

the devil's GRANDMOTHER



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I went to the river between our world and the underworld and stood with a foot in fact and a foot in fiction. With an ear in rumour and an ear in truth and with no end in sight and my tongue in my cheek and my heart in my mouth I asked the Devil's Grandmother how you can make an alternative reality out of stories. And how it might help to free us from oppressive establishment hierarchies. She laughed heartily at me and told me to come into her cave and sit down on a chair, warm from sin and pleasure and all things bad and nice. This is what she told me:

The Devil's Three Golden Hairs

Lucky Hans was born in a birth caul and was therefore destined to marry the king's daughter. The greedy, insecure King threw him in the river but he was fished out by a miller and his wife. Years later, the King chanced upon Hans when touring the kingdom and ordered him to the palace to deliver a letter which was, in fact, an instruction for his execution. But an empathetic band of robbers switched it for one that said that this boy was to marry the princess. The king arrived just in time for the wedding, and enraged, sent Hans off to Hell to get three of the Devil's golden hairs. On his way he passed an empty well, a barren apple tree and the ferryman to the underworld who couldn't stop rowing back and forth. He promised he would solve these problems by the time he returned. Down in Hell, the Devil's Grandmother was sympathetic to Hans' mission and turned him into an ant to hide in her skirt. The devil returned exhausted from his day's devilling and fell into grandma's lap where she stroked him and sung him to sleep. Each time she plucked a golden hair from his head he woke up in pain, but assuming that it was part of his dream, he told his night-time visions to Grandma: a dried-up well in a town square with a toad underneath blocking the flow, a tree that does not flower because of a mouse gnawing at its root, and a ferryman who can be freed just by placing his oar in the hands of his passenger on the river's bank. Kitted out with this information and the three golden hairs, Hans set off back, providing the answers he overheard to the ferryman and to the villagers. He was rewarded for his wisdom with gold laden asses. At the palace, the King, shocked by Hans's success, asked where he got all that gold and Hans told him it was across the river. The king cantered off to the river where the ferryman placed the oar in his hands and back and forth he has rowed forever and ever, till this very day (Grimm, 80).

This is *The Devil's Three Golden Hairs*, an ultimate teller's tale concerned with communication and miscommunication of information, instruction, prophecy, packed with stock characters and scenes; it resembles several stories mashed together. Morally ambiguous representations of the Devil, his grandmother, hell; truth and tales and deceit, resist conventional ethical structures.

AT HELL'S KITCHEN TABLE

The archetypal characters and situations of this particular fairy tale will be at our side as we are introduced chronologically to a troop of characters, from Sybil of Cumae to the goose in *Untitled Goose Game*. The Devil's Grandmother, that gossiping storyteller, hosts us at her textual kitchen table where, just like in the tale of *The Devil's Three Golden Hairs*, she is conveyor of information, secrets, answers, a connoisseur of: 'orally transmitted narrative with a relaxed attitude to the reality principle and plots constantly refurbished in the retelling' (Carter, 11) as one of Angela Carter's definitions of fairy tales goes. Particularly intriguing about the Devil's Grandmother is that she isn't a fair maiden or a wicked witch or a disobedient wife or even a witty heroine. She appears only in one scene, but plays a crucial decision-making role in the plot, where Hans himself is entirely passive, riding his luck to a happy ending. She evades moral expectation and categorisation: the Devil and Hell are weighty negative associations to bear by any standard, more so the further back you go in Church-dominated European history; indeed, the first published English translation of the story replaced the Devil with a giant for fear of offending (Tatar, 157). And yet, she is not only merciful with Hans, but goes significantly out of her way to help him, motivated by curiosity for the devil's secrets and the desire to communicate them (to Hans) for drama's sake, for the sake of what happened next. In other words, motivated by her gossiping instinct. She combines magic powers with domestic powers: hiding ant Hans in her skirt is an especially strong matriarchal move, evoking similar back-to-the-womb instances from Mary as *The Virgin of Mercy*, depicted sheltering large groups of tiny people under her cloak (Sano di Pietro), all the way to Oskar's storytelling Grandmother in Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum* who protects and hides both lover and grandchild under not one, but four skirts (Grass, 32).

In *From the Beast to the Blonde*, Marina Warner associates the rise of the fairy tale as a printed genre with ‘permission to accept that between heaven and hell and purgatory there lies another kingdom, a realm of human fantasy, in which the traditional categories of good and evil clash and find resolution that differ from orthodox faith and even ethics’. The Devil’s Grandmother sits, in spite of her hellish title and home, in just this liminal moral space.

This research is a rough guide to following her example: How can storytelling be used as a tool to build an alternative, non-establishment framework? Hopefully, the question can be answered through narrative archaeology, by excavating layers of shifting information, filtered through the perspectives of several gossiping storytellers. Angela Carter describes the process as ‘validating my claim to a fair share of the future by staking my claim to my share of the past’ (12).

