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The Madonna and the Cuckoo: An Exploration in European Symbolic Conceptions

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AN ETHNOGRAPHICAL PROBLEM

This paper means to suggest that it is good at times to step out of the glare of modern frames of intelligibility in order to perceive in ethnographic data dim, or subtle, signs of worldviews no longer apparent. It proposes to show, in this strain, that humble attention to folklore allows us to make sense of seemingly pointless trivia. Overall, the article is an experiment in interweaving ethnologic and folkloristic approaches to expand the relevant contexts of problematic cultural details and thus attain theoretical generalization.

The chosen pretext is an intriguing discrepancy I found in the northern Portuguese sanctuary of *Senhora da Abadia*, Our Lady of the Abbey. The main statue of this old Marian sanctuary, probably dating from the early fourteenth century, is a depiction of the Madonna and Child. The standing Virgin dresses in a red tunic bearing floral motifs, partly covered by a blue mantle. In her right hand, the Madonna used to hold a flower stem that has long since been broken; in her left arm, she holds her baby. The child Jesus, conspicuously blond, in turn uses his left hand seemingly to feed a golden bird resting on his lap.

As if to emphasize the importance of this bird motif, another statue standing on a lateral altar, dating from the nineteenth century, offers the corresponding image of St. Joseph holding Jesus in his left arm, the child in turn holding in his left hand a golden bird that he feeds on greenery with the other hand. Given the well-known role of the Holy Spirit, often represented as a dove, in the begetting of Jesus, the identification of the birds in both statues might seem ob-

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vious. But even though the bird on the main altar might be a dove, the bird on the lateral statue definitely does not look like one. This discrepancy, avowedly a subjective impression of strangeness, has provided the pretext for the following exploration.

It is important to stress that I have not been able to clear the mystery by asking. So far, all informants that seem to care about the identity of the birds have told me they must be doves, since the Scriptures mention such a bird. And although not one informant has disagreed with my remark that the feathered biped on the lateral statue does not look like a dove, some locals have suggested that this must be the artist's fault. Given, however, that nothing else in the statue in question is faulty or undetermined, the consensual fact that the artist fashioned a bird that does not look like a dove suggests the intention of depicting something else altogether. While I cannot be sure that my informants were not actually withholding information concerning the birds' identity, I did get this impression after talking to two knowledgeable men at the sanctuary. Could it be, I have then asked myself, that the mysterious bird has become for some reason unpalatable; that, for the sake of the prestige of the sanctuary in the contemporary bourgeois mental setting, locals would proceed to disguise a bird become a source of embarrassment under the traits of the canonic dove? But then, of course, it could be that locals were giving me their best answers. And I could simply be wrong in my assessment of what a dove should look like.

Plainly, to go on in this way would carry the research into inextricable difficulties. Alternatively, I submit, the solution for this sort of problem requires taking the inquiry into an altogether different level. Since the issue is symbolic, for the birds stand for something else (whatever this may be), the way to go is to reconstitute—beyond the morass of subjective impressions and ad hoc statements—the context where each bird is bound to make sense. In this perspective, the issue of the informants' sincerity or lack thereof becomes irrelevant. Since in symbolism one thing stands for another, screening and revelation tend to appear inextricably bound. For the interpreter, what eventually turns obfuscation into signification is command of context. In other words, interpretation in a symbolic realm requires that we follow the thread of any given problem in order to reconstitute, as far as possible, the underlying mental fabric. Only after this does an assessment of the researcher's original intuition—that bird is not a dove—and of the informants' response—think again, sir—become possible. Of course, this assessment could turn out to be the least interesting part of the whole matter in case the following of the thread, as hinted, should open up hitherto unsuspected vistas.

In any case, let us say for the moment that we have a problem: the identity and the semantic import of birds in the hand of Jesus seating in the arms of Mary and of Joseph—birds at the heart of the Holy Family. Let us examine each statue in turn, and follow whatever links may prove relevant.

ST. MICHAEL, AND THE MADONNA AND CHILD

To start with the main statue of the sanctuary, let us go from basics. The sanctuary is on a hill called, of old, Mount St. Michael. Legend has it that Moorish invasions in the eighth century have interrupted a longstanding devotion to Our Lady on this site. Supposedly, the statue of the Madonna, previously hidden from the Moors, reappeared in the twelfth century by a water spring under a boulder, and a small sanctuary was afterwards built on the present-day site. The statue of the Madonna and child we are concerned with is supposedly the self-same hidden-and-found treasury of old.¹

Note a pattern in the connection between the archangel and the Madonna on this hill. St. Michael's identity as the fighter of the Dragon of the Apocalypse fits the fact that Senhora da Abadia, up to the present day, has a special connection with snakes. (This Madonna offers "protection against poisonous ophidians" and a huge serpent skin used to figure prominently in the storeroom of votive offerings.) Moreover, St. Michael has replaced at least one pagan water-source divinity nearby in northern Portugal; and the Madonna's statue has supposedly reappeared in a cave where a water source springs from a boulder. The placing of the twelfth-century abbey under the joint patronage of St. Michael and St. Mary seemingly prolongs, therefore, an ancient mountaintop cult centering on boulders and springs, somehow related to snakes.²

Granted, this is flimsy evidence. But it does suggest that the connection between the Madonna and Child on the one hand, and St. Michael on the other is anything but casual. To explore this lead will require a comparative procedure. Let us first take up the link of Mount St. Michael and the Virgin. In the twelfth century, Geoffrey of Monmouth describes in his *History of the Kings of Britain* how King Arthur tried to rescue a maiden abducted by a giant on later-day famous Mount St. Michael in France. Although Arthur valiantly fought and defeated the giant on the mountain summit, the maiden, Helen, was by then already dead and buried at the twin peak, named for this reason *Tumba Helenae*—hence, its extant name *Tombelaine*. This legend brings to light the motif of the abducted bride, fundamental in dragon-slaying tales. The anthropomorphic giant must not fool us here; indeed, the dragon that St. Michael fights often appears as a giant. (Such is the case, for example, of the statue at the St. Michael source in front of the cathedral of Our Lady in Paris, another famous instance of the link between the Madonna and St. Michael.) Anyway, the relevant point

¹ The data in this paragraph are taken from Arlindo Ribeiro da Cunha, *Senhora da Abadia: Monografia Histórica-Descritiva* (Braga: Edição da Confraria de N. S. da Abadia, 1977), 54, 71–72, 79–81.

