

## Repositório ISCTE-IUL

---

Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2019-03-29

Deposited version:

Publisher Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Vaz da Silva, F. (2006). Sexual horns: the anatomy and metaphysics of cuckoldry in European folklore. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 48 (2), 396-418

Further information on publisher's website:

[10.1017/S0010417506000156](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417506000156)

Publisher's copyright statement:

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Vaz da Silva, F. (2006). Sexual horns: the anatomy and metaphysics of cuckoldry in European folklore. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 48 (2), 396-418, which has been published in final form at <https://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0010417506000156>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with the Publisher's Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.

---

### Use policy

Creative Commons CC BY 4.0

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a link is made to the metadata record in the Repository
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

---

# Sexual Horns: The Anatomy and Metaphysics of Cuckoldry in European Folklore

FRANCISCO VAZ DA SILVA

*Institution ISCTE—University of Lisbon*

IN MEMORIAM ALAN DUNDES

It seems remarkable how often we call “myths” the kind of arbitrary constructs in other peoples’ worldview that we tend to attribute to the nature of things in our own case. Double standards may be involved, of course; but it could also be the case that one tends to miss the semiotic essence of the cultural construct one calls “reality.” As every anthropologist knows, one’s most cherished cultural assumptions tend to remain implicit; otherwise put, worldview is largely unconscious. This paper explores the possibility of plumbing unconscious aspects of one’s own culture in order to assess what some might call—regarding other cultures—the mythic underpinnings of worldview.

The pretext taken is the obscure, if unabated, folk notion of transmissible sexual horns. To clarify this notion, the following discussion engages the *très longue durée* of basic mental categories having endured in European folklore throughout centuries. Such a project entails taking into account ancient sources, along with modern ethnographies, to elicit immemorial folklore. But let me place a caveat here. In this exploration, tangible customs and so-called beliefs are not taken at face value; rather, they are seen as signifiers—pointers for a less tangible conceptual fabric of cultural meanings. Moreover, the discussion seeks such meanings in the subconscious logic of folklore imagery and customs, by trial and error, rather than in conscious rationalizations by any particular individual. Indeed, it is assumed that even the tiniest scrap of folklore teems with significance if placed in its proper mental context. But what such contexts are cannot be postulated a-priori; instead, each has to be patiently unraveled.

This is why it matters to set out from a conspicuous and resilient (if obscure) notion, such as transmissible sexual horns. From the start, there are obvious clues to follow. Any attentive reader of Shakespeare may notice that the theme of cuckoldry relates the ubiquitous topic of horns to a curious bird—the cuckoo. And the quizzical reader might wonder why cheated husbands

should happen to be called after the he-goat (*cabrón*), and whether this relates to the longstanding trend of calling children “kids.” By and by, the inquiry patiently follows the thread of each given problem, then weaves together individual threads in a bid for added clarification (which, in turn, occasionally brings to light new threads to be followed and eventually weaved together to produce further clarification. . .).

Such inductive procedure amounts to gradually building a heuristic frame of intelligibility in the light of which a number of obscure (if familiar) cultural notions may hopefully regain clarity and purpose. Overall, the inquiry discloses a sexual anatomy as well as a traditional metaphysics of cuckoldry and procreation. Ultimately, it is hoped that this dabbling in folklore intended to illuminate “mythic” aspects of *Weltanschauung* may provide modern readers with the means for looking anew at familiar things.

#### A SHAKESPEAREAN THEME

John Brand, the English nineteenth-century antiquarian, defines thus the scope of our problem: “The consideration of the vulgar saying, that *a husband wears horns*, or is a *cornute*, when his wife proves false to him; as also that of the meaning of the term *cuckold*, which has for many years been the popular indication of the same kind of infamy, which also it has been usual slyly to hint at by throwing out the little and forefinger when we point at those whom we tacitly call cuckolds.”<sup>1</sup> It is amazing how widespread this imagery is, considering its opacity. Think of it: why should horns and cuckoos be the attributes of the unhappy husband?

Brand rightly records his perplexity that the word cuckold, “generally derived from *cuculus*, a cuckoo, has happened to be given to the injured husband, for it seems more properly to belong to the adulterer, the cuckoo being well known to be a bird that deposits its eggs in other birds’ nests.” He notes that the same applies to the saying that the cheated husband wears horns, for, “It is well known that the word horn in the Sacred Writings denotes fortitude and vigour of mind; and that in the classics, personal courage . . . is intimated by horns. Whence then are we to deduce a very ancient custom . . . of saying that the unhappy husbands of false women wear horns, or are cornutes?”<sup>2</sup>

In the same vein, Julian Pitt-Rivers, working in the context of contemporary Spanish culture, acknowledges the “curious inversion” through which the

<sup>1</sup> John Brand and Henry Ellis, *Observations of the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain: Chiefly Illustrating the Origin of Our Vulgar Customs, Ceremonies, and Superstitions* (London: H. Bohn, 1849), 2: 181.

<sup>2</sup> Brand and Ellis, *Observations*, 2: 183, 196. Malcolm Jones also mentions the semantic difficulty that “it is not the cuckoo that raises the offspring of others, but they hers” *The Secret Middle Ages: Discovering the Real Medieval World* (Phoenix Mill Thrupp, Gloucestershire: Sutton, 2002), 69–70.

“word *cabrón* (a he-goat), the symbol of male sexuality in many contexts,” refers “not to him whose manifestation of that quality is the cause of the trouble but to him whose implied lack of manliness had allowed the other to replace him.” To answer this question, Pitt-Rivers proposes that received horns represent the ritual defilement, or “state of desecration,” of the husband unable to defend the “sanctity” of his wife’s virtue. In this perspective, the cheated husband’s horns are both the devil’s symbol, rife with anti-social connotations (for the husband has failed to defend a vital social value), and the stigma of his fall under the male rival’s domination. But this fails to explain why horns, deemed prophylactic and virile, should stand for desecration and defilement. And the basic question remains: why would the specifically phallic symbol fall upon the head of a man unable to keep his wife?<sup>3</sup>

Pitt-Rivers actually provides a clue in saying that the transfer of horns shows the humiliated husband “has fallen under the domination of its [*sic*] enemy and must wear his symbol.” However, to understand what is at stake we must turn to William Shakespeare’s expertise in folklore. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Shakespeare presents a lascivious knight, Falstaff, who proclaims that his cudgel “shall hang like a meteor o’er the cuckold’s horns” of a certain lady’s husband (2.2.250–51). What is more, Falstaff—“disguis’d, like Herne, with huge horns on his head” (4.5.43–44)—boasts to the two merry wives he covets that “my horns I bequeath your husbands” (5.5.24). Although one of the latter does assimilate Falstaff’s horned likeness to that of the devil (5.2.13–14), the knight himself compares it to the bull shape of amorous Jove. Moreover, the lascivious fellow’s horns are variously assimilated to those of a stag, a male deer, and a buck (5.5.1–25)—of, that is, males renowned for their sexual prowess. This said, it is important to note that the ultimate aim of the unfolding masquerade is to “dis-horn the spirit” (4.4.61); indeed, by the end of the day, the revengeful husband is in a position to call the defeated Falstaff (whose virile horns have now been removed) “a cuckoldly knave,” who enjoyed from the husband not the wife, but the “cudgel” (5.5.107–10).<sup>4</sup>

So, horned Falstaff is variously assimilated to the devil, the Wild Hunter, and the amorous mode of Jupiter consorting with human maidens. His horns connote transgressive virility, the otherworldly origin of which is clear. Thus, the harassing rogue is horned, and to “dis-horn the spirit” amounts to neutralizing his amorous drive. The second thing to note is that to make another man a cuckold entails passing on one’s own horns. Hence, the enterprising knight intends to turn cheated husbands into cuckolds by

<sup>3</sup> Julian Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status,” in J. G. Peristiany, ed., *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (London: Weinfeld and Nicolson, 1965), 46–47, 50; *The People of the Sierra* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 116.