OLD WIVES’ TALES

Fairy tales are referred to also as Old wives’ tales – that is, worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip, a derisive label that assigns the art of storytelling to women at the same time as it takes all the value from it (Carter, xi). The word ‘tale’ is used synonymously with the word ‘lie’. *You’re telling tales* say suspicious parents to fibbing children. The associative connections between fiction, stories, tales, fables, gossip, anecdotes, lies will become apparent as we hear more and more of them. While they are not the same, they are sometimes interchangeable and the boundaries between them are blurred by this essay just as they have always been blurred by society.

Recognising gossip as a crucial form of unofficial communication, a sister to storytelling and a source of solidarity among women and reclaiming it from associations – Idle! Wicked! Bitchy! – placed on it by the patriarchy to keep women obedient, is an important tool for the excavation. So we should bear in mind gossip’s changing status, from benign term denoting female friendship in early modern England, to what Silvia Federici describes as ‘part of the degradation of women[...]the stereotype of woman as prone to malignity, envious of other people’s wealth and power, and ready to lend an ear to the Devil’ (38). Rather than that, we’ll lend it to his Grandmother, and contribute an artifact to the continual process of narrative accretion, ready to be stolen and chopped and mashed and spread just as much as its subjects and sources have been.



Maurice Sendak, The Devil's Grandmother, 1973



Michaelangelo, Cumaen Sibyl, 1510

*Okay, Sibyl of Cumae, you may
have heard about her
if in doubt she's one to watch,
and here she's one to hear, in fact (in fict.?) she's ten,
then many times wrinkles, and whispers,
and winks and tricks and tales.*

*She sees and says across porous borders of pagan and pious
monster meets monastery up mystery mount.*

CHAPTER ONE

sibyl of cumae

‘The fates will leave me my voice, and by my voice I shall be known’ Said the Cumaean Sibyl to Aeneas when she realised that she’d asked a smitten Apollo to live a long life (‘till the crack of doom’) but forgotten also to request eternal youth and would therefore ‘shrink from her present fine stature into a tiny creature, shrivelled with age’ (Desonay, 53).

THE SECRET PLEASURE CAVE

The Oracle, Teller and Trickster of legend fled to a concealed cave on the highest ridge of the Appenine mountains (still called Monti Sibillini in her honour) when Christianity’s tightening grip on the Roman Empire forbade her from practising her pagan arts: fortune telling, prophesising, making up stories, passing on information. Sibyl’s declaration of mighty vocal immortality echoes through to the present; she wasn’t shut up by the coming of Christ or the exiling of classical divinities or by the Witch Hunts or by any of history’s other attempts to silence women: by her voice she is known.

She is a proto-Mother Goose; a ‘composite character of the female narrator’ as posited by Marina Warner (71). Beginning as Classical prophetess in pagan lore, daughter of Lamia the snake-woman and Zeus, she guides Aeneas to the underworld in Virgil’s epic and sells her oracles to Tarquin the Proud, the last king of Rome, then becomes a fata, an enchantress, in order to star in medieval legend, where she revels in accusations of pagan perversion and entangles herself with folklore of the fairy seductress: in a chivalric romance by Andrea de Barberino from 1391, Guerin the Wretch meets the Devil. Aiming to get his soul, the devil tempts him with news of a secret pleasure kingdom where Sibilla, a great enchantress lives with her fairy entourage. Guerin enthusiastically ventures forth and finds the beautiful Sibyl of Cumae with ‘breasts that seemed to be made

out of ivory' in a paradise of feasting and music and fruit and flowers where there is no pain or sorrow or ageing. She offers to find Guerino's father for him if only he will become her lover but he resists seduction. And a good thing he did so too because one day, peeping under the fairies' skirts, Guerino discovers that every Saturday, they turn into horrible creatures with deformed nether limbs. Furious, he avows his Christian virtue and escapes to Rome where the Pope absolves him of his year in the sinful company of the Sibyl (Warner, 5).

The story has been told and retold again and again, the cave of delights appearing in high and low forms, literary and oral, including versions in which the gallant knight is not pardoned by Rome and so turns back and lives out the rest of his life in bliss with the Sibyl. After all, she's only monstrous once a week. Magic practising pilgrims visited the realm in great numbers to consult the Sibyl's ancient wisdom in the hope of strengthening their powers until papal authorities, worried about all that profanity, had the cave filled up in the seventeenth century. In 1898 a group of mountaineers reported that it had been dynamited (Warner, 10). These are extreme and physically destructive measures to take in order to silence an already millennia dead, mostly fictional woman. It is testament to the real threat posed by the female storyteller to authoritarian male doctrine .