² Carlos Alberto Ferreira de Almeida, "Senhora da Abadia," *Separata da Revista de Etnografia* 4 (n.d.): 3; Cunha, *Senhora*, 5, 36–37, 135; Paulo Ferro, *Real Santuário de Nossa Senhora da Abadia na 2ª Metade do Século XVII* (Amares: Confraria de Nossa Senhora da Abadia, 1998), 105.

here is that on Tombelaine a church has been built—so Geoffrey says—directly over Helen’s tomb, and it has been dedicated to *Notre-Dame-la-Gisante*, “Our Lady the Laying One,” understood to be *en gésine*, in childbirth. On Mount St. Michael itself, originally called “Mount Tomb,” a chapel has been built in honor of *Notre-Dame-sous-terre*, “Our Lady Underground.” The parallelism becomes striking if we note that, according to Geoffrey, the giant’s origin was Spain—which, in the twelfth century, bespeaks a Moorish affiliation. Likewise, the Portuguese statue of the Madonna supposedly emerged out of a boulder from the Moorish period—and I may add here that in modern Portuguese tradition, “Moor” is code for pre-Christian. In both the French and Portuguese cases, then, on a mountain dedicated to the dragon-slayer archangel the Madonna with child symbolizes an ancient scene of childbearing from the underworld.³

What could such chthonian childbearing stand for? Another version of events on the French Mount St. Michael, preserved in Jacopo da Voragine’s thirteenth-century *Golden Legend*, may help us understand what is at stake here. In this version, St. Michael himself orders that on Tombelaine a church be built where a bull lays abducted under boulders, on the one hand, and that water is to be brought forth from hard rock, on the other. So, an unearthed bull is an allomorph for a delivered child. Here we hit one recurring trait of legends concerning the dedication of mountains to St. Michael: the archangel exerts some sort of magical control over the cattle grazing on his mountain. This is relevant in light of the Indo-European assimilation “of the empire of the dead to grazing grounds,” as Viatcheslav Ivanov and Vladimir Toporov put it. Indeed, Claude Gaignebet shows that Mount St. Michael and its twin peak, Tombelaine, appear in literature and folklore as isles of the dead as well as grazing grounds. Add to this that in the conservative realm of European fairy tales, from Portugal to Greece, the dead mother of Cinderella becomes a grazing cow. The same notion surfaces in other guises in northern Iberia, where cows are supposed to see the dead and so-called second funerals, at the anniversary of someone’s death, used to consist in the sacrificial killing of cows. Overall, St. Michael’s role as protector of such beasts is then to be connected with his well-recognized function as protector of souls and their arouser for resurrection. Indeed, the archangel’s iconography throughout Portugal emphasizes his related roles as dragon slayer and protector of souls, which supposedly the archangel rescues from the netherworld Purgatory.⁴

³ Geoffroy de Monmouth, *Histoire des rois de Bretagne* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1992), 231–35. On *Notre-Dame-la-Gisante*, see Claude Gaignebet, *A plus hault sens: L’ésotérisme charnel et spirituel de Rabelais* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1986), 1:144, 2: 376 n. 497.

⁴ Jacques de Voragine, *La légende dorée* (Paris: Points/Seuil, 1998), 545–46, cf. Henri Dontenville, *Mythologie française* (Paris: Payot/Rivages, 1973), 83–84. The connection of cattle with the mount of St. Michael is clear in Dontenville, *Mythologie*, 82–83; Gaignebet, *Plus hault*, 1: 196–99; Voragine, *Légende*, 545–46. Gaignebet, *Plus hault*, 1: 196–97, 298. Regarding the tumulus connotation of mountains associated with St. Michael, see Luís Chaves, “São Miguel na Terra Por-

While I know of no mention of released cattle concerning the Portuguese sanctuary, it is sure that the hidden bull motif found in the French case is part of a wider theme of stray cattle indicating the spot where a Madonna statue has been buried or a chapel is to be built. Of course, in the Portuguese legend a direct link exists between water springing from hard rock and a buried image of the Virgin with child, on the spot where a church is to be built. Seemingly then, the legend of the Madonna and child appearing under a boulder on Mount St. Michael prolongs a tradition of release of souls in connection with dragon slaying.⁵

Again, this is not quite enough for our purpose. To learn more, we must turn to the link between St. Michael and the Virgin in the broader light of Christian tradition. Let us consider the fundamental text. The Book of Revelation, chapter 12, describes a vision by St. John the Evangelist. In this vision, the archangel Michael and his angels rescue from the dragon's attack "a woman, adorned with the sun, standing on the moon, and with the twelve stars on her head for a crown," then in the process of giving birth to a male child who is to rule all the nations. To a longstanding exegetic tradition, this woman and her child are the Virgin Mary and the Christ; and the explicit identification, in *Revelation*, of the dragon with the "primeval serpent" entails that the Virgin is the new Eve defeating the serpent.⁶

To understand what is at stake here, we must look on the side of Eden. In the third book of Genesis, after womankind is doomed to yearn for men and suffer in pregnancy, the primal mother of all the living receives the name *Hawa*, which means "life" and a longstanding exegetic tradition has related to a name for "serpent." Moreover, Yahweh curses the offspring of the serpent to strike the heel of the offspring of women and, in turn, have its head crushed. In light of the recurrent connection in folklore of snakebite with the onset of menstruation, and account taken of the continuing folk tradition in modern Anatolia that men-

tuguesa e na Alma dos Portugueses," *Separata da Revista de Guimarães* 66 (1956): 20; Dontenville, *Mythologie*, 76–79, 112, 114–17, 122, 146; Gaignebet, *Plus haut*, 1: 144; Voragine, *Légende*, 545. Viatcheslav Ivanov and Vladimir Toporov, "Le mythe indo-européen du dieu de l'orage poursuivant le serpent: Reconstruction du schéma," in *Échanges et communications: Mélanges offerts à Claude Lévi-Strauss à l'occasion de son 60ème anniversaire*, eds. J. Pouillon and P. Maranda (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1970), 1191–92. Concerning the horned guise of Cinderella's mother, see Francisco Vaz da Silva, *Metamorphosis: The Dynamics of Symbolism in European Fairy Tales* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 102–3, 193–99. The data concerning cows and the dead is in María Cátedra Tomás, *This World, Other Worlds: Sickness, Suicide, Death, and the Afterlife among the Vaqueiros de Alzada of Spain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 247–53, 268–70, 326, 330. Regarding the Portuguese iconography of St. Michael as dragon slayer and rescuer of souls, see Chaves, "São Miguel," 28–33.

⁵ Gaignebet, *Plus haut*, 1: 199. Marlène Albert-Llorca, *Les Vierges miraculeuses: Légendes et rituels* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 29–30.

