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 chopped 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 mystic 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 hair from the Devil’s head gives power over him. Hair partakes of the body and transmits that body’s special powers: Dindraire, 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 watchcase she has woven from her hair to bind to him to her – it is indeed holy, 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 strangling locks still adhering to the shrunkened 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
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 unselconscious, 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
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.)

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).

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

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 nubele, 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 schemata, 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

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.)
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 fairtale heroine’s riches, her goodness and her fertility, her foiison, 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 treze 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 ashide 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 naiveté; 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.
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 enfant* — 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 Lusitcruo 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: ‘Dear child, your hair, 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, 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 adapts with gleeful perversity the 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.

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 Iggname, a boar, after he has presented herself to her in apparel worthy of a wooer: ‘a wig of squirrels’ tails and fruit hung around Iggname’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 udders, 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 brimming, 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 her 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 fulfill; 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.

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**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,*

*Float 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.)