<sup>4</sup> Pitt-Rivers, *People of the Sierra*, 116. William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, P. Alexander, ed. (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994), 70, 83, 85–88.

bequeathing them his horns, and he is defeated as he fails to do so. Third, to pass on horns implies asserting male supremacy over one's rival. This is why the lecherous knight would like to put the cuckolded husband under the dominion of his "cudgel," and why his inability to do so amounts to being bested by the victorious husband's "cudgel."

In short, Shakespeare's usage of horns imagery suggests that a man, in seducing another's wife, transfers his own horns of virility onto the cheated husband's head even as he asserts male supremacy over the cuckold. The convergence with Pitt-Rivers' contemporary Iberian data is striking; indeed, Pitt-River's intuition that a man's inability to defend his wife's chastity amounts to incapacity to defend his own honor is best understood in light of Shakespeare's depiction of cuckoldry in the terms of a man having his "gates open'd," even as his wife is "sluiced," by another man (*The Winter's Tale* 1.2.191–8). In other words, the unfaithful wife's openness to another man is that of the cuckold himself, which explains the feminization of the latter in regard of his "sluicing" rival.<sup>5</sup>

Now we are ready to consider Alan Dundes' proposition that the basic message of bequeathing horns is that the husband "is a male without horns, without a functioning phallus," for it is the rival enjoying his wife "who has the horns and who is providing the horns" for him. This insight must, I think, be taken one step further. The issue is not simply that the seducer is *affirming* his virility at the expense of the husband but that a *transfer* of virility supposedly takes place between the two men. To put it differently, the notion of a transfer of horns between two rivals entails that the seducer grants the stuff of virility to the husband, who appears feminized in that—to use Shakespearean terminology—his own "gates" are symbolically opened to his rival's "sluicing." In short, one reason why the wronged husband gets on his head the unmistakable attribute of masculinity even while being feminized is that the passing of horns symbolizes a transfer of substance between two men.<sup>6</sup>

Note a crucial specification. Even though in Shakespearean usage the cuckoldry horns are those of animals deemed particularly virile—bull, deer, elk, buck—it is specifically buck horns that Falstaff plans to bequeath on the merry wives' husbands (*Merry Wives* 5.5.22–25); indeed, Falstaff's disguise includes a "buck's head." This is significant, for elsewhere Shakespeare sums up the very least noble aspects of "whoremaster man" in the expression "goatish disposition" (*King Lear* 1.2.112–21). Isidore of Seville links such disposition to sexual intemperance as he writes, "the he-goat is a luscious

<sup>5</sup> Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, 412.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Dundes, *Bloody Mary in the Mirror: Essays in Psychoanalytic Folkloristics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 132; this idea had been foreshadowed by Richard Broxton Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate* (New York: Arno Press, 1973), 243.

and shameless beast, always anxious to copulate . . . its phallus is so burning that its blood can dissolve a diamond.” (*Etymologies* 12.14). In the same vein, a seventeenth-century work in Latin (cited by Brand) proposes that the attribution of horns to the cheated husband “derives from an insensibility peculiar . . . to the he-goat, who will stand looking on while another is possessing his female.” This is confirmed by modern ethnological fieldwork.<sup>7</sup>

Anton Blok notes that Mediterranean societies generally posit a contrast between the ram, regarded as the model of the sort of masculinity that involves controlling the females under one’s guard, and the he-goat, represented as the paradigm of male lasciviousness and permissiveness. What is more, Blok suggests this polarity is part of a wider system of classification that places rams (and sheep generally) on the side of honor, masculinity, virility, and so forth; and he-goats (and goats generally) on the side of shame, women, cuckolds, and so on. This presupposes the goats’ well-established reputation for concupiscence, which befits Shakespeare’s use of the expression “goatish disposition” to sum up the least noble human aspects. In this light, we have the means to understand the conflation (noted by Pitt-Rivers) of the wronged husband and the seducer under the *cabrón* epithet insofar as the he-goat metaphor is all about the coexistence of two males peacefully sharing a female, consequently assimilated to a she-goat—the standard epithet for fickle women in southern Iberia.<sup>8</sup>

Overall, the classificatory scheme pinpointed by Blok makes a sharp distinction between the kind of persons who indulge in amorous triangles, therefore assimilated to goats as a species, and individuals who go for matrimonial steadfastness, on the model of sheepish women and their fierce ram-like protectors, and are consequently assimilated to sheep as a species. Note one consequence. While males who behave as rams conduct their virility in a controlled and vigilant way—the hallmark of honorable masculinity—males behaving like he-goats display the kind of shameful, uncontrolled sexuality allegedly characteristic of femininity. This means the sexuality of men branded as he-goats is deemed unmanly. Not surprisingly, both the wronged husband and the horny seducer—classified together on the side of goats, not sheep—present female traits on closer examination. Indeed, not only is the

<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, 87, 1133. I am translating from the fine bilingual edition of San Isidoro de Sevilla, *Etimologías*, J. Oroz Reta, and M. A. Marcos Casquero, eds., vol. 2, *Libros XI–XX* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1994). The Latin text in question is quoted, translated into English, in Brand and Ellis, *Observations*, 2: 184. Jones likewise shows that the horns of several animals (goats, bulls, stags) will do for the cuckold in medieval Italy, and he provides an example in which an artist specifically depicts “the cuckold’s horns as those of the goat” (*Secret Middle Ages*, 68).

<sup>8</sup> In Portuguese the term *veado*, “deer,” is sometimes used to designate the horned cuckold, also dubbed *cornu*, “horn,” but otherwise more commonly named *cabrão*. Anton Blok, “Rams and Billy-Goats: A Key to the Mediterranean Code of Honour,” *Man* 16, 3 (1981): 428–31. Pitt-Rivers, “Honour,” 48, 63.

husband unmistakably feminized even as he gets virile horns; the bestowing of these implies the feminization of the horny seducer.<sup>9</sup>

In sum, we have seen that (i) horned animals in general—including bulls, rams, and he-goats—are clear and constant symbols of virility, but (ii) there is a basic difference between rams and he-goats: while the latter are promiscuous, thus shameful, the former are fiercely exclusive and thus honorable. From these assessments, two corollaries may be drawn.

First, the common ground between rams and he-goats suggests that all men (honored or otherwise) have their correspondents in horned animals. Here we may go back to Shakespeare, who states that “unaccommodated man is no more but . . . a . . . forked animal” (*King Lear* 3.4.106–7). Compare the information that in contemporary Sicily, “one expresses the worth of a child by the hardness of its small horns”; or that in Mexico, “baptism . . . causes one of the child’s two horns—symbolic of his animalistic status—to fall off. Confirmation . . . completes the child’s transformation into a human being . . . the parents or godparents often comment to the child . . . ‘the other horn has already fallen.’” Claudine Vassas notes that the premise of a gradual metamorphosis of newborns into human shape (implied in the image of horns that fall) is current throughout Europe, where *vox populi* has it that the unbaptized child “belongs to the devil.” Again, we meet with horns in association with the otherworld. More to the point, the image of horned babies suggests that the full human condition is a cultural development from a basic horned condition.<sup>10</sup>

This appears to illuminate Shakespeare’s statement that unaccommodated man is a forked animal. Lear actually utters this insight as he is in the process of losing his mind and of tearing off his clothes, that is, of regressing to a primordial stage—for he personifies the maxim that “old fools are babes again” (1.3.20)—figuratively expressed as one in which he leaves “his horns without a case” (1.5.39). Lear, likened to the bird that raised the cuckoo in its nest (1.4.214–15)—the very image of the cuckold—and with figurative horns exposed, personifies, then, the quintessential forked animal within humans as he regresses to the unaccommodated condition of a baby.

<sup>9</sup> The conceptual coherence afforded by the goat model is even clearer *a contrario*. In the New World, the goat has been discarded as a metaphoric image, every other term becoming therefore in some measure independent of the others, and the overall articulation has lost coherence. Thus, Stanley H. Brandes, “Animal Metaphors and Social Control in Tzintzuntzan,” *Ethnology* 23, 3 (1984): 211, reports from Tzintzuntzan, Mexico that there the promiscuous man is symbolized by the terms *burro* (donkey) and *garañón* (stag), the fickle woman is called *perra* (bitch), and the cuckold is a figured *buey* (ox)—while the *toro* (bull) is reserved for one always seeking a fight.