PAGAN TO PIOUS

And despite their best efforts and their dynamite, the Sybil dodged the puritanical Christian culture cull, surviving as 'a hyphen between the old faith and the new' (Warner, 70). Rather than being demolished, she was incorporated into the Christian scheme of redemption: the Sibyl was cast as a prophet of the Messiah, a forerunner of the faith, commended by no less than Saint Augustine as 'a citizen of the city of God' (Dronke, 13).

Her warnings of the apocalypse were vehement and vague enough to be neatly recast as predictions of divine Judgement day. In the hands of Lactantius, an early Christian author, himself prosecuted for his religion in the Roman empire and then honourably restored with the conversion of emperor Constantine early in the fourth century AD, she is quoted as knowing about Jesus's life in remarkable detail: 'He will satisfy five thousand from five loaves and a fish of the sea.' (Lane-Fox, 647)

So entwined is she with Christianity, that one version of the Sibyllian legend says that she fled because, having predicted

the birth of the saviour to a virgin, she expected to be the one chosen by God as the virgin mother of her own prophecy, bearing not just news of Christ, but also the baby himself, and on discovering that Mary had been given the role, took off to the mountain peaks in a fit of disgust (Neri, 213).

The Cumaean Sibyl is maybe the most fabled of all the ten Sibyls who pronounce their oracles from every corner of the earth, each with their own attribute and particular prophecy yet functioning together as one archetypal figure; they shift fluidly between the Sibyls and Sibyl. This multiplicity provided rich scope for artists and storytellers who could put her in any number of outrageous heathen hats and situations and other stories. And gave her endurance and flexibility as a mythic figure through time. She is a manifest narrator who welcomes more and more voices to tell with her. Sibyl then, is the Devil's Grandmother's Grandmother, pioneering inter-ethical surfing for the Devil's Grandmother to follow in her wake when she comes along. The sibylline cavern of pleasure is a fruity, blooming manifestation of the hell full of the secrets and promises and shapeshifting that we recognise from the Grimm's tale. The Devil's Grandmother's soothing head massage is perhaps less overtly erotic than when the Sibyl 'lays down by [Guerino's] side and shows him her beautiful white flesh' (Desonay, 21) but they are parallel instances of physically gratifying men to secure information or promises. Though in neither story do these women wield their wiles from a place of necessity; they are writing the plot not escaping from it.

The dwellings of the Sibyl and Devil's Grandmother, respectively lavish and cosy, fulfil in their moral ambiguity a function in thinking about forbidden, secret matters. Ostensible finger wagging and negative verdicts lightly cover the real point of these fantasy caves where enchantresses perform magic and wonder, delighting in invention free from orthodox constraint. Whereas the aged crone typically stands for vice, her moral deficit causing physical decrepitude and vice versa, here old age represents ancient wisdom. From Sibylline iconography springs the old wise woman as the imagined source of fairy tales.

MOUTHPIECE OF THE DEVIL

But although she is celebrated on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel (all ten of her), wrinkled and muscular (presumably from carrying all those heavy books around) and although her oracles reached wider secular audiences with the invention of the printing press, by the sixteenth Century she was branded a mouthpiece of the Devil by the era of witch terror: in the late middle ages, church and law launched an attack on female communication and networks. Collective knowledge as midwives and healers meant that women controlled illicit realms of sex, contraception, and abortion and therefore, also fertility, morality, attitudes, and alliances: Management of the physical and social body constituted a big threat (Federici, 29). The negative shift of the word 'Gossip' from early modern times to the late middle ages, charts the vilification of female companionship, social gathering, communication: In 1014, 'gossip' meant a godmother or father, a morally important and comendable co-parent; by the mid 1300s it referred to a female friend invited to the a christening of a child. A 'Gossiping' was used to mean a christening feast. During the 1600s, as these celebrations grew into lavish occasions for socialising and bonding, the word 'gossip' came to hold associations of wickedness: a woman who delights in idle chatter (Warner, 33). In French, 'commère' and in Italian 'commare', follow similar downward spirals.

Broadsheets denounced women's rattling tongues, associating them with curses and spells. An English print from 1603 – 'Tittle Tattle; or the several branches of Gossiping' – warns of the places where women gather dangerously without supervision, starting 'At the Childbed'. Here, women friends of the new mother arrive to help with the birth. A 1508 prayer book shows the grim Reaper dancing off to the grave with a queen, a duchess, a regent, a knight's lady, an abbess, a market vendor, every social group all the way down to the witch and the fool (Jeay, 95). A portrait of the Wise Woman reads, 'Everyone look at me because I am a wise woman/ A golden padlock I wear on my mouth at all times' (Armstrong, 129). The scold's bridle, a contraption like a dog muzzle, was invented to gag women found guilty of blasphemy. In 1624 a law was passed in England against cursing by which mostly peasant women would be identified as witches in league with the devil by inquisitors, and burnt at the stake.