⁶ I am quoting *Revelation* from Alexander Jones, ed., *The Jerusalem Bible: Reader's Edition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), and I am drawing for this analysis on the fine exegetic annotations in *La Bible: Traduction oecuménique* (Paris and Pierrefitte: Les Éditions du Cerf/Société Biblique Française, 1989), 3047–48.

stration derives from Hawa's act of disobedience in Paradise, the essence of the situation seems clear. After the fall, that irreversible transition from the timeless eternity of heaven to the sublunary living quarters of accursed humankind, there is equivalence under the shifting moon between the sloughing snake and womankind's cyclic bleeding. In this perspective, to defeat the dragon amounts to overcoming the moon and the associated procreative fate of women, most visible in shed blood—that of the hymen, of course, and implicitly that of menstruation and childbirth as well. So, defeat of the dragon amounts to being the new Eve in that Mary is above the shedding of blood that became the lot of Eve under the spell of the serpent. The so-called Protevangelion of James, dated to the mid-second century, makes this connection clear in having Joseph inform us that the serpent of Eden deflowered Eve even as he fears that Mary, then showing the first symptoms of pregnancy, has been defiled—only to conclude, of course, that he was wrong.⁷

The link between defeating the dragon, being above the moon, and bloodlessly conceiving of celestial seed has received much attention in European art. In an early seventeenth-century painting now held at the National Gallery in London, Velázquez has depicted St. John's vision of the Virgin adorned with the sun, standing on the moon, and wearing the crown of stars as the very image of the "Immaculate Conception." A statue at the cathedral of Lisbon, likewise depicting Our Lady of Conception standing on the crescent moon, adds to the moon an image of the serpent with the forbidden fruit of Eden. The same is true of an eighteenth-century drawing by Ubaldo Gandolfi, now held at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, which actually depicts the serpent coiled around the horned moon. A late fifteenth-century panel painted in the immediate circle of the Master of the Amsterdam Cabinet, entitled "The Virgin of the Apocalypse" and now held at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, shows the Madonna holding her child, standing on the moon, against a solar background. In this picture, an overall golden radiation permeates the cosmic region comprising the moon below, the sun at the central background, and the shining halos and hair of the mother and child in the upper part of the picture. The latter may be compared with the twelve stars in Velázquez after *Revelation*, standing in all likeness for the twelve parts of the ecliptic in the yearly cycle—hence, for the whole fixed sphere of the starry heavens.⁸

⁷ Concerning the identity between the female bearer of life and the serpent, see Claude Gaignebet, "Véronique ou l'image vraie," *Bulletin de la Société de Mythologie Française* 139 (1985): 14–15; Alain Testart, *Des mythes et des croyances: Esquisse d'une théorie générale* (Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1991), 287–93. Regarding the link between snakebite and menses, see Gaignebet, "Véronique ou l'image vraie," 15; Alexander H. Krappe, *La gènes des mythes* (Paris: Payot, 1952), 291–92. For a fuller analysis of the events in Genesis, see Vaz da Silva, *Metamorphosis*, 76–82. Carol Delaney, "Mortal Flow: Menstruation in Turkish Village Society," in *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*, eds. T. Buckley and A. Gottlieb (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 79. "Le protévangile de Jacques," in *Évangiles apocryphes*, ed. F. Quéré (Paris: Points/Seuil, 1983), 77.

⁸ Artworks mentioned in this paragraph can be viewed online at, for example, the following

Here we have an important clue to the golden hair of Jesus in the statue of Senhora da Abadia. Michael Baxandall, to convey what he calls the “traditional view” on the complexion of the Virgin, finds it suitable to quote a fifteenth-century Dominican, Gabriel Barletta, who in turn quotes thirteenth-century St. Albert the Great. According to this layered view, the Madonna “was not simply dark, nor simply red-haired, nor just fair-haired. For any one of these colours by itself brings a certain imperfection to a person . . . Mary was a blend of complexions, partaking of all of them . . . And yet this, says Albertus, we must admit: she was a little on the dark side.” This conclusion has for itself commendable commonsensical premises, such as, Jews tend to be dark and Mary was a Jewess; St. Luke, an eyewitness, made three pictures of the Virgin where she appears brown-complexioned; and Christ himself was dark. It is in reference to this battery of seemingly self-evident premises, enlightened by the radiant picture of the Master of Amsterdam cabinet, that we may heed Vladimir Propp’s insight that the blond hairs of divinities, of the dead, and of initiates—as well as of fairy-tale heroines and heroes, which was Propp’s main point—are symbolic of their belonging in the otherworldly realm of the sun. Actually, I must add here that fairy tales consistently link the otherworld not only with the sun, but also with the moon and the stars. And we need only consider Grünewald’s sixteenth-century Resurrection (held at the Unterlinden Museum in Belgium), depicting the head of Jesus involved in a radiant halo that gradually shades into the impassible background of the stars, to understand that the seeming blondness of Christ—after birth, as well as after resurrection—is really the fiery token of a heavenly origin.⁹

An eighteenth-century painting by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo that again shows the immaculate Virgin above the moon and the serpent further depicts, on the celestial end of the scene, the Madonna’s head involved in a yellow scarf underneath the Holy Spirit dove. This depiction of the Immaculate Conception is structurally identical with the twelfth-century depiction of the “Annunciation” in a German manuscript now at the Getty Museum, which shows a dove descending upon the Virgin’s head while the Madonna keeps the serpent under her left foot. Also, in Tiepolo’s painting an angel holding a white flower while facing the serpent of Eden invokes the theme of Mary the New Eve, which for example the Annunciation by Fra Angelico, held at the Prado Museum, depicts by setting in parallel the expulsion of Eve from Eden and the impregnation of Mary. These associations are synthesized in an early nineteenth-century painting by Leopold Layer, “The Debt is Paid,” held at the Slovenian Religious Mu-

sites: Velazquez: <http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/v/velazque/1620/>; Gandolfi: http://www.si.umich.edu/History_of_Art/demoarea/details/1970_2.43.html; Master of the Amsterdam Cabinet: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/glas/ho_1982.47.1.htm.

⁹ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 57. Vladimir Propp, *Les racines historiques du conte merveilleux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 388, 393. Grünewald’s Isenheim altarpiece, held by the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar, Belgium, can be viewed at: <http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/grunewald/crucifixion/christ.jpg>.

seum in Stična. Here the dove and God, together, emanate iridescent rays towards the Virgin's head, which appears surrounded by twelve stars amidst fiery light. All the while, the Madonna stands above the horned moon and on the serpent of Eden, which an angel faces off while another angel holds a white flower to Mary. Yet another angel erases the scene of Eden on a tomb slate, for the debt is paid insofar as the spiritual impregnation of the New Eve through her ear (conspicuously in sight in this painting) erases the red sin of Eve, here represented by the apple associated with the challenged dragon.¹⁰

Ernest Jones has marshaled an impressive array of evidence regarding the notion that the breath of God impregnated the Virgin through the ear. Jacopo da Voragine, in stating that the Virgin on the Annunciation "was troubled by the words of the angel, not by the sight of him," delicately alludes to this tradition, of which Christian art in the early fifteenth century gives beautiful instances. For example, the Annunciation by van Eyck, now held at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, displays the Virgin's bare ear receptive to the stream of words by the angel as well as to the celestial light that streams along the plunging course of the dove. The Annunciation by Robert Campin, now held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, conjoins the angel's words and a descending iridescent breath that actually carries the incarnating Jesus bearing the cross of his passion. Together, the two breaths on their gusty way to the ear of the Virgin blow off a candle and ruffle the pages of an open book. The Madonna all the while piously reads. While her ear engages in conception—hence, the resilient notion of "pleasures of the ear"—her eyes, intently staring at the scriptures, indicate the transcendent import of the theophany about to take place. St. Augustine has made the sexual connotation of the event unmistakably clear by stating that the Incarnation of the Word happens "by a marriage which it is impossible to define."¹¹