<sup>10</sup> Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, 1149. Salvatore D’Onofrio, “Autour de la règle,” in J.-L. Jamard, E. Terray, and M. Xanthakou, eds., *En substances: Textes pour Françoise Héritier* (Paris: Fayard, 2000), 262. Stanley H. Brandes, *Metaphors of Masculinity: Sex and Status in Andalusian Folklore* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), 208. Claudine Fabre-Vassas, *The Singular Beast: Jews, Christians, and the Pig* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 198–99.

Both horned-animal metaphors and the notion that babies come horned appear, therefore, to be aspects of the single notion that humans are in essence forked animals, with an implication of otherworldly origin. This would amount to saying that animal metaphors indicate the conceptual unity of apparently different realms, transition among which shows as metamorphosis.<sup>11</sup>

#### SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED HORNS

The second corollary of the conceptual relationship between rams and he-goats, bearing on their dissimilarity, is that the latter but not the former transfer horns. As we have seen, the distinctive trait of *cabróns*—as opposed to men likened to rams—hinges on their transfer of horns through a female. Let us take a closer look at this image by considering Andalusian data reported by Stanley Brandes. This author asserts, “*never* is the husband’s rival spoken of as the sole source of the horns”; rather, either the wife puts horns on the husband or else the illicit couple does it. But Brandes draws from this a conclusion that appears to be less than convincing. He suggests that the cuckold is transformed into “a super goat” by wearing the horns of the woman and so symbolically becoming a woman himself. However, the plain fact that the term *cabrón* stands for a superlative *he-goat* implies that he-goat horns go onto the wronged husband’s head—by way of the shared metaphorical goat—from, necessarily, the head of the *cabrón* rival. Recall that the notion of an amorous triangle is the crucial feature of the goat metaphor.<sup>12</sup>

From this perspective, we can do justice to Brandes’ insight that the male attitude toward horns reflects “an actual fear of playing the passive role in a homosexual encounter.” But first, we must heed Brandes’ own remark that the notion of horns being put on the husband’s head coexists with that of horns growing “from within the cuckold.” Let us tentatively combine the ideas that horns pass from one man to another through a woman, and that they stem from the husband’s head. Would this combination not yield the image of horns waning on the seducer’s head even while growing on the husband’s? Recall Pitt-River’s anecdote that an Andalusian husband, made a cuckold by a rich man, was for this reason nicknamed “the horn of gold.” This would suggest that the essence of the wife’s rich seducer, transmitted to the husband’s head, sprouts there in the guise of a symbolic horn. In short, it now appears that the virile substance of one man streams through

<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, 1134, 1136, 1138. Concerning the notion of metamorphosis, consider the following simple example. Brandes’ affirmation that “there exists an unbridgeable gap between all animals, on the one hand, and *cristianos* . . . on the other,” must be softened in light of his following statement: “Confirmation, the second sacrament, usually following within a year or two after baptism, completes the child’s *transformation* into a human being” (Brandes, “Animal Metaphors,” 208, my italics).

<sup>12</sup> Brandes, *Metaphors of Masculinity*, 90–91, 95.

the shared woman into the other man, there to somehow crystallize in the guise of horns.<sup>13</sup>

We may consider in this perspective Blok's rather cryptic remark that "Sicilian men rarely drink milk. In fact, they regard it as abominable. Nor do women expect them to drink it." In other words, the sort of true male who refuses to share his wife likewise refrains from drinking milk. Would this imply, conversely, that to share one's wife amounts to drinking milk? At least, we may say this much: men who would share their wives are likened to males of the species that produces such milk as true men, on the side of rams and cheese, refuse to drink. The implication seems to be that only men assimilated to he-goats would incorporate goat milk—presumably, account taken of the goatish-triangle model, he-goat "milk."<sup>14</sup>

Fortunately, we do not have to rely on inferences in this matter. The metaphoric identity of milk and semen, which tacitly underlies the abominable status of milk for Sicilian males, comes out openly in Iberia. As Brandes explains, in Spanish "*leche* means 'semen' as well as 'milk'; it is, in fact, the most universally and commonly employed word to refer to male sexual fluid." In the same vein, Françoise Héritier argues that the complex array of marriage prohibitions based on milk kinship in Muslim countries must be understood in relation to the proverb that "Milk comes from the man"—meaning that a woman's milk comes from her husband's semen. In Sicily itself, Salvatore D'Onofrio points out that the sort of breast milk that is deemed beneficial—being dense and creamy, like sperm—presents a definite male connotation.<sup>15</sup>

Such widespread semen/milk homology confirms that the sharing of one's wife and the ingestion of goat milk are synonymous images for the taking in of another man's substance—metaphorical he-goat milk, so to speak. This entails that the wronged husband grows horns because he is taking the metaphorical milk of his rival, whose virile horns dwindle in tandem with the growth of the cuckold's appendages. Hence, we understand the close connection between the bequeathing of horns and the loathing of unwittingly absorbing another male's substance, which amounts to the "actual fear of playing the passive role in a homosexual encounter" noted by Brandes. (Incidentally, this

<sup>13</sup> Brandes, *Metaphors of Masculinity*, 91. Pitt-Rivers, "Honour," 50; cf. Brand and Ellis, *Observations*, 2: 185. The idea I am proposing—that the cuckold's horns are bequeathed, waxing on the husband's head while they wane on the seducer's—seems to me more inclusive than the hypothesis by D'Onofrio that the cuckold's horns are a "regression" of the husband's seed into his own head ("Autour," 263). It also allows us to discard D'Onofrio's exegesis (contradicting his preceding one) that the bequeathing of horns consists in replacing the husband's full horns by empty ones.

<sup>14</sup> Blok, "Rams," 431–32.

<sup>15</sup> Brandes, *Metaphors of Masculinity*, 83. Françoise Héritier, *Two Sisters and Their Mother: The Anthropology of Incest* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 271–72; D'Onofrio, "Autour," 264–65.

entrenched fear could also explain the fact that men in Andalusia decidedly avoid taking Communion: for to take in the substance of Christ is, again in Brandes' words, "unmistakably identified with being a woman or having a feminine character.") Again, Shakespeare conveys the essence of the matter in having Falstaff—in between his first defeat that results in having the "belly full of ford" (the rightful husband's name) and a second defeat that results in being mistreated by the same husband's "cudgel"—pathetically refuse to ingest eggs so as not to absorb sperm; "pullet-sperm," as he slyly chooses to allude to cock seed (*Merry Wives* 3.5.27–28, 3.5.32, 5.5.109–11).<sup>16</sup>

And so, we appear at last to be in a position to understand why the husband is deemed feminized even while a symbol of masculinity is growing on him. The model of the bequeathing of horns implies that these wane on the head of the man who spills his seed into the shared woman and correlatively wax on the head of the husband, who (by sharing this woman) absorbs his rival's substance. Hence we return to the statement that the rival males displaying a goatish sexuality share a feminine connotation: the husband is feminized because he receives male substance, which shows in growing horns; the seducer is "dis-horned" insofar as he relinquishes his virile stuff. Shakespeare, in the *Merry Wives*, has brilliantly reenacted this symbolism while reversing it. Even though Falstaff (mark the pun) is dis-horned, as one might expect, he fails to seduce the merry wives he covets. Instead, he suffers the husband's "cudgel," metaphorically absorbs the rival's substance, and in the end bears the cuckold horns. In this merry play, we face the twisted image of a cuckolded seducer.

#### THE MATTER OF THE FACTS

The foregoing discussion suggests that the traditional model of cuckoldry involves the notion of a sexual contact between two men, one of whom performs the abomination of "drinking" and storing the other's "milk." Remarkably, this model implies that horns are (somehow) a concentrated form of sperm and that—insofar as accumulation of sperm in one man's body entails spermatid depletion for the other man—such good exists in a limited quantity. Now we must make sense of these clues in light of underlying assumptions regarding human physiology.