In this environment, the Devil was believed to speak though the heathen Sibyls. Pierre de Lancre, an inquisitor sent to

cleanse the Basque country of witches in 1608, reported sabbath orgies, night-flyings, obscene rites and women's susceptibility to becoming possessed, mentioning 'Fairies, Nymphs, Sibyls, White Ladies' (de Lancre, 89)



Anton Woensam, *Wise Woman*, 1525

SITTING COMFORTABLY

So they lay forcibly dormant, until emerging enlightenment thinking slowly began to soften opinion. At the end of the seventeenth century, sceptics started doubting the notion that the Devil spoke through the pagan oracles (Warner, 78). The supernatural beings that accompanied him were stripped of their malignant power by the argument that they just didn't exist. Fairyland was reasoned from diabolical threat to nonsense. Nonsense that could develop into a lurid and fantastical strand of entertainment: by no coincidence, the first collections of written folk tales were being produced at this time, significantly Perrault's *Mother Goose* tales, published in 1697, which brought *Sleeping Beauty*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Blue Beard*, *Cinderella* to a literary audience and invented the fairy tale as a written genre and an area of study.

As historical luck would have it, the Sibyl was poised on her mountain top, ready to leap into a combo role of Fairy Queen and Mother Goose. A collection of stories with the title *Queen Mab: containing a selection of Only the Best, most Instructive and Entertaining Tales of the Fairies* ends with a ditty: 'This Tale a Sibyl-Nurse a-read / And softly stroak'd my youngling Head, / And, when the Tale was done, / Thus some are Born, my Son (she cries) / With base Impediments to rise, - And some are born with none.' (*Queen Mab's Song*, 365)

So she became the Sibyl-Nurse, still a wise teller, a purveyor of fortune, an educator, though more domesticated and probably with fewer teeth than her sexy predecessor. In this harmless guise, wrapped in blankets and bundled into a rocking chair, she could be a moral poster girl who legitimised fairy tales filled with violence, sex, extravagance, and fantasy as suitable for the education of children. The morphing character of the Sibyl unties her from any historical column. She is set loose to invent future fictions. But something is retained from the earliest recorded mention of her by Heraclitus in 500BC: 'Sibyl with frenzied lips, uttering words mirthless, unembellished, unperfumed penetrates through a thousand years with her voice' (McGinn, 8)



The Cumaean Sibyl leads Aeneas to the underworld (Anon.)

*So, shameless skip from seer to singer
from carved in stone to stereophonics
to set the record straight. And contemplate
the common traits and tricks on radio stations, stay tuned
on the highway from mountain top to spotlight to hell.*

A big Hello to:

CHAPTER TWO

DORY PREVIN



LIVING THE FAIRY TALE

Dory Previn plays, in her life and in her lyrics, not only the Devil's Grandmother, but also wife and daughter in a Hollywood-brand Hell of the 60s and 70s. As a radio interviewer once remarked, her life story reads like a fairy tale (BBC kaleidoscope): born in 1925, the eldest daughter of a poor, strict Irish Catholic family with a father who would rage then embrace and held the whole family at gunpoint in a locked attic for a month, she toured as a chorus-line dancer, then one day in a chance encounter with a film producer, got discovered as a lyrical talent, and in a few months had a contract at MGM, and had fallen in love with and married Andre Previn, a glamorous jazz prince (Weber, 23). Together they wrote Oscar winning movie numbers together until one day she discovered he'd been having an affair with the nymph-like Mia Farrow. Dory Previn was hospitalised after a mental breakdown and treated with electroshock-therapy (Ruhlman). When she recovered, she wrote her experience into parables of songs: spitting into the emerging second wave of feminism - tender, angry, cynically didactic tales populated by a cast of mythical kings, iguanas, angels and devils,

dwarves, prophetic old men, Jesus, Jesus' baby sister. Songs like *Starlet Starlet on the Screen Who Will Follow Norma Jean?* expose the lie of the fairy tale that Hollywood sells to women: "And you wait for the phone to ring / In a vine street motel / And you write your folks / That being in the movies is / Really, really swell / Well / If that's anyone's idea of heaven / Who do you have to fuck / To get into hell?" Three different systems of storytelling – the phone, a letter, the movies – mentioned just in this half verse of a song build an impression of the inter-media web of truths and half-truths and lies and fiction that showbiz, or 'hell', is built on. And just like the Devil's Grandmother's, Dory's hell is one in which morality shifts trickily: 'How do you make a virtue of a vice?' (*Starlet Starlet*) she asks, accusing media moguls and their notorious casting couches of directing a sinful route to the silver screen. She swings between biblical and crude, the catholic daughter, and the chorus line girl. *You don't* is the silent answer to the rhetorical question; spinning a vice into a virtue is like spinning straw into gold, there's always a catch to this deal: only in exchange for your first born child; in exchange for sex; in exchange for your soul. Rumpelstiltskin stamps so hard that he falls right through the ground to the flaming centre of the earth and the miller's daughter lives in her palace with her baby and her king happily ever after. Not so for Dory's protagonists: if ever after is considered together with the premise 'Female meat/ Does not improve with time'(Starlet Starlet), it doesn't look so happy.