Some of this difficulty of definition may perhaps be dispelled if we note that a celestial impregnation through the ear both sublimates and inverts regular, down-to-earth copulation. As Lévi-Strauss has shown in another context, the position of the ear in the coordinates of body openings—above, posterior—

¹⁰ Artworks mentioned in this paragraph can be viewed online at, for example, the following sites: Tiepolo: http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/t/tiepolo/gianbatt/7_1760s/11immacu.html; Miniature in the Stammheim Missal: <http://www.getty.edu/art/collections/objects/o112579.html>; Fra Angelico: <http://cgfa.sunsite.dk/angelico/p-angelic4.htm>. I visited the Museum of Religion at the Stična monastery on 7 June 2003, thanks to the kindness and hospitality of Mirjam Mencej, of the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Ljubljana, and her husband, the sculptor Jiří Bezlaj. Let them be warmly thanked here. The photo of Leopold Layer's painting is printed by permission of the Slovenski verski muzej v Stični.

¹¹ Ernest Jones, *Essays in Applied Psycho-Analysis*, vol. 2, *Essays in Folklore, Anthropology and Religion* (New York: International Universities Press, 1964), 268–73. Artworks mentioned in this paragraph can be viewed online at, for example, the following sites. Van Eyck: http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/e/eyck_van/jan/02page/18annunc.html; Campin: <http://cgfa.sunsite.dk/c/p-campin3.htm>. Voragine, *Légende*, 196. St Augustine, *Sermons for Christmas and Epiphany* (Westminster, Md., and London: The Newman Press/Longmans, Green, and Co., 1952), 115.

thoroughly inverts the below, anterior body coordinates of the vagina. In anatomical terms, then, the spiritual conception of Mary is an inverted image of the carnal act. Add to this the assimilation of the top half of the body to heaven and of its lower half to earth, to which Leo Steinberg insightfully draws attention, throughout centuries of Christian art. In this light, there is a perfect fit between the male divine Word proceeding from the upper part of cosmos and a receptive ear at the upper part of a female body. Note that men are somehow close to divinity in that their seed supposedly contains a spiritual principle. Thomas Laqueur hints that this notion, emphatically stressed by Aristotle and much repeated in subsequent centuries, implies that males put an idea in the female body. This is in line, of course, with the persistent double meaning of the word "conception" up to the present time, even to the title of this paper. But women respond with a deaf ear, as it were, for on the human level conception happens through that lower opening related to earth and blood. Eve, of course, inaugurated this state of affairs because she did not heed the word of God. Inversely, the New Eve preserves her intactness even as she welcomes the divine Word. In Mary "the incarnate Word deigned to gestate . . . and exited without giving injury," as Steinberg puts it suggestively, whereas in Eve the serpent has started the blood of human procreation.¹²

In short, if Eve has been doomed to yearn for men and share with the serpent a cyclic power to renew life, then the specificity of Mary is that she is above such sublunary destiny. For the New Eve, as we have seen, to be above the moon and the shedding of procreative blood amounts to keeping the serpent in check. This entails, of course, a concentration of fruitful powers. Georges Dumézil, working on Indo-European data, has realized that the mystic value of virginity stems from the inherent unspoiled plenitude of feminine "creative power." This remark has a more general application. Insofar as feminine blood is supposedly the stuff of motherhood, its maximum concentration in a womb creates the appropriate medium for a divine incarnation; even more so since the fate of this incarnation is to shed blood for the redemption of humankind. Interesting implications follow, but here I must halt this train of thought.¹³

The main point here is that to be receptive to the fiery sphere of heaven and to tame the lunar dragon are two inseparable dimensions of the Virgin Mary. The success of the resultant theophany receives emphasis in the main statue of the Portuguese Mount St. Michael both through the blondness of the child and

¹² Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Deduction of the Crane," in *Structural Analysis of Oral Tradition*, eds. P. Maranda and E. K. Maranda (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 10–17; *Mythologiques*, vol. 2, *Du miel aux cendres* (Paris: Plon, 1966), 202–11; *Mythologiques*, vol. 1, *Le cru et le cuit* (Paris: Plon, 1964), 145. Steinberg, Leo. *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 27–28, 149–51. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 35, 42. Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*, 94.

¹³ Georges Dumézil, *Mythe et épopée*, vol. 2, *Types épiques indo—européens: Un héros, un sorcier, un roi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 368.

by his holding the bird that represents the begetting spirit. In the only other case I know, besides the Portuguese statue of St. Joseph and Jesus, in which the child feeds with his right hand a golden bird he holds in his left hand—an early fifteenth-century German sculpture now held at the Louvre museum—this bird with spread wings could be a dove. So could the bird on the Portuguese statue of the Madonna and child; at least, I have found no reason so far to think otherwise.¹⁴

THE MADONNA, THE CHILD, AND THE BIRD IN THE CALENDAR

Now that we have acquired a sort of basic understanding of what a statue of the Virgin with Child in association with St. Michael stands for, let us look more intently at the actual cult in the Portuguese sanctuary. The main statue has, besides its rather innocuous main name—Our Lady of the Abbey—a more significant one: *Senhora da Goma*, “Lady of Sap.” Local cultivators still say to this day that in springtime crops start to *agomar*—literally, to “en-sap”—meaning to swell up with milky stuff. This brings out the agricultural import of this denomination concerned with the rising sap of crops. I have found notice that a procession used to take place on the first Saturday of Lent, called for this reason in this region “Day of the Lady of Sap”; but, even so, the main celebration of *Senhora da Goma* is on the so-called “Segunda-Feira de Pascoela,” meaning “Monday of Small Easter,” that is, the Monday in the week after Easter. In nearby parishes, the same festivity goes under the name *Gozos de Nossa Senhora*, “Joys of Our Lady,” or *Senhora dos Prazeres*, “Lady of Pleasures.” According to a tradition very much alive in Portugal, the first of these pleasures or joys—seven in all—is the Annunciation and the consequent impregnation of the Virgin. Hence, in the Azores to this day, *Pascoela* Sunday goes by the name of *Domingo da Pombinha*, “little dove Sunday.” One clear implication is that *Senhora da Goma* links together the swelling of vegetables with milky sap and the swelling of a womb with celestial emanations.¹⁵

Note that the homology between the milky sap of crops and celestial seed is actually pre-Christian. Virgil wrote long ago in his *Georgics*, as modern Portuguese peasants still say to this day, that in springtime “the corn . . . swells with milk” (*Georgics* 1.313–15). This is not just a poetic expression, for Pliny lets

¹⁴ The Madonna and Child with a bird image held at the Louvre may be conveniently seen at http://www.photo.rmn.fr/fr/f_recherche.html by searching the phrase “Chapelle Cardon.”