Brandes reports that in Andalusia, "breast milk is a 'limited good,' in George Foster's sense of the term," and so is semen perceived "as a finite

<sup>16</sup> Brandes, *Metaphors of Masculinity*, 86. The use of "cock" for the penis falls, of course, within the scope of the observation that "close animals may . . . serve as near obscene euphemisms for unmentionable parts of the human anatomy," as noted by Edmund R. Leach, "Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse," in W. A. Lessa and E. Z. Vogt, eds., *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 215. Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, 78, 88. Jones, *Secret Middle Ages*, 70, notes that "cock's egg" used to designate horned cuckolds.

substance. . . . Since people consider semen to be an essential ingredient for maintaining a man's vigor, energy, and youth, its dwindling supply can only lead to his more rapid demise." Brandes adds, "Since semen . . . exists in limited supply, men should be careful to preserve it as much as possible. This means, for male youth and unmarried men of all ages, that self-control should be exerted against masturbation."<sup>17</sup>

This remarkable aside leads us to the matter of the facts. It invokes the widespread belief that masturbation is bad for your wits, and that even female onanism weakens all faculties insofar as it draws on the "white fluids" (to speak like nineteenth-century French hygienist Julien-Joseph Virey). Such representations suppose that the whitish matter of the brain, bone marrow, and semen are essentially similar. Hence, the notion in contemporary Sicily that fellatio involves "marrow sucking" (as in the expression *mi sucò a mududda*) supposes that semen comes from the spinal marrow. In the same vein, I have often heard Portuguese expressions hinging on *chupar o tutano*, "sucking the marrow," to denote the act of bringing about a man's sexual exertion. This trend of ideas has a venerable age, for Shakespeare describes a man's exertion in bed as "spending his manly marrow in her arms" (*All's Well that Ends Well* 2.3.274–75), just like Rabelais states that the exhaustion of the spermatic vessels leaves one "unmanned" (*Tiers livre* 6.35). On the prophylactic side, I have been taught as a child to eat the marrow of any bones in my plate on the grounds that this is particularly strengthening.<sup>18</sup>

These few examples are parochial instances of the wider notion that—to put it at its simplest—male seed produces the body bones, from which marrow will again flow out as seed. Such doctrine was in favor among the ancient Egyptians and the Greeks, who seemingly conceived of the spinal cord and the phallus as one single reproductive organ. Plato, for instance, speaks of marrow as seed and defines the brain as that part of the marrow where divine seed is stored (*Timaeus* 73–74). Consequently, he describes generation for both sexes as a passing of marrow—in fact, seed full of soul—from the head, down the neck and along the spine, to the appropriate sex organs thereby filled with the lust of generation (91b). It is also clear for Aristotle that "the nature of the semen is similar to that of the brain," and that bones

<sup>17</sup> Brandes, *Metaphors of Masculinity*, 82, 86; cf. George M. Foster, "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good," in J. Potter, M. N. Diaz, and G. M. Foster, eds., *Peasant Society: A Reader* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1967).

<sup>18</sup> Julien-Joseph Virey, *De la femme, sous ses rapports physiologiques, moraux et littéraires* (Paris: Crochard, 1823), 88. I am taking the Sicilian information concerning fellatio as well as the folk view on semen (the source of which is Giuseppe Pitrè) from D'Onofrio, "Autour," 262–63. Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, 355. The term that J. M. Cohen translates as "unmanned" is *efillez* (François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955], 304; see François Rabelais, *Les cinq livres: Gargantua. Pantagruel. Le tiers livre. Le quart livre. Le cinquième livre*, J. Céard, G. Defaux, and M. Simonin, eds. [Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1994], 589).

are made of “the seminal and nutritious residue” (*Generation of Animals* 2.6.744b, 2.7.746b, cf. 1.20.728b, 2.6.743a).<sup>19</sup>

We face here “a physiology of fungible fluids and corporeal flux,” as Thomas Laqueur puts it, which allows for variations within the bonds of its basic postulates. For example, a Hippocratic account reported by Laqueur shows a complete picture of semen derived from blood, brain, and marrow: “Sperm, a foam much like the froth on the sea, was first refined out of the blood; it passed to the brain; from the brain it made its way back through the spinal marrow, the kidneys, the testicles, and into the penis.”<sup>20</sup>

This constant view, implying that the testicles are not the ultimate organs of spermatic generation, agrees with Aristotle’s point that the testes’ function is mainly to keep the spermatic ducts in place so as to steady secretions, much “as women fasten stones to the loom when weaving” (*Generation of Animals* 1.4.717a–b). This, again, fits with Plato’s explication that the brain and the spine are an integral part of the reproductive apparatus. Note the agreement between Plato’s notion that in the skull lies the “divine seed,” for God placed here “the sovereign part of the human soul to be the divinity of each one” (*Timaeus* 73c, 90a), and Aristotle’s assertion that semen “must either be soul or a part of soul, or something containing soul” (*Generation of Animals* 2.1.733b). Indeed, Aristotle states that the region about the eyes “is, of all the head, the most seminal part” because “the nature of the semen is similar to that of the brain” (2.7.747a). He also remarks that the seminal ducts of both males and females “adhere to the back and the region of the spine” (1.13.720a). This, of course, recalls Plato’s assertion that “the marrow . . . passes from the head along the neck and through the back, and . . . produces . . . a lively desire of emission, and thus creates in us the love of procreation” (Plato, *Timaeus* 91a–b).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> For the Egyptian and Greek cases, with a preliminary comparison to African representations, see Serge Sauneron, “Le germe dans les os,” *Bulletin de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale* 60 (1960); and Jean Yoyotte, “Les os et la semence masculine: A propos d’une théorie physiologique égyptienne,” *Bulletin de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale* 61 (1962): 139–46. To get an idea of the pervasiveness of this representation, with in-depth analysis of an African example, see Françoise Héritier-Augé, “Semen and Blood: Some Ancient Theories Concerning Their Genesis and Relationship,” in M. Feher, ed., *Fragments for a History of the Body*, (New York: Zone Books, 1990). Aristotle, *The Complete Works*, J. Barnes, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 1155, 1158. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations of the *Generation of Animals* use this translation by A. Platt.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 35.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *Complete Works*, 1114. Plato, *The Collected Dialogues, Including the Letters*, E. Hamilton and H. Cairns, eds. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), 1196, 1209. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations of *Timaeus* use this translation by B. Jowett. Aristotle, *Complete Works*, 1118, 1139, 1158; Plato, *Collected Dialogues*, 1210. Cf. Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 25–43, 250–57, concerning the fundamental agreement between superficially different Greek doctrines regarding generation.

The hoary antiquity of these representations shows in their diffusion. Not only has Richard Onians retraced on an Indo-European scale the notion that the head contains the source of procreative life-power; Lévi-Strauss has mapped all across Asia the huge ethnographic span covered by the notion that bones come from the father (and flesh from the mother), with the implication that body bones are made of the coagulated father's sperm. As far away as Papua New Guinea, we meet the notion that "when a man ejaculates, the stuff inside his skull travels down through his spine and into his penis," the idea that "fellatio is like drinking your bone" to strengthen the fellator's "bone," and the tenet that bones are built from sperm. Overall, Héritier proposes that this notion comes from the repeated empirical observation that the long body bones enclose a substance analogous, in consistency as in color, to human semen. She comments, "It is not surprising that different people observing the same phenomena in the same way have reached the same conclusion: sperm and marrow are of the same nature and contain the germ of life, stored away like kernels." And she adds, "At the core of belief what we find is matter."<sup>22</sup>

Such matter, I propose, is of the essence of cultural facts concerning horns. Just as the early spilling of semen will weaken your brain, so an accumulation of semen will predictably show as added vitality in the head. Onians has shown that the axiom that the head is the fountainhead of seed effectively accounts for the sexual value of hair and other outgrowths on the head. (Recall Edmund Leach's drawing of attention to the sexual value of hair on a transcultural scale.) As Onians puts it, "what grows out of the head is almost inevitably believed to be an issuing of what is within the head." In this perspective, horns would qualify as indicators of abundant reserves of vitality. For Democritus, horns are reportedly the thrusting out of the "most generative part of nourishment," turned hard at