OBSCENE GOSSIP

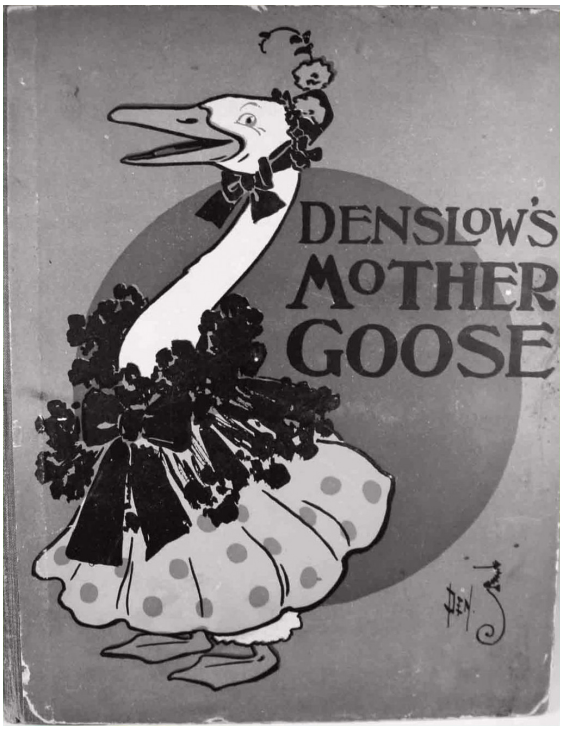
Her use of fairy tale imagery and morality does contain a hefty dose of irony, but not just that: arguably, folklore has always functioned at its best when redirected to fight oppressive norms and power structures. It serves the Folk who serve it. There is room for criticism and celebration simultaneously. Whilst you don't want your daughter in a Rock n Roll band, Folk music's OK – it's domestic, personal, safe, a genre that is within female reach for the same reasons as the folk tale is. In Dory's hands, domestic and personal become anything but safe. She explodes 'folk music' from the inside and slurps up controversy like mother's milk. If Joni Mitchell is singer-songwriter's Cinderella then Dory Previn is her ugly stepsister. Folk music need only share a style and a storytelling temperament with actual "traditional" folk songs to be defined as folk music: There is no anxiety about self-consciously authored songs fraudulently tricking their way

into the pure oral tradition, as there perhaps is with fairy tales; the genre stretches all the way to pop-idol worship in concert stadiums. But the traditional folk song function of relating news and anecdote (most efficient pre-newspaper method) at least ostensibly, is retained. These songs, then, stand in a global tradition of communication through unofficial channels.

Actually they don't stand in the tradition, they stamp in it: Dory whispers or screams her gossip straight into our ears. In an introduction to a performance of *The Obscene Phone Call* she confides, "I got a call the other day. The verbal flasher told me off, hung up and there I was stuck with the receiver in my hand. It wasn't the call I minded so much, it was the hang up, after all he'd had his say and I didn't have a chance to answer." It's outrageous that men, because they're men, can be disgusting and irrelevant and still have the last word. Dory Previn is driven to snatching it back, extra-cathartically, in public. In the song, every level of male-led authority – the F.B.I, the C.I.A, the United Nations, dismiss her until eventually she calls GOD, who instead of helping, is 'inclined to find this call of [Dory's] obscene' and then hangs up. This caricatured complaint about complaining is filed: women's voices are continually shut down by establishment powers, supposedly here to serve and protect us, so that, by necessity, we broadcast through our own channels. It is an instance of rehearsed gossip, functioning on an expanded, public scale.

VILLAINS AND VICTIMS

In *Did Jesus Have a Sister?* she tackles the biggest boy in masculine hero history - Christ Himself. And examines the moral status of men and women in our culturally defining narratives: 'And in private to her mirror/ Did she whisper/ Saviourette?/ Saviouwoman?' Here, just as in *Snow White*, the mirror equals self-awareness and self-identification. Wicked Stepmother and Jesus' sister, fall on this source of recognition in absence of recognition from the outside world. It denotes vanity in the wicked stepmother, but when Jesus' sister does it, we reverentially pity her. She is a martyr to aborted potential. So to speak. The Heavenly Lord, 'The chief / The man / The show' (*Did Jesus*) is at best, boastful and attention seeking. Heroes and Villains, then, are replaced with Posers and Victims, a cynic's guide to morality. They may not be as emancipated as the Devil's powerful, heroic Grandmother, but if these female protagonists are not freed from victimhood, at least they get to talk about it.