¹⁵ On *Senhora da Goma* and its relation to the sap of crops, along with the *Gozos de Nossa Senhora* and *Senhora dos Prazeres*, see Almeida, “Senhora,” 6; Cunha, *Senhora*, 127, 215. On *Pascoela* Monday, see José Leite de Vasconcelos, *Etnografia Portuguesa: Tentame de Sistematização*, eds. M. Viegas Guerreiro, A. da Silva Soromenho, and P. Caratão Soromenho, vol. 8 (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional—Casa da Moeda, 1982), 242. My source for the procession on the first Saturday of Lent and the “Day of the Lady of Sap” is Leite de Vasconcelos, *Etnografia* 8, 180. The main celebration of *Senhora da Goma* is on *Pascoela* according to Almeida, “Senhora,” 6, and Cunha, *Senhora*, 127; cf. Cunha, *Senhora*, 215; Ferro, *Real Santuário*, 104. The other “pleasures” of Our Lady are: her Visitation to Elizabeth, the Nativity, the Adoration of the Magi, the Presentation to the Temple, the Resurrection, and her own Coronation.

us know in the eighteenth book of his *Natural History* that this “genial milky juice” comes from the Milky Way, whence supposedly “crops derive milk as from an udder” (18.281–82). Likewise, Macrobius reports that newborns drink milk because “the first movement of souls slipping into earthly bodies is from the Milky Way,” where souls return after death (*Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* 1.12.3). The implication being that all milky life fluids proceed from the realm of fixed stars and go back there, the link of the Lady of Sap with the white juices of life takes us back to the halo of stars around the Madonna’s head as she expects her child and also, at times, before her dead son proceeds to resurrect. One such image of the bereaved Madonna holding her dead son, on display at the cathedral of Lisbon, shows over the Virgin’s head seven small stars around a bigger one—clearly, in accordance with stable pre-Christian symbolism, the seven planetary spheres and that of the fixed stars, emphasized over the others.¹⁶

This link between the conception and the resurrection of Christ calls attention to the fact that Jacopo da Voragine discusses both events under the same calendar entry, 25 March. This date certainly relates to the equinox, in older days conceived more as a series of days than as a singularity in time. Thus, Varro reckons the vernal equinox on 24 March (*On Agriculture* 1.28.1), Columella locates it on the 24th and the 25th (11.31), and Pliny likewise places the end of the equinox on the 25th (18.246). The correspondence of 25 March with the equinox is important in that the ideal date for Easter, which of course commemorates the Resurrection of Jesus, is a Sunday falling on a full moon coinciding with the equinox. By the end of the fourth century, some Christian groups who opted for a fixed date on the authority of the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus actually celebrated Easter on 25 March. Nevertheless, the Church’s victorious insistence on the complicating lunar- and week-cycles factor has implied that Easter always falls later than the ideal date; which helps emphasize the imperfection of the sublunary realm where humans dwell since the Fall.¹⁷

This being so, it is all the more remarkable that Jacopo links not only the resurrection but also the conception of Christ to the time period when the sun rises above the celestial equator. In linking the two events, this author expresses the symbolic identity of the tomb and the womb as he writes that, “just as Our Lord could leave his mother’s womb without opening it . . . so he could leave his tomb without opening it.” This identity is interesting because, according to the same Gospel of Nicodemus that was the authority for placing the Resur-

¹⁶ I am using H. R. Fairclough’s translation in Virgil, *Ecloques. Georgics. Aeneid I–VI* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press/William Heinemann, 1935), 103, H. Rackham’s translation in Pliny, *Natural History*, vol. 5, *Books XVII–XIX* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press/William Heinemann, 1950), 366n.a, 367, and W. H. Stahl’s translation in Ambrosius Aurelius Theodosius Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 134.

¹⁷ Regarding Easter on 25 March, see Rémi Gounelle and Zbigniew Izdorczyk, eds., *L’Évangile de Nicodème* (Bruxelles: Brepols, 1997), 107–8, 124.

rection on 25 March, Jesus while buried actually visits the netherworld and rescues souls there. The twofold implication is that the netherworld is like a womb, whence the deceased may issue anew; and that, conversely, to be born from a womb is akin to issuing from the realm of the dead.

Again, artworks may be of help in understanding puzzling notions. A late fourteenth-century French altar cloth from the Narbonne cathedral, held at the Louvre, shows that the descent of the Christ to the limbos amounts to keeping the dragon in check—just as, so we saw, his conception does. In this altar cloth, Jesus overpowers the dragon with the cross. This makes sense, of course, for through the crucifixion the Christ enters the netherworld. An early sixteenth-century depiction of the crucifixion by Josse Lieferinx, also held at the Louvre, makes a straight association between the crucifixion and the dragon fight by St. Michael, under the heading of soul deliverance. Recall that in St. John's vision the very birth of Jesus hinges on the dragon-slaying act. Overall, the successful trips of Jesus to the womb and the tomb are then homologous. This explains, on the one hand, that in some paintings the incarnating baby already carries the cross of His passion (the examined Annunciation by Campin and the fifteenth-century Annunciation at *Sainte Madeleine* church, in Aix-en-Provence, show this motif); and, on the other, that Jacopo conflates the conception and the resurrection of Christ. From point zero, the descent into the womb, the divine incarnation was a Passion bound to culminate in the redeeming ascent from the tomb. This overall sacrificial path of multilayered death and resurrection is, in part, what the consistent symbolism of dragon slaying stands for.¹⁸

I am well aware that this statement actually raises more problems than it solves. While I do mean to stress the complexity of the symbolic field we are visiting, I have to shy from heavy-duty links that would lead us astray of our theme. This is a humble ethnographic problem, to which we must presently return. Therefore, let us look the way of the second statue at the sanctuary.

ST. JOSEPH, THE CHILD, AND THE CUCKOO IN THE CALENDAR

One obvious element of convergence with the foregoing discussion is that 19 March is the day of St. Joseph. Clearly, this places his statue in the same calendar context as that of the Madonna and child image. Moreover, on 19 March or else on the 21st—locally considered the first day of spring—the cuckoo is supposed to arrive from its winter abode. In Portugal as in other European regions, this “bird of spring” purportedly announces marriages as well as the agricultural bounty of springtime. Therefore, the calendar context presents us with a migratory bird that makes its appearance at the very time of year in which the dove is supposed to have conveyed the Holy Spirit into Mary. In this light, it

¹⁸ Both the Narbonne altar cloth and Lieferinx's painting may be conveniently viewed at http://www.photo.rmn.fr/fr/f_recherche.html. The Aix Annunciation may be viewed at http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/highlight.cgi?file=html/m/master/aix_annu/annunci.html&find=aix. Vorigine, *Légende*, 202–3.



FIGURE 1. Statue depicting the Madonna and Child with Bird (*Senhora da Abadia* sanctuary, Portugal).



FIGURE 2. Madonna and Child with Bird, detail (*Senhora da Abadia* sanctuary, Portugal).