<sup>22</sup> Onians, *Origins*, 100, 154–62, 213n.4, 231–41; cf. Héritier, *Two Sisters*, 255. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* (Paris, La Haye: Mouton, 1967), 430, 454. To my mind, Lévi-Strauss was unwise in denying this could be the effect of a basic theory of procreation even as he places the burden of his explanation on the sociological level. On the one hand, the sociological explanation must live with the fact that the very lexicon in use (bones and blood, etc.) supposes the theory of procreation under examination here; on the other, this model of procreation actually exceeds by far the geographical area covered by the generalized exchange mode of so-called elementary structures of kinship—see Michael Oppitz, "Sur les traces du grand ours," in M. Izard, ed., *Claude Lévi-Strauss* (Paris: L'Herne, 2004), 63. For the idea of the coagulation of seed into bones, see Héritier-Augé, "Semen and Blood," 170; Sauneron, "Le germe dans les os," 22, 24. The quotations regarding New Guinea are taken from Gillian Gillison, "Cannibals among Women in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea," in P. Brown and D. Tuzin, eds., *The Ethnography of Cannibalism* (Washington, D.C.: Society for Psychological Anthropology, 1983), 39; Gilbert H. Herdt, *Guardians of the Flutes: Idioms of Masculinity* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 239, cf. 217; and Gilbert H. Herdt, *Sambia Sexual Culture: Essays from the Field* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 179. For the tenet that semen provides bones, see Herdt, *Guardians*, 195–96, cf. 51, 178–79, 217, 236. Héritier-Augé, "Semen and Blood," 173–74.

the contact with air. Likewise, Aristotle states that both hair and horns are made of such “superfluous matter” as is otherwise secreted as menstrual flow and semen (*Generation of Animals* 1.20.728b, 2.7.747a, 4.5.774a, cf. 3.11.762a).<sup>23</sup>

Intriguingly, Héritier quotes an ethologist’s description of how the spring-time-abundant vegetal protein that females of *Megacerus giganteus* (a large deer now extinct) turned into milk for the newborn calves was used by males for the growth of their huge antlers; then, after the fights over females were over in fall, the males’ antlers fell so they could divert nourishment for the needs of semen fabrication. It is remarkable how the equivalence of antlers, the milk of females, and the sperm of males in this description fits the traditional ideas on horns we have examined. Moreover, the constant inner logic of this trend of ideas makes it clear why in the Scriptures horns should be attributed, as Frederick Elworthy notes, to remarkable persons “as a mark of distinction—something to attract attention and to bespeak respect.” The short answer, as Onians puts it, appears to be that “unusual growth of life-substance . . . meant unusual greatness.”<sup>24</sup>

With this in mind, we can return to my suggestion that the husband incorporates his rival’s “milk” through his wife, who “puts horns” on her husband. This implies that (i) the wife transmits horns, in accord with the goat-triangle metaphor, account taken of the fact that she-goats actually have small horns; and (ii) sexually transmitted horns come from the male seducer. To understand the matter of the facts on the feminine side of this scheme, consider Elworthy’s remark that “the women of the Druses in Lebanon wear silver horns upon their heads, larger or smaller, to distinguish the married from the single.” Elworthy adds that among the Jewesses of Tunis a pointed cap, standing for “the Scriptural horn,” is “much higher on the matron than the maid.” (Similar hats appear to have been part of European dress codes; recall Perrault’s depiction of the headgear the stepsisters of Cinderella wear at the fairy-tale ball as *cornettes à deux rangs*, and see such horns on the head of the stepmother in Andy Tennant’s film *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* [1998].) Such customs appear to imply that the symbolic horns of married women actually increase, certainly due to their regular sexual activity.

<sup>23</sup> Onians, *Origins*, 231–41. Edmund R. Leach, “Magical Hair,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 88, 2 (1958): 147–64; cf. Gananath Obeyesekere, *Medusa’s Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 32–35. The translated quotation of Democritus and the quotation of Onians himself are in Onians, *Origins*, 237. Aristotle, *Complete Works*, 1: 1131, 1158, 1198.

<sup>24</sup> Françoise Héritier-Augé, “Etude comparée des sociétés africaines,” *Annuaire du Collège de France* 86 (1985–1986): 530–31. The two quoted statements on Biblical horns are respectively due to Frederick Thomas Elworthy, *The Evil Eye: An Account of this Ancient and Widespread Superstition* (New York: Bell, 1989), 199, cf. 185–86; and Onians, *Origins*, 239, n. 6.

Again, underlying representations concerning body fluids can clarify this matter.<sup>25</sup>

Héritier notes, “since Aristotle, medical writers have not ceased to remark that married women have more abundant menses than young girls, which they explained by the contribution of spermatic substance.” So then, married women have been supposed to have more abundant menses as well as bigger symbolic horns because married life purportedly involves a regular absorption of sperm. This supposes that sperm can turn to surplus blood (and horns) in women’s bodies, in accordance with the ancient axiom of the fungibility of body fluids. Indeed, Aristotle states that both semen and menstrual blood are residues concocted from body blood (*Generation of Animals* 1.18.724b–25b, 1.19.727a, 2.4.740a), and he adds that hair and horns are made of residues that would otherwise turn into semen and menses (1.20.728b). In the same vein, Dante depicts blood turning into semen in men’s bodies, and back into blood in women’s “natural vessel” (*Purgatorio* 25.37–48). To such persistence in time, we must add the recurrence of this notion in space. For example, Héritier witnessed in Burkina Faso the selfsame belief that: “Sexual intercourse between spouses provides the wife with a surplus of blood, the larger part of which she loses through her menses, a fact that accounts for the abundance of menstrual blood shed by adult women as compared to nubile girls.”<sup>26</sup>

What is more, Héritier points out that in Africa illnesses such as genital elephantiasis, tuberculosis, and hemoptysis supposedly indicate that a man’s wife has been adulterous. She explains this in light of the constant idea that the husband, in sharing his wife with her seducer, acquires a surplus of semen/blood that either accumulates in his genitals or else must come out in the form of spitted blood. The background rationale for such notions, according to Héritier, is that “since blood is transformed, purified into sperm, reciprocally sperm is completely altered in the female body, turning into blood.” Compare María Cátedra’s allusion to the Spanish notion that male tuberculosis originates in intercourse, especially in menstrual sex.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Elworthy, *Evil Eye*, 199. For actual European ethnographic examples, see Yvonne Deslandres and Monique de Fontanes, “Histoire des modes de la coiffure,” in J. Poirier, ed., *Histoire des mœurs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 741, 744.

<sup>26</sup> Héritier, *Two Sisters*, 76; Dante, *The Divine Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 307–8; Héritier-Augé, “Semen and Blood,” 161.

<sup>27</sup> Héritier, *Two Sisters*, 196–97, 237, 251. In fact, Héritier oscillates between the notions that the semen-turned-into-blood afflicting the husband is his rival’s, or else his own refluxed, so to speak, on meeting the rival’s seed within the common woman. Insofar as the bequeathing of horns goes, the first interpretation is clearly to be preferred. But one may not actually have to choose. Since, in the examples adduced by Héritier, the rival is of the husband’s own blood, the accumulated semen-as-blood is both his own and the rival’s—which, of course, generates an image of own blood regressing upon itself, such as one finds in both incest and menstrual sex. Héritier, *Two Sisters*, 251. María Cátedra Tomás, “Notas sobre la envidia: Los ojos malos

In short, the widespread idea that a woman bloated with blood causes her regular mate to accumulate vital fluids is implied in European elaborations concerning horns. Married women have bigger symbolic horns than maidens do because only the former are supposedly “fed” by intercourse. Nonetheless, feminine appendages are generally smaller than their male counterparts insofar as women, and only women, cyclically shed surplus blood. What is more, the notion that semen in a woman’s body will revert to blood implies that a wife “sluiced” by a lover becomes bloated with blood that will again translate in her husband’s body into male “milk,” symbolically stored into waxing horns. Note that, even though the adulterous woman is a source of surplus juices for her husband (who starts growing horns), the female-only capacity for cyclic purging keeps in check the size of her own symbolic horns. Therefore, down to the relative size of sexual horns (she-goats having smaller horns than males), the goatish triangle expresses with precision the physiological notions underlying cuckoldry. In a nutshell, the European goatish triangle involves the transmission of male “milk” between two men, via the shared woman’s womb blood.