Gather gandergang and hear! our story goes from gore to glory.

hurry now it's hot a minute's all I've got to tell you

Long far ago when feet were webbed and quack meant squawk and squeal meant quack and honk made sense

They came to stuff my neck. Knock knock who's there?

'The butchers, here to slit your throat and peel its skin and simmer in stock and drop in a stew' They said

'We'll sew up the top then a knot in the bottom will do, the stuffing won't get through'

Stuff you! I said and flicked and flapped and flew

'Your filling acquires a melting soft texture' they tried to say,

but I was away and out of the frying pan into the fray.

The sisters soared and spared no words they ranted and roared and clack clack attack with beaks and tiny teeth.

*With a mighty feather and an outstretched wing, with signs and wonder,
with fright and fight, our necks are ours. We live to honk another tale*

CHAPTER THREE

untitled goose



Untitled Goose Game was hatched when an employee of House House - the Australian video game company - posted a stock photograph of a goose in the company's internal communications (McMaster). This led to a conversation about geese. And what emerged in 2019 was a video game in which *it's a lovely morning in the village and you are a horrible goose*. So the official strapline goes. Players control a goose on the loose whose objective is to wreak havoc on an idyllic English village through pranks and thievery and vandalism (Untitled Goose Game).

Since the game's release, the goose has become the charmingly and cathartically anarchic hero of an entire genre of internet memes, with several twitter accounts and facebook pages devoted to spreading the honk; an icon of transgression and irreverence for its own sake, the devil-may-care style entertainment that thrives on social media (Fox). It joins the flock of internet birds that in their militant bird-nature, denounce incompetent and/or evil human management of world affairs.

GOOSE-LORE

Keeping in mind the rich goose-logic tradition of oral storytelling, it is curious that they raise their heads now as stubbornly non-verbal bringers of chaos. They have prolific history both as gossiping fools and wise tellers, decidedly female ones: 'Many women, many words; many geese many turds' says an old English proverb (Coates, 31). A French fable from the seventeenth century tells how a husband as a test of his wife's discretion, shouts out in the night that he has laid an egg. She rushes to tell the neighbour and the egg grows four times the size; the neighbour runs on and the egg becomes three eggs and so on until the whole town marvels that he has laid a hundred (La Fontaine, 223). The egg grows just like the lie and the storytelling goose is stupid enough to believe her own story. In the folk tale Chicken Licken, Chicken Licken thinks the sky is falling down when an acorn hits her on the head and finds Goosey Loosey and the other birds who all process together to tell the King that the sky is falling. On the way they meet Foxy Loxy who invites them into his lair and gobbles them up (Stimson). The punishment for gossip here is death. Gullible Jemima Puddle Duck falls for the same trick in Beatrix Potter's children's book from 1908, when a fox offers her lodgings in his house, but luckily she's rescued by a collie dog at the last minute (this story is a reworking of Little Red Riding Hood). The Gabble twins, Amelia and Abigail, in Disney's Aristocats are compacted English goose caricatures, who wear the same hats and capes as Jemima Puddle duck. They are irritatingly bossy and uptight and cannot shut up while they waddle to Paris. Later with their drunken uncle Waldo, they round off the goose archetype by shouting bawdy distasteful jokes, honk honk. Primarily, these geese are ridiculing talkative women. But, there is an alternate goose-identity as bearer of 'hidden foreknowledge both ominous and wonderful' (Warner, 58): in Greek mythology, they are the sacred bird of Neitho the nymph who personifies persuasion. The goose at her side represents her sweet talking tongue. Choose Goose in the cartoon TV series Adventure Time is a merchant of rare objects and insights which he dispenses exclusively in rhyming couplets. Mostly his advice and merchandise backfire or prove to be useless but he retains his swivel-eyed bardic mysticism. In Charlotte's Web, the unnamed goose coaxes Wilbur the pig to speak, so setting the plot in motion (White). She repeats all her words thrice and at speed and suggests that 'TERRIFIC TERRIFIC TERRIFIC' should be woven into the

spider web to impress the farmer. It seems appropriate that Oprah Winfrey, big-league talker and gossip chief, voiced her in the 2006 live action version of the film. The Brothers Grimm, provide a truism at the beginning of their tales ‘birds converse together on the destinies of men’ (Grimm, 672).

So, Mother Goose is a language wielding, prophet-fool hybrid, occupying a fluid moral status not unlike that of the Devil’s Grandmother who also is wise but somewhat ridiculous; kind but frightening; domestic but powerful.

