, who confronts the horrific without flinching, as in a tiny, disturbing *esquisse*, *One Person Watching Another Dying*.

In 1935 she began consciously identifying with the protagonist of the story 'Genoveva'. Geneviève or Genoveva is the virtuous queen of a jealous king, who casts her out and orders a huntsman to kill her. He takes pity on her, and she lives on in the forest, in the wilds, and there bears the king a child, whom she calls Schmerzereich (Kingdom of Pain). At length, the king discovers her again, while out hunting one day, recognizes her true worth and takes her, and his son and heir, back again. Meret Oppenheim made a series of works inspired by the story, including a laconic poem, which opens, 'At Last! Freedom!' In it she describes how, after the birth of the baby, Genoveva swaddles him in her hair, since in her forest state that is all she has to clothe herself and her child.

Meret Oppenheim's *Le Déjeuner en fourrure* (The Fur Luncheon) of 1937 has become, rightly, one of the most celebrated objects of the Surrealist movement. The teacup and saucer and spoon of Chinese antelope hide wittily combine erotic innuendo, the outrageous and bristling inversions dear to Surrealist humour, and a deadpan comment on polite society's manners. It makes visible, with quite remarkable economy, the problematic presence of the wild in the civilized, the place of the animal in society, and the containment and ordering of female sexuality. It was not her first work to draw on the power of animal hair to unsettle and invite and amuse: her *Project for Sandals* of the preceding year consisted of a high-heeled shoe with a furry foot and toes; she also designed a pair of gloves, a highly comic, tingling, slightly sinister evocation of a bear or werewolf's paws, like the costume of Native American shamans. These fashion accessories, conceived in high spirits, act as a reminder, in a spirit of mischievous fairytale humour, of the Beast within.

But Oppenheim even surpassed her own achievement with the fur pieces in her most brilliantly achieved challenge to the conventions of fairy tale: *Ma Gouvernante, My Nurse, Mein Kindermädchen* of 1936 (Pl. 25). It too, like the *Fur Luncheon*, makes a tight visual pun on the twin themes of sex and food, but it also suggests another theme, through the connections of its title with its materials. For

the sculpture shows a pair of white high-heeled shoes trussed on a dish, like a chicken, with butcher's frills on the heels. The shoes were purloined – to her fury – from Max Ernst's wife, Marie-Berthe Aurenche, and it is not impossible that Oppenheim was burying a protest at the thraldom Ernst exercised over his women. But the title directs the viewer in another direction. *Ma Gouvernante, My Nurse, Mein Kindermädchen* invokes the voices of the different women – governesses and nannies – who had told Meret stories when she was a little girl, maybe in three languages. These stories pointed to the future that lay in store for her: they prepared her to be a young woman, they introduced her to the idea of being handed over to the Beast, to that Other and his appetite. Hence the combination of the title with the bridal white shoes, which trussed and dished up offer another image of the female body apt to be consumed. Oppenheim was creating the piece in a spirit of revolt against the bourgeois expectations of her class and her time, and she saw in the white wedding a metaphor of virgin flesh surrendered, as in the dénouement of fairy tales in which the heroine escapes one kind of sexual ordeal for another, finds her way out of the woods into the kitchen and the bedroom. But she also rang a consummately witty change on the bridal hope chest with its warning images, using the recurrent fairytale image of the shoe.

Oppenheim was playing knowingly on this metonymy, substituting shoes for carnal knowledge. She was recognizing, with a certain mordancy, that the matched footwear leads to the true bride's recognition and thence to her wedding. The imagery of an ill-fitting shoe for an unhappy union has a long history: the Wife of Bath, admitting she took merciless revenge on her philandering fourth husband, says, 'in earth I was his purgatory … he sat full oft and sung, / When that his shoe full bitterly him wrung'. Bruno Bettelheim analysed the symbolic substitutions in 'Cinderella', reading menstruation in the bleeding toes, the bleeding heels of the ugly sisters, and virginal prepubertal purity in the glass slipper. But the symbolism of footwear has also taken its place in the social language of ritual: in Judaism, for instance, when a man dies childless, and his widow does not wish to marry her husband's brother, and vice versa, thus going against the prescription of Levirate marriage, he may 'undo her shoe', that is, take off rather than put one on, in order to dissolve the bond and be free to marry elsewhere.

In *Ma Gouvernante*, Oppenheim, through the symbolism of a pair of shoes, proposed an acerbic gloss on the preconditions the fairytale bride has to fulfil; she began to reverse the terms of value, to reject the groomed beauty (the golden blonde) for the dishevelled beast she recognized and affirmed inside herself.

CHAPTER 23

The Silence of the Daughters: The Little Mermaid

I was in one hour an ashen crone
A fair-faced man, a fresh girl,
Floated on foam, flew with birds,
Under the wave dived, dead among fish,
And walked upon land a living soul.

Old English riddle

Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his *History of the Kings of Britain*, written around 1136, tells a familiar folk tale, known as 'Love Like Salt': an old and widowed king calls his three daughters to him and asks them how much they love him. The two older girls protest their undying love; they will love him till China and Africa meet, they will prize him as riches above pearls, above rubies, they will be true till the stars fall down, till salmon jump in the street. But the youngest, when it is her turn to speak, merely says she loves her father as meat loves salt. He feels himself slighted by this answer. It is an enigma, and he does not yet love

'The Wonder of Wonders': 'a Mermaid, that was seen and spoke with, on the Black Rock nigh Liverpool, by John Robinson,Mariner, who was tossed on the Ocean for six Days and Nights.' (Chapbook, eighteenth century.)