#### METAPHYSICAL CUCKOLDRY

So far, we have considered the imagery of horns-transfer on the down-to-earth level of human bodies. Now we must expand our views and take notice of the cosmic import of cyclically waning and waxing horns. Not only is the new moon recurrently declared horned; Elworthy points out that the crescent moon figure—sometimes called “the old moon in the arms of the new,” conventionally represented as a dark disk within the crescent—often appears in iconography as a disk on the head of a horned animal. In light of such association between horns and the regenerating moon, a striking parallel between the waning and waxing of cuckoldry horns and lunar phases becomes clear. On the one hand, we have the image of horns waning as a man pumps away his marrow, via a feminine womb, and then waxing as another man gets stuffed with virile marrow. On the other, there is the model of the moon decreasing to subsequently increase, horned, through those “between two months” periods (as Varro, *On Agriculture* 1.37.1, puts it) when menstrual discharges supposedly occur (Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* 2.4.738a). This homology between dark moons, deemed both “old and new” (Varro, *On Agriculture* 1.37.1), and the regenerating womb of women brings forth a hitherto unnoticed dimension of renewal that we must take into account.<sup>28</sup>

---

entre los Vaqueiros de Alzada,” in C. Lisón Tolosana, ed., *Temas de antropología española* (Madrid: Akal, 1976), 39.

<sup>28</sup> For examples of adages referring to the horns of the moon, see Brand and Ellis, *Observations*, 3: 145; Jean-Philippe Chassany, *Dictionnaire de météorologie populaire* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1989), 194–96; José Leite de Vasconcelos, *Etnografia*

In France, says Pierre Saintyves, marrow and seed (along with hairs and nails) used to be deemed dependent on the moon. And, notes Brand, it used to be said in England “that to the influence of the moon is owing the increase and decrease of the marrow and brain in animals.” In the same vein, a seventeenth-century play (quoted by Brand) states that “when the moon’s in the full, then wit’s in the wane.” Keep in mind that the new moon is deemed horned on the one hand, and that women’s blood supposedly overflows, to use Aristotle’s imagery, when the moon is dark (that, is, “empty”) on the other. It seemingly follows that when the moon fills up with milky substance, its horns wax (like the wronged husband’s appendages); and it wanes (rather like the seducer’s antlers) as it pumps away vital marrow. In this light, the examined sexual circulation of body fluids appears to be part of a vaster flow ruled by the ever-changing moon. This, in turn, suggests that horn-bequeathing imagery is part of a wider notion of cyclic time involving perennial dissolution and renovation.<sup>29</sup>

A paradigmatic example of the cyclic dimension of horned cuckoldry is to be found in the twelfth-century *Vita Merlini*, attributed to Geoffrey of Monmouth. In this account, both Merlin’s wife and the Earth—presented in a metaphoric relationship—lay wasted when Merlin withdraws to the woods. The Earth will not “produce its multi-coloured flowers” until the return of “spring or summer—and the cuckoo back in song”; just so, Merlin’s wife—in fairness “beyond . . . the rose in bloom, beyond the lilies of the field,” and on whom alone the splendor of spring used to shine—loses her “delicate bloom” until Merlin returns home (*Vita Merlini* 150–81). This is to say that the wizard’s marital separation amounts to winter, and his return to his wife amounts to that of spring/summer over the land. In this context, the theme of the rival sets in. When Merlin is ready to leave home once more, and his wife again collapses as if dying, Merlin allows her to marry another man on condition that this new husband “never gets in my path or comes near me” (362–81). Since the visits Merlin pays home are tantamount to the cuckoo back in song, the suggestion appears to be that the rival can only embrace the common woman during wintertime. The equivalence between Merlin’s visits and the springtime appearance of

---

*Portuguesa: Tentame de Sistematização*, vol. 7, M. Viegas Guerreiro, A. da Silva Soromenho, and P. Caratão Soromenho, eds. (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional—Casa da Moeda, 1980), 397; *Tradições Populares de Portugal*, M. Viegas Guerreiro, ed. (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional—Casa da Moeda, 1986), 54; Paul Sébillot, *Le folklore de France*, vol. 1, *Le ciel, la nuit et les esprits de l’air* (Paris: Imago, 1982), 58. Elworthy, *Evil Eye*, 181–96. Marcus Porcius Cato and Marcus Terentius Varro, *On Agriculture* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann, 1935), 261; cf. Brand and Ellis, *Observations*, 3: 145.

<sup>29</sup> Pierre Saintyves, *L’astrologie populaire étudiée spécialement dans les doctrines et les traditions relatives à l’influence de la lune: Essai sur la méthode dans l’étude du Folklore des opinions et des croyances* (Paris: E. Nourry, 1937), 174. Brand and Ellis, *Observations*, 3: 145.

the cuckoo, in turn, sets the stage for the bequeathing of horns on the cuckold—Merlin and the newly found husband, in turns. Let us scrutinize this aspect of the story.<sup>30</sup>

While Merlin has been leading a wintry “animal life . . . among his woodland flock,” living on frozen moss in the snow and the angry blast, his wife Guendoloena becomes legally promised in marriage; thus, the time comes for the inevitable meeting of the two rivals in love (*Vita Merlini* 416–20). One night, when the horned moon is shining, the prophet watches a ray from Mars and a twin beam from Venus. Together, the two shafts announce a king dead and another king to be, as well as love divided. Merlin understands that Guendoloena “perhaps . . . is happy in the close embrace of another man. So I lose, another wins her”—yet, he adds, “she may marry now the time is right, and with my permission enjoy a new husband” (424–51). Accordingly, on the morrow, Merlin brings to the wedding place of Guendoloena a herd of stags, she-goats, and does. The prophet himself rides the first stag. This fact, taken along with the hint that he has been living an animal life amongst the woodland flock, is to be understood in light of the traditional idea that Merlin can turn into a stag. So then, a symbolically horned Merlin, amounting to the spring cuckoo, turns up at the marriage of Guendoloena. This marriage, placed under a horned moon, is the prophesized dismissal of one king by another in the context of love divided—in other words, an act of cuckoldry amounting to horns bequeathed. Indeed, as soon as Merlin beholds his rival, he wrenches off the horns of the stag he rides and throws them at the bridegroom’s head, knocking him lifeless and driving his spirit to the winds (452–70).<sup>31</sup>

Interpretation of this episode is relatively straightforward. Given the metaphorical association between a woman and the earth, Geoffrey portrays the contrasting seasonal aspects of the earth as a wifely opening to alternate husbanding agents. As Claude Gaignebet lucidly understands, in Geoffrey’s tale the transition between the seasons—impersonated by rival husbands—goes under the sign of horns. Indeed, the act of throwing horns on a rival under the horned moon sets the horned triangle in a seasonal setting. First, Merlin goes horned while his rival cohabits with the shared woman, then Merlin returns—as the cuckoo does—to make his rival a horned cuckold and send him to the netherworld until, again, the seasons’ wheel turns round.<sup>32</sup>

This interpretation finds confirmation in that Merlin’s horned-cuckoo role is well known in folklore. By Carnival in Romania, young men disguised as horned cuckoos would come out of the woods and besmirch everyone

<sup>30</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Life of Merlin*, B. Clarke, ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973), 61, 71–73.

<sup>31</sup> Monmouth, *Life of Merlin*, 73–77. Claude Gaignebet and Marie-Claude Florentin, *Le Carnaval: Essais de mythologie populaire* (Paris: Payot, 1974), 136.