FIGURE 3. Statue depicting St. Joseph and Child with Bird, detail (*Senhora da Abadia* sanctuary, Portugal).



FIGURE 4. Site of the Madonna-and-child statue apparition (*Senhora da Abadia* sanctuary, Portugal).



FIGURE 5. Our Lady of Conception (*Senhora da Conceição*. Lisbon Cathedral, Portugal).



FIGURE 6. Leopold Layer, "The Debt is Paid." 1825 (Slovenian Religious Museum in Stična).



FIGURE 7. Pietà (*Senhora da Piedade*. Lisbon Cathedral, Portugal).



FIGURE 8. The Cuckoo. In, José Leite de Vasconcelos, *Emografia Portuguesa: Tentame de Sistematização*. Manuel Viegas Guerreiro, Alda da Silva Soromenho, and Paulo Caratão Soromenho, eds. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional—Casa da Moeda, v. 7, 1980, p. 218.

may be relevant that a drawing of a cuckoo taken from Leite de Vasconcelos' *Portuguese Ethnography* presents a bird not unlike the one we see in the statue (figure 8, cf. figure 3). This, in itself, is not compelling evidence. But let us check whether a cuckoo could relate to this statue as, indeed, the calendar context suggests.¹⁹

What may look like compelling evidence is that the cuckoo is supposed to bring children from its winter abode. This notion shows in several convergent sayings. In northern Portugal, one used to ask a pregnant woman whether she was already making the baby clothes for her little cuckoo. Indeed, people used to call small children "little cuckoos." And Leite de Vasconcelos, the turn-of-the-century ethnographer from whom I am taking this information, specifies that people would advise childless couples to "go take the clothes to the cuckoo." That couples would, if only symbolically, take baby clothes to the cuckoo to obtain babies, called for this reason "little cuckoos," seemingly implies that cuckoos are child providers. Even though this may seem strange at first sight, we are all familiar with the kindred idea that babies come by way of storks, or some other migratory bird, from a watery or underground realm. I will get back to this shortly. For the time being, I would like to note the close fit between the Christian notion that a dove brought Jesus to Mary's womb and the folk idea that cuckoos bring babies to ordinary women. In the cultural context of northern Portugal, this naturally puts the child Jesus in the position of a little cuckoo. In this light, the possibility arises that the bird in Jesus' hand resembles a cuckoo for the good reason that it means to depict one.²⁰

Another reason for thinking that the cuckoo relates to the statue of St. Joseph is that, to put it bluntly, the foster father of Jesus has incarnated a cuckold for many centuries now. Clues are extant ever since the Scriptures. Both Matthew and Luke specify that Mary became pregnant after being given in marriage to Joseph, but before their having started to live together (Matt. 1.18; Luke 1.27, 34). Jacopo, using other traditions, lets us know that Joseph had experienced misgivings about becoming at his age the husband of a fourteen-year-old virgin; moreover, he specifies the consensual point that Joseph had been out of

¹⁹ José Leite de Vasconcelos, *Etnografia Portuguesa: Tentame de Sistematização*, eds. M. Viegas Guerreiro, A. da Silva Soromenho, and P. Caratão Soromenho, vol. 7 (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional—Casa da Moeda, 1980), 216–30; *Tradições Populares de Portugal*, ed. M. Viegas Guerreiro (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional—Casa da Moeda, 1986), 181–82; cf. Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, vol. 2 (London: George Bell and Sons, 1883), 675–78; Aleksandr V. Gura, *Simvolika zhivotnykh v slavianskoi narodnoi traditsii* (Moscow: Indrik, 1997), 699.

²⁰ Leite de Vasconcelos, *Etnografia 7*, 221. For the timing of the cuckoo's presence, see Grimm, *Teutonic 2*, 677, 679–80; Paul Sébillot, *Le folklore de France*, vol. 5, *La faune* (Paris: Imago, 1984), 177–79; Leite de Vasconcelos, *Etnografia 7*, 222. Claude Gaignebet and Marie-Claude Florentin, *Le Carnaval: Essais de mythologie populaire* (Paris: Payot, 1974), 132–33, understand that the image of storks bringing babies is one modern instance of the idea that this bird brings back souls from the netherworld—which of course supposes the notion, found throughout ancient European representations by Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), that the realms of the dead and of the unborn coincide.

town when his bride became pregnant. The apocryphal *Story of Joseph the Carpenter*, probably composed in the fourth century, lets us know that Joseph was ninety-two by the time Mary became pregnant and that, owing to his sadness on seeing her pregnant, he could not bring himself to eat or drink. In the same trend, the Protevangelion of James tells how Joseph, returning home to find Mary six-months pregnant, threw himself down on the floor crying bitterly, and decided to repudiate her in secret. In the same vein, Matthew has it that, “Joseph, being a man of honor and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally” (Matt. 1.19); and the apostle agrees with apocryphal texts in specifying that the archangel Gabriel had to talk Joseph into playing his selfless role. Latter paintings, such as Raphael’s depictions of the Holy Family, suggest the melancholy of this role. On a less subjective note, we have information that Catalanian men who would dare to marry on 19 March were supposed to become cuckolds. This relates, of course, to the idea that the cuckoo starts singing on this day; for this reason, they say in Portugal, “St. Joseph gave it speech.” What such “speech” means is plain. In northern Portugal, to state in jest that in some neighboring hamlet the cuckoo starts singing early carries the implication that men there get horned early in the year. In the same region, so Leite de Vasconcelos tells us, “one calls a man whose wife is unfaithful a cuckoo.”²¹

So, all three components of the second statue—St. Joseph, the child, and the bird—connote the cuckoo. Joseph, the meritorious cuckold (a cuckoo in fact, for a single term, *cuco*, designates in Portuguese the bird and the cuckold) holds the child Jesus, that incarnation of the godhead in the guise of a little cuckoo (to speak in the terms of local folklore), who in turn holds and feeds a bird cuckoo. This surprising pattern requires that we have a quick look at the semantics of cuckoos and cuckoldry.