Arguably, Untitled Goose Game’s inherent humour has to do with the discrepancy between fictional goose representation and what geese are really like: aggressive and jarringly loud with sharp teeth, rather than, talkative, cuddly, hearthside grannies. House House juxtaposes its non-traditional goose with archetypal English village setting. The domesticity and commonness of this bird, the same features that qualify it for its specific role in story and myth, also mean that its real-life behaviour is recognisable, caricatured in this game to comic effect. Goose propensity for narrative has maybe diminished, but they have found a new medium through which to broadcast the concerns and antics of the people: yesterday’s mother goose is today’s meme lord.

MEME STAR

Richard Dawkins coined the term meme in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* – a unit for carrying cultural ideas, symbols or practises, passed from mind to mind through mimicry in writing, speech, gestures, rituals: the cultural equivalent of biological genes (352). When the word was taken up decades later in its now most familiar usage, referring to viral internet phenomena, Dawkins characterised these kind of memes as deliberately altered by human creativity as opposed to mutating ‘by random change and a form of Darwinian selection’ (Solon). Fairy tales fit snugly within this updated definition. Daniel Dennet describing the implications of memes as ‘the idea of my brain as a sort of dung heap in which the larvae of other people’s ideas renew themselves, before sending out copies of themselves in an informational Diaspora,’ (202) could apply convincingly to the role of fairy tales in the public consciousness. Considering the influence of internet memes in social and political discussion, considering their moral convictions, their entertainment value, their anonymous origins, their continual adaptation, their open accessibility, the unofficial networks through which they are

communicated, it seems useful to see them as fulfilling the fairy tale function in the modern day.

There are formal parallels, like framing stories with other stories and memes with other memes: Hans Christian Andersen opens *The Bog King's Daughter*, with the words: 'The storks know two stories that are very ancient and very long: one of them is the story of Moses. The other is a fairy tale that has been told by stork mothers for a thousand years. The first storks who told it had experienced it themselves' (278). This use of meta-narrative, in which the telling of the story is itself a story, sends us deeper into the frame-work of fairy-land: the ancient storks bear witness to the fiction and authenticate it, carrying one more layer of suspended disbelief. In the story of Moses mentioned here, sacred ibises, not storks, are the birds to see the baby prophet in his basket among the bulrushes, picked out of the river Nile by pharaoh's daughter (not unlike lucky Hans). From goose to stork to ibis, big birds have flexible identities that shift depending on which species is familiar in any given setting. This is true also among birds featured in memes:



Here, the aptly-named Drake performs a compere roll similar to the storks in the Hans Christian Andersen story. The meme page Untitled Leftist Goose narrates and Drake, with heavy-weight meme icon status, endorses the *birbs* (who cares what kind). A large part of meme and of fairy tale appeal lies in recognisable characters and objects that become relatable in the cultural landscape: They work with a symbolic, self-referential

language. And in this stock cast, talking animals, birds in particular, abound. They stand as alternatives to a dominant establishment perspective: oppressed non-human species, who against the odds and laws of reality, are voicing opinions. More broadly, we can look at this as part of fantasy's liberating function; that it allows us to imagine hierarchies and systems that are different from the existing ones.

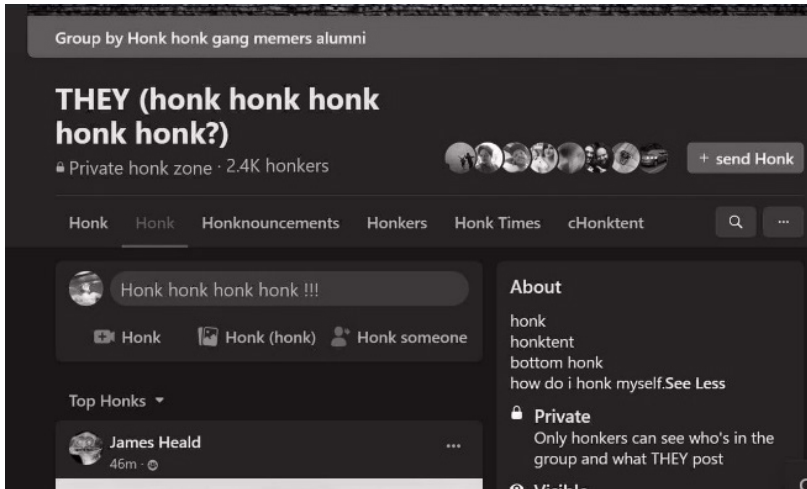
HONK

The horrible goose, like many meme stars, delights in riotous entertainment for entertainment's sake, a spirit which has been commandeered in recent times by the alt-right within internet culture. This propensity in memes towards anti-ideology is not expressly right wing or conservative but according to Angela Nagle, evidence for 'the hegemony of the culture of non-conformism, self-expression, transgression and irreverence for its own sake—an aesthetic that suits those who believe in nothing but the liberation of the individual and the id' (37). And with this attitude the horrible goose honks its catchphrase: 'Peace was Never an Option' (Untitled Goose Game).