<sup>32</sup> Gaignebet and Florentin, *Le Carnaval*, 136, 159–60.

they met. At the other extreme of Europe, in Portugal, by the time of the vernal equinox people would proceed to capture the cuckoo in the woods and parade a cuckoo-disguised youngster, along with an assortment of horns, around the hamlets. Here the general idea is explicated: “the cuckoo . . . brings about the good weather and joy, the start of springtime and its heralding, foreboding good crops.” Since in such seasonal setting all sympathy goes to the horned intruder who brings forth new vitality, it is understandable that Geoffrey wastes no compassion on the cuckolded husband. But Geoffrey’s episode and folk customs, taken together, do suggest that seasonal renewal calls for the invigorating action of horned males over women and the Earth, with the consequence that wintry husbands must be cyclically turned into cuckolds. Granted, Geoffrey’s mythological scheme (stressing, as it does, the assimilation of succeeding seasons to alternating husbands) does not explicate the notion that the vital contribution of horned intruders to wombs and fields is to the actual advantage of husbandmen. But Shakespeare does put this idea most clearly in the mouth of his precious wise-fool: “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” (*All’s Well that Ends Well* 1.3.42–47).<sup>33</sup>

In short, the notion that horned beings and cuckoos bring over renewed fertility in a cyclic framework implies that husbandmen are seasonally assimilated to cuckolds. Such assimilation is quite conspicuous in Carnival customs. This is fitting because Carnival (just like Merlin’s bequeathing of horns) falls under the aegis of a horned moon in the transition between wintertime and springtime. In this perspective, Arnold Van Gennep’s information that the traditional parading of “senile, beaten, or cuckolded husbands” around hamlets or towns would oftentimes take place at Carnival is all the more interesting. The life-force symbolism of horns on these occasions is striking. On the one hand, weak husbands as well as women were made to kiss horns (“the horns of the bird,” says one French source); on the other, weak husbands along with the newlyweds of the year (those, that is, without any children as yet) as well as unmarried young men were paraded on donkeys and made to wear horns. In the same vein, childless Portuguese newlyweds would be paraded in March, “bound and downcast,” in the guise of cuckoos.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Michel Vulpesco, *Les coutumes roumaines périodiques: Etudes descriptives et comparées* (Paris: Larose, 1927), 137. Leite de Vasconcelos, *Emografia* vol. 7, 221–22. Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, 347.

<sup>34</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *Manuel de folklore français contemporain, Vol. 1, 3, Carnaval, Carême, Pâques* (Paris: Picard, 1979), 1069–78. José Leite de Vasconcelos, *Emografia Portuguesa: Tentame de Sistematização*, vol. 8, M. Viegas Guerreiro, A. da Silva Soromenho, and P. Caratão Soromenho, eds. (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional—Casa da Moeda, 1982), 189–90. Just as in the goatish metaphor the term *cabrón* applies to both the seducer and the cheated husband, so in Portuguese the cuckold is named “cuckoo,” and in vernal processions the same

Clearly, Van Gennep's view that such customs are vindictive goes only so far in explaining them. Overall, we see that people deemed in special need of virile life force—women, men still unproven in the task of begetting, and weak husbands—were placed under the aegis of horns and/or the cuckoo. This implies that men as well as women would draw fertility from their contact with horns. Again, we meet the idea of the transcendent origin of all fertility, and its implication—all successful husbandmen are cuckolds in the fundamental sense that they are indebted to horned purveyors of fertility.

In sum, at the critical juncture of winter and springtime (when there is strongest hope for renewed life-stuff), the newlyweds of the year as well as the weakest of husbands used to express the situation of metaphysical cuckoldry afflicting all husbands. One corollary is that the goatish triangle model involves (in addition to ideas regarding a flow of fungible fluids among bodies) the notion of a wider circulation of life force between the otherworld and the human realm. In other words, the imagery of cuckoldry is metaphysical in essence, in that it expresses the supernatural origin of fertility, granted by horned purveyors to human couples. If so, then the congruence between the cuckoo and the horned dispenser of life force in the goatish triangle implies that the he-goat—like the cuckoo—must be a supernatural dispenser of life force. Let us consider one well-known example from ancient Italy.

In legendary stories about the genesis of Rome, there is one striking episode. Romulus and his turbulent male companions found themselves unable to impregnate the Sabine women they had kidnapped to obtain offspring. As a consequence, the first Roman procreation required divine intervention. As Ovid tells the story, this happy occasion was made possible by Juno Lucina. Enigmatically, the goddess commanded: "let the sacred he-goat . . . go in to Italian matrons." Immediately, a certain Etruscan augur slew a he-goat and "at his bidding the damsels offered their backs to be beaten with throngs cut from the hide," hence getting pregnant (*Fasti* 2.441, 445-46). Note three points: First, Ovid narrates this boon of fertility in the context of the February full-moon rites of "two-horned Faunus" (2.267), nicknamed *Inuus* from the verb *inire*: "to go into, to cover." Second, the poet places the consequent bounty in the context of the renewing of the moon's "horns" on 1 March. Third, this bounty is at once human and agricultural, for it comprises the divine begetting of Romulus and Remus and the supernatural impregnation of the first Roman matrons as well as the onset of springtime (3.229-48). Overall, says Ovid, "tis right that Latin mothers should

---

disguised person represents the newly arrived cuckoo as well as the downcast cuckold. In all cases, the horned bestower of fertility and the cuckolded husband appear to be like two halves of one dynamic entity.

observe the fruitful season” (3.243), which is his way of expressing the constant homology between women and the teeming earth in their common relationship to horned providers of life force.<sup>35</sup>

Remarkably, when the first Roman matrons got pregnant by symbolically submitting to the divine he-goat they meritoriously behaved like procreative goats. By a necessary inference, their resigned husbands acted like patient cuckolds in regard of the divine provider of fertility. The bottom line, again, is that all husbands are essentially cuckolds on the face of the horned source of supernatural life force.

We find the same thing regarding the ritual reenactment of the impregnation of the first Roman matrons by Faunus. In the ancient festival of *Lupercalia*, celebrated annually on 15 February, youths wearing only goatskins about their loins would run around the ancient city of the Palatine. According to Plutarch, they would “strike all who meet them with the throngs, and young married women do not try to avoid their blows, fancying that they promote conception and easy child-birth” (*Romulus* 21.5). Servius confirms that girls were then “beaten with the throng of goatskin in order that they may escape barrenness and be fruitful.” Moreover, a certain Anysius claims the rites were “aimed at promoting the growth of the crops.” James Frazer synthesizes these representations by saying that the conspicuous dimension of annual purification of this festival was deemed to “repel the forces of evil and so to liberate the forces of good, thus promoting the fertility at once of man, of beast, and of the earth.” In sum: youths incarnating he-goats, symbolically reenacting the sowing of wombs and fields by the sacred he-goat (both at the absolute origin of Rome’s time cycles and at the start of each New Year), would impersonate the Shakespearean “drudge” for the benefit of Roman husbandmen.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> James George Frazer, *The Fasti of Ovid* (Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1973), 1: 81. I am using this translation for all quotations of the *Fasti*. Regarding the connection between the full moon and the Ides, when sacrifices to Faunus would start (according to Ovid 2.193), see Frazer, *Fasti*, 2: 70, 73–74. On *Inuus*, see Livius 1.5.2–3; and Georges Dumézil, *La religion romaine archaïque avec un appendice sur La religion des Étrusques* (Paris: Payot, 1974), 351, 354; Frazer, *Fasti*, 2: 333–34. Ovid uses, in the context of the newly found fertility of the Sabines, the expression: “the moon was renewing her horns” (Frazer, *Fasti*, 1: 83).

<sup>36</sup> I am quoting Plutarch from B. Perrin’s translation, in Plutarch, *Lives, Vol. 1, Theseus and Romulus. Lycurgus and Numa. Solon and Publicola* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann, 1914). Regarding the connection between the purification and the fertility dimensions of the rite, see Dumézil, *Religion*, 353; Frazer, *Fasti*, 2: 330–31, 335. The problem of the link between purificatory/martial activities and the promotion of fertility has perhaps been most cogently discussed (apropos the connections of Mars with the protection of crops) by Dumézil (*Religion*, 239–48). We should keep in mind that the *Luperci* supposedly prolong the original youth groups of Mars’ scions, Romulus and Remo; see Georges Dumézil, *Fêtes romaines d’été et d’automne suivi de Dix questions romaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 158–59; Dumézil, *Religion*, 352. Servius as well as Anysius are cited by Frazer, *Fasti*, 2: 232.