THE CUCKOO HYPOTHESIS

When dealing with folklore problems, it often pays to ask Shakespeare. In the present case, the master folklorist puts in a fool’s mouth, addressing King Lear, the saying that “the hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long that it had it head bit off by it young” (*King Lear* 1.4.214–15). A Portuguese nineteenth-century almanac both reiterates and clarifies this lesson. After stating that cuckoos eat the eggs and hatchlings of other birds in order to place their own eggs in the nests, this source adds, “They say that the cuckoo, on leaving the nest, thanks its fos-

²¹ Alan Dundes, “The Hero Pattern and the Life of Jesus,” in *In Quest of the Hero* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 212–13, has made similar points long ago. Voragine, *Légende*, 195, 497. “Histoire de Joseph le charpentier,” in *Évangiles apocryphes*, ed. F. Quéré (Paris: Points/Seuil, 1983), 98, 102. “Protévangile,” 76–77. I am quoting Matthew from Jones, ed., *Jerusalem Bible*. I am taking Catalanian data from Marlène Albert-Llorca, *L’ordre des choses: Les récits d’origine des animaux et des plantes en Europe* (Paris: Éditions du Comité des Travaux historiques et scientifiques, 1991), 245–46. Leite de Vasconcelos, *Emografia* 7, 220, 222.

ter father . . . in oh a so characteristic way . . . by gobbling it.” In this light, we understand that the fool—that conspicuous “wisefool” (*morosophe*) figure, to borrow Rabelais’ expression—was telling Lear that his thankless daughters were like “degenerate bastard[s],” as the king himself recognizes a little later (1.4.253), and that consequently, Lear was like the cuckold. Another Shakespearean clown explains “cuckold” as one who has taken in someone else’s “crop” (*All’s Well that Ends Well* 1.3.42–43), and a Portuguese late nineteenth-century author clears up this metaphor by saying, *cuco* “designates the husband who suffers the unfaithfulness of his wife, unwittingly sustaining her offspring.”²²

So, the cuckold is the caretaker of the cuckoo’s offspring insofar as his wife is implicitly equated to the female cuckoo—which, as another Portuguese source makes clear, reportedly “has no stable companion, no nest, and shows no motherly or wifely tenderness: she wanders through the woods and there consorts with several males.” Therefore, we find a model of the cuckoo seducer, the fickle wife—assimilated to a female cuckoo due to her wantonness—and the cuckold husband, ultimately equated to the seducer as a metaphoric cuckoo insofar as, so the pervasive notion goes, this bird “does not know his children.”²³

It needs no saying that conjugal unfaithfulness per se does not concern the Holy Family, where carnal marriage has long been ruled out; and, of course, the moral character of the Virgin is not an issue. Rather, in order to understand how the theme of cuckoldry relates to the Holy Family, we have to grasp the metaphysical dimension of the cuckoo triangle beyond the trivial uses of this model for the shortcomings of matrimonial steadfastness. One way to go is to relate the seasonal character of the impregnating cuckoo, the surprising fact that St. Joseph is the patron of married folk despite his cuckold connotation, and the related assertion by Rabelais that “cuckoldry is one of the natural attributes [*apennages*] of marriage” (*Tiers Livre* 32.7–8). Recall the calendar situation of the cuckoo and its implications. From Portugal, where on 19 March a man disguised as a cuckoo used to be ritually captured for the sake of agricultural and

²² I am quoting from William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. P. Alexander (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994). François Rabelais, *Les cinq livres: Gargantua. Pantagruel. Le tiers livre. Le quart livre. Le cinquième livre*, eds. J. Céard, G. Defaux, and M. Simonin (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1994), 828–29; *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955), 414. *Almanaque de Lembranças* de 1880, p. 126, cit. in Leite de Vasconcelos, *Emografia* 7, 216. Joaquim Teófilo Braga, *O Povo Português nos Seus Costumes, Crenças e Tradições*, vol. 2 (Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 1986), 102.

²³ Leite de Vasconcelos, *Emografia* 7, 219. The cuckoo’s ignorance of its children is affirmed in a Pomeranian tale alluded by Albert-Llorca, *L’ordre*, 251. As far away as Russia, the female cuckoo is deemed to consort with males of several other species and her overall connotation is that of broken family or marriage ties or relationships, see Gura, *Simvolika zhivotnykh*, 683–84. (This information is among a wealth of data kindly communicated to me by Andreas B. Johns, a keen specialist of Slavic folklore I had the good fortune of meeting at the University of California, Berkeley.)

human fertility, eastwards up to at least Romania—where young people disguised as cuckoos by Carnival used to ritually soil everyone they met—the arrival of the cuckoo indicates the overall return of life force. This includes, as we have seen, the notion that cuckoos bring babies from their winter abode; that is, from seasonal antipodes, which are none other than the netherworld. This is manifest in the recurring idea that the cuckoo reappears riding a bird of prey, which echoes the fairytale theme of the hero's ascent from the underworld after having acquired there new means of fertility, such as golden fruits and brides. If we look further eastwards, we see that throughout Siberia, the spring-time return of migratory swans is supposed to bring back the “life force.” Here too, the connection with procreation is clear in that the souls that swans bring to incarnate in newborns are supposedly birds, just as in Portugal babies, purportedly brought by cuckoos, are called *cuquinhos*, “little cuckoos.”²⁴

In this framework of ideas regarding the supernatural origin of babies, the Rabelaisian assertion that cuckoldry is a fundamental of marriage reveals its esoteric sense. This is fully compatible with the notion that women are generally under the spell of the variable moon as well as of a fiercely irrational “animal” (*Livre Tiers* 32). If souls cyclically come to incarnate from the otherworld, carried by migratory birds or other mediators, then the sexual act—for which craves, or so Rabelais says, the “animal” in women that men can hardly satisfy—is only the physical dimension of a wider, metaphysical process that involves the cuckoo. Given ideas regarding the impregnating cuckoo, which carry the implication that newborns are little cuckoos, husbands blessed with offspring cannot but be cuckolds in a cosmological sense (if hopefully not in the trivial one involving human rivals). Of course, no ignorance of the relevance of the physiological act to conception is involved in these representations. Rather, we are again dealing with the notion that sperm carries a spiritual prin-

²⁴ Leite de Vasconcelos, *Etnografia* 7, 221–22; Michel Vulpesco, *Les coutumes roumaines périodiques: Etudes descriptives et comparées* (Paris: Larose, 1927), 137–40. Both Sébillot, *Folklore* 5, 179, and Grimm, *Teutonic* 2, 679, pinpoint the idea that the cuckoo metamorphoses in winter into a bird of prey. W. Schulenburg, *Wendische Volkssagen und Gebräuche aus dem Spreewald* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1880), 262, also refers this idea among the Sorbs, a Slavic population in Eastern Germany; and Gura, *Simvolika zhivotnykh*, 696, states that this is a widespread belief among the Slavs. (Again, I owe information on these Slavic data to Andreas R. Johns.) Moreover, Sébillot, *Folklore* 5, 179, 226 n. 6, finds in France the idea that the spring cuckoo returns on the shoulders of a carrion bird and adds, “this belief goes back to Antiquity and is much more widespread in England than in France.” On the fairytale side, this is motif F101.3: “Return from lower world on eagle” and it appears most often in the plot classified as Aarne-Thompson type 301. See Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1961), 90–92, as well as Paul Delarue, *Le conte populaire français: Catalogue raisonné des versions de France et des pays de langue française d'outre-mer*, vol. 1 (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1985), 108–33, for the classification. Regarding the connection between bringing forth golden items from the underworld and the return of springtime, see Propp, *Racines*, 371–93, and Vaz da Silva, *Metamorphosis*, 36–42, 94–105. For the more explicit Altaic representations, see Roberte Hamayon, *La chasse à l'âme: Esquisse d'une théorie du chamanisme sibérien* (Nanterre: Société d'ethnologie, 1990), 315–16, 766 n. 20.