## SEASONAL BESTIARY

A further word is in order regarding the stable symbolism of animals bearing these representations. Just as goatish Faunus was surnamed *Lycaeus*, the name *Luperci* applied to the young men who ran about clad in goatskins contained “wolf.” The necessary inference that the Luperci figured composite figures of wolves/he-goats compares well to Michel Vulpesco’s remark that in Romania, up to modern times, masked figures called *Brezaia*—figuring wolves, he-goats, and storks—would come out at the time of the ancient *Lupercalia*. What is more, Vulpesco notes that masks figuring horned cuckoos, making their appearance at Carnival, used to behave much like the ancient Luperci did. And in the Pyrenees, masks of goatskins figuring bears used to behave in the manner of Roman Luperci and Romanian cuckoos. Note that bears are supposed to leave their winter dens (just like cuckoos and storks are supposed to return from their winter abode) at the start of springtime. This perspective is useful in understanding Herodotus’ information about ancient Neuri turning into wolves once a year (*Histories* 4.105), confirmed by an early seventeenth-century traveler who reports the belief that that the “people of Narva and Livonia become werewolves every year.” In precisely this vein, a Livonian self-confessed werewolf has candidly told seventeenth-century inquisitors that he and his companions annually strove to rescue from hell the seeds necessary for abundant crops and cattle. The implied link between wolves and the realm of the dead is confirmed, to pick but a famous example, in that the Germanic wolf Fenrir is the brother of Hell. Such data confirm the overall notion that fertility must be brought in from the otherworld every spring, oftentimes by animals that cross the fateful boundary, in association with horns.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Concerning Faunus, or Pan, Lycaeus, see Ovid, *Fasti* 2: 420–24, and see Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*. Vol. 1, Books 1–2. (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press / William Heinemann, 1937), 1.32.3–5, 1.79.8. A summary of old debates on the goat and wolf dimensions of Luperci, along with interesting original points, may be found in Dumézil, *Religion*, 352–53; as well as in Frazer, *Fasti*, 2: 337–39. Vulpesco, *Coutumes*, 136–40, 190. On Pyrenean bears and their cloaks of goat skin, see Violet Alford, *Pyrenean Festivals, Calendar Customs, Music and Magic, Drama and Danse* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1937), 108–10; and van Gennepe, *Manuel* 1, 3, 909–17. The account of Richard James (a seventeenth-century traveler) about Slavic werewolves is here quoted from Roman Jakobson and Marc Szeftel, “The Vseslav Epos,” in R. Jakobson and E. J. Simmons, eds., *Russian Epic Studies* (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1949), 68, n.59. They see in these examples fragments of a lost Slavic, and probably Indo-European, mythology. The voice of the professed werewolf from Livonia has been discussed by Carlo Ginzburg, *Les batailles nocturnes: Sorcellerie et rituels agraires en Frioul, XVI<sup>e</sup> et XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris: Flammarion, 1984), 49–50; *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 153–55, along with very interesting reconstitutions of the cosmological context where these representations belong. On this theme, see also Francisco Vaz da Silva, *Metamorphosis: The Dynamics of Symbolism in European Fairy Tales* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), ch. 1.

Let us focus on the symbolism of the passage itself. Intriguingly, Plutarch reports that the Luperci, after slaughtering the goats, were supposed to touch the forehead of two youths of noble birth with blood and immediately wipe the stain off with wool dipped in milk; then, the youths must laugh (*Romulus* 21.4–5). The hypothesis, suggested by early-day scholars, that a process of death and rebirth is enacted in this scene seems sustained in that the bear of the modern Pyrenean ritual is shaven with ewe's milk before being ritually shot and brought to life again—presumably in human shape, for (as Gaignebet shows) a bear rid of its fur shows as a human being. In the same vein, a group of Danish fairy tales (ATU 433B, *King Wivern*) presents a wivern being brought to human shape by discarding “shifts” until blood runs off it, and then being washed in milk or dressed in white linen. This fairy-tale shape shifter, like the ritual bear, regains human shape by discarding its animal envelope, and it shares with Roman youths going from blood to milk.<sup>38</sup>

Why getting rid of an animal skin should amount to going from blood to milk is not too hard to fathom, since we have come across the notion that the body's white fluids are concoctions of blood on the one hand, and we have met a constant homology between bloody wombs and moist fields on the other. In light of the womb/field metaphor, the blood → milk evolution outlines the growth process of both infants and seedlings. Babies evolve from feeding on womb blood to feeding on milk; seeds nurtured in the moist soil (equated to the bloody womb) develop into stalks filled with milky sap. So the seasonal passage from winter to spring, from hidden life to visible growth, is one from “blood” to “milk.” What is more, birth itself involves shedding the amniotic membranes, often perceived as a second skin.<sup>39</sup>

That the theme of skin change is central to cyclic renewal/rebirth helps explain the constant presence of werewolves—skin shifters par excellence—in association with the horned bestowers of supernatural life force.

<sup>38</sup> A hypothesis of death and rebirth proposed by Mannhardt has actually been taken up on comparative grounds by Frazer, *Fasti*, 2: 340–43. Alford, *Pyrenean Festivals*, 111. Claude Gaignebet and Jean-Dominique Lajoux, *Art profane et religion populaire au Moyen Age* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985), 83; cf. Michel Praneuf, *L'ours et les hommes dans les traditions européennes* (Paris: Imago, 1989), 146–47. For a symbolic analysis of the “King Wivern” fairy tale, see Bengt Holbek, *Interpretation of Fairy Tales: Danish Folklore in a European Perspective* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1998), ch. 7; and Vaz da Silva, *Metamorphosis*, 23–27, 146–55.

<sup>39</sup> On amniotic membranes as a second skin, or envelope, normally discarded at birth, see Jakobson and Szeftel, “Vseslav Epos,” 56; Nicole Belmont, “La coiffe et le serpent,” in *Échanges et communications: Mélanges offerts à Claude Lévi-Strauss à l'occasion de son 60ème anniversaire* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1970); *Les signes de la naissance: Étude des représentations symboliques associées aux naissances singulières* (Brionne: Gérard Monfort, 1971), 29–38; and Vaz da Silva, *Metamorphosis*, 43–47. The overall seasonal passage of blood to milk is depicted, for example, in Sandra Ott, *The Circle of Mountains: A Basque Shepherding Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 31–38; as well as in richly textured pages by Yvonne Verdier, *Façons de dire, façons de faire: La laveuse, la couturière, la cuisinière* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 65–68.

Moreover, the homology between the Carnival bear stripped of its fur and the wivern freed of its sloughs recalls that werewolves and snakes have in common being skin shifters. And, of course, serpents are deemed chthonic animals, the sloughing of which parallels the moon's phases. (Werewolves and bears, too, have clear lunar connotations.) We have seen that the new moon, bringing new life from death, corresponds to the bleeding womb of women as well as to death turning into new life in teeming fields.<sup>40</sup>

In sum, we find at the core of representations hinging on the goatish triangle a rejuvenating patch of earthy red associated with sloughing and the moon's phases. And we realize that representations of a transfer of horns between men through a woman imply cosmic symbolism as well as a sexual theory, under the common denominator of a wide circulation of vital force. In essence, the anatomy of cuckoldry implies a metaphysical view of procreation, unawareness of which obscures the meaning of many a resilient cultural trait.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> On the connection of werewolves with the snake as well as with the moon—therefore, with vampiric imagery—see Jakobson and Szeftel, “Vseslav Epos,” 64–66. Éva Pócs mentions werewolf seers “characterized by underworldly ‘snake-initiation,’” in *Between the Living and the Dead: A Perspective on Witches and Seers in the Early Modern Age* (Budapest and Ithaca, N.Y.: Central European University Press, 1999), 143. On the chthonian and lunar nature of the bear, see Praneuf, *L'ours*, 7, 123–41.

<sup>41</sup> I have written on such metaphysics of procreation in Francisco Vaz da Silva, “The Madonna and the Cuckoo: An Exploration in European Symbolic Conceptions,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46, 2 (2004): 273–99.