ciple, which we now understand to revolve between this world and the other-world. This “folk theory of procreation,” to take up a term introduced by Carol Delaney, has come down to us in at least two versions, as does all folklore.²⁵

One version has been seriously upheld until fairly recently. Bronislaw Malinowski, while famously grappling to come to terms with a South Seas version of the metaphysics of procreation in the late 1910s, expounded to natives of the Trobriand Islands what he calls “the embryological view of the matter,” namely, “the simile of a seed being planted in the soil and the plant growing out of the seed.” By the same epoch in 1929, Otto Rank spelled out in similar terms the “truthful answer” to give a child interested in the origin of children, namely, that “the child grows in the mother’s body somewhat as the plants grow in the earth.” Delaney, who reports having heard this answer by the mid-twentieth century and later conveying it to her own daughter, has gotten around to remarking that this view—entailing that “men . . . provide the creative spark of life . . . while women, like soil, contribute the nurturant material that sustains it”—has been “the predominant folk theory of procreation in the West for millennia.” Delaney argues that this has continued to be so even after the discovery of the ovum and of genetics; that, in other words, the knowledge that women are co-engenders has had little effect on explanations about procreation in everyday language and even in academia. In short, the ancient view that procreation consists in placing in the nurturant media of females a spiritual seed or divine principle, as Plato (*Timaeus* 73c, 90a, 91a—b) and Aristotle (*Generation of Animals* 716a, 728a, 730b, 731b—2a, 736a—7a) had it long before Christianity, has proved remarkably resilient.²⁶

Just as Malinowski has opposed this seemingly self-evident view to the soul-reincarnation theory that Trobriand Islanders held to in spite of (as he thought) better evidence, so Rank has opposed it to “the renowned *fable of the stork*” to which, he fancied, children hold on in spite of being taught the “truthful” plant-and-earth explanation. Remarkably, the tacit equivalence between so-called primitives and children is here making enlightened Europeans impervious to the possibility that their own certainties are every bit as mythological as the ideas they are examining. Consider Rank’s case. Freud’s observations led him to strongly maintain that the “stork fable” is actually not one of the sexual theories of children but is rather a view that children meet “with energetic doubts,” and generally “refuse to believe,” while learning the facts of life from the scrutiny of humans and the sexual life of animals. What is more, Freud granted that the stork story imposed on children is a “mythologically significant piece of in-

²⁵ Carol Delaney, *The Seed and the Soil: Gender and Cosmology in Turkish Village Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 8.

²⁶ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion, and Other Essays* (London: Souvenir Press, 1982), 223. Otto Rank, *The Trauma of Birth* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 1993), 30. Carol Delaney, “The Meaning of Paternity and the Virgin Birth Debate,” *Man* 21, 3 (1986): 509–10; Delaney, *Seed*, 8, 12–13.

formation.” This entails, I think, that the sexual education of European children has largely consisted in exposing them to the culturally relevant metaphysics of procreation while pretty much leaving them to find for themselves the physics of it. The importance of such culturally relevant metaphysics—to the point that, as Delaney pertinently remarks, it has withstood the shock of scientific evidence—seems clear in that even scientists feel tempted to relapse. Witness Carl Sagan, commenting on the ethnographic trials and tribulations of Malinowski: “If some peculiar-looking stranger came into my town and asked *me* where babies come from, I’d certainly be tempted to tell him about storks and cabbages.”²⁷

With the benefit of hindsight, we may regard Rank’s “truthful” answer regarding the origin of children and the stork answer he attributes to children as equivalent versions of a single, pervasive folk model of procreation. The fundamental assumption of this model is, as it seems, that of a soul principle active in semen, which migratory birds cyclically replenish from the otherworld. In this light, it is clear that the cuckoo of Portuguese ethnography is an allototif of the stork of pan-European lore and of the swans of Siberian belief, on the one hand; and it seems fair to speculate that these fertilizing birds roughly correspond to the dove imago of the impregnating Holy Spirit, on the other. Indeed, there is a remarkable fit between the Christian admission that the impregnating Holy Spirit may embody as a dove and the folk notion that incarnating souls come with birds, the nature of which they partake.

CONCLUSION

If so, we seem at last to have the proper context to understand the correlation in the Portuguese sanctuary between a statue of Mary, the child Jesus, and a dove on the one hand, and a statue of Joseph, the child Jesus, and a seeming cuckoo, on the other. In this sanctuary we find, juxtaposed, the catholic tenet that it was the Holy Spirit embodied as a dove, not Joseph, who impregnated the Virgin and the local idea that it is the migratory cuckoo, not the husbandman, that is ultimately responsible for the soulful seeding of wombs and fields. In the same frame of mind, the cuckold connotation of Joseph fits the corollary that all husbandmen are essentially cuckolds.

As noted above, this is not just a ribald conclusion by Rabelais. Shakespeare, too, draws on the metaphor between wombs and fields to say why cuckoldry makes for happy husbandmen. As the clown in *All’s Well that Ends Well* puts it, “He that ears my land spares my team, and gives me leave to in the crop. If I be his cuckold, he’s my drudge. He that comforts my wife is the cherisher of my flesh and blood . . . Ergo, he that kisses my wife is my friend” (1.3.42–47).

²⁷ Rank, *The Trauma of Birth*, 30–31. Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, ed. A. Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), 190–93. Carl Sagan, *Broca’s Brain: Reflections on the Romance of Science* (New York: Random House, 1979), 80.

So the peasant of old might say, the returning cuckoo is my drudge and I am his happy cuckold. Again, according to the same logic, St. Joseph is the patron of married folk. For this reason, people pray to the statue of the exemplary cuckold, honored on the day of the return of the cuckoo and holding the child Jesus in association with a little cuckoo, for the success of marriages and for peace in the family.²⁸

In short, the statues of the child Jesus in the arms of his mother and foster-father, holding the bird of his conception, represent the Holy Family and, indeed, all families. This means that they symbolize a metaphysical view of procreation not reducible to Christian dogma. Indeed, the complementarity between the statue of Mary with Jesus holding a presumed dove, on the main altar, and the statue of Joseph with Jesus holding a presumable cuckoo, on a lateral altar, enact the mutual fit between the paradigmatic Christian theophany and a cyclic view that sets procreation in the context of a round of souls. Overall, contemporary interpreters—such as local people at the sanctuary, and the writer of the present piece—do have a legitimate choice between at least two possible interpretations concerning the problematic bird. While the dove reading emphasizes catholicity, the cuckoo hypothesis unearths persistent traditional notions that the dove reading would remit to oblivion. Even though some at least among the local folks may justifiably choose the first path, the folklorist setting a price on the richness of symbolic thought is likely to go for the second. But no alternative is at stake, really, for the two variants correspond, and they imply each other.

²⁸ “Protévangile,” 74–75; Voragine, *Légende*, 196, 497.