The writer Lawrence Millman said 'Chance is the mother of invention,' on hearing the richness of local folk-stories when in the Arctic. He added 'Invention is also the mother of invention'. A story from Angela Carter's *Virago* collection, flaunting its self-expression and its own inventiveness, makes his point:

So one woman after another straightaway
brought forth her child. Soon there was a whole
row of them. Then the whole band departed,
making a confused noise. When the girl saw
that, she said: 'There is no joke about it now.
There comes a red army with umbilical cords still
hanging on.' (3)

This type of story and goose memes share a mood, ebulliently refusing logic and defying analysis. Take the irreverent nonsense a step further and you get *honking* the universally repurposable expression of aggression, that makes the horrible goose so very memeable:



It is anti-verbal, with the cathartic quality of a scream, beyond criticism or explanation. Its non-specificity makes it applicable to an infinite range of situations. And within the goose game universe the Honk is not impotent and ridiculous as we know it to be in real life, but dangerous and effective:

21 Sep 2019

I got a suggestion to use a turbo button controller for the honk button. I have weaponized this goose.

Through pages like *Untitled Leftist Goose*, the Goose retaliates against the far-right trolls who rampage through the internet. It has been adopted as a symbol of anti-capitalist resistance. This makes sense considering the aim of the game is to disturb the workings of a smug, upper-class, presumably conservative, presumably non-progressive, village, rather than just causing indiscriminate chaos. Tactical disruption of a capitalist system by a marginal figure certainly sounds like political action. This extends intuitively, free from analytic process, in different directions:



Bobby 🇺🇸

@marqueemoonpie

This is the leader of ANTIFA. His name is Jason and he is a duck. #EXPOSEANTIFA



9:49 AM · 04 Jun 20 · Twitter Web App



Goose, a quaint village near you

The Goose from Untitled Goose

endorses Bernie



HONK HONK HONK HONK HONK HONK HONK HONK.
HONK HONK HONK HONK. HONK HONK HONK HONK
HONK HONK HONK HONK HONK, HONK HONK HONK
HONK HONK HONK HONK HONK HONK HONK HONK.
HONK HONK HONK!!"

Generated at IENDORSEBERNIE.com — #IEndorseBernie

Bernie



Gerson Freitas Jr. @gersonjr · 22h

Brazil president Jair Bolsonaro shows a box of hydroxychloroquine pills — which he's advertised as a cure for Covid-19 symptoms, despite evidence to the contrary — to emu-like birds in Brasilia. He's recently bitten by an emu-like bird. Twice.

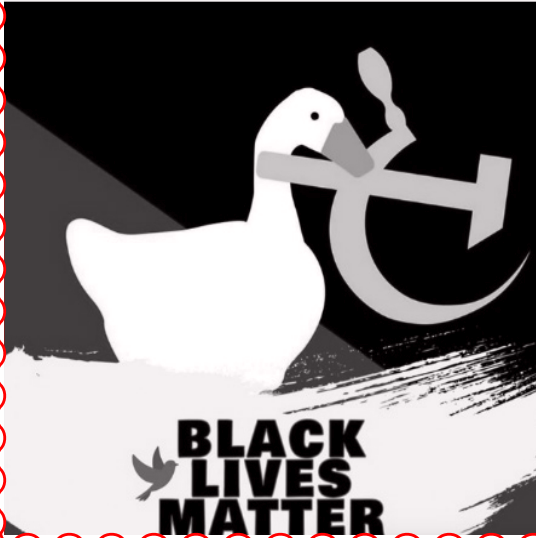


Untitled Leftist Goose

12 juli om 20:38 · 🌐



Comrade **Untitled Goose Memes** out there doing the good work, they're a normie meme page and regularly piss off followers when they drop some of that lefty jazz.



That memes are so integrated into communication and socialising – conversations can be held through pure meme exchange, and often a meme replaces a comment as a concise illustration of what needs to be expressed – makes them important gossip components. As demonstrated in the two news-commentary-joke combos above. Spread on global social networks, instead of round the kitchen table, gossip is exponentialised. Meaning that non-establishment politics have more clout and more consequences on the offices of power than ever before, as we have seen terrifyingly with the rise of populism in Europe and America. Even if Trump's election shouldn't be entirely accredited to memes and internet trolling, their power, whether imaginary or not, is clearly huge – the hype is real.

What does it mean for this non-verbal, non-narrative form to be the new fairytale? Where fairytales are garrulous and spun out, designed to extract as much entertainment from a story as possible in the days before TV existed, memes are ultimately boiled down, to squeeze a message into a half-second between constantly competing stimuli. With thrust and concision comes simplification. In times when politicians/devils like Boris Johnson and Donald Trump cultivate a simple idiot image to gain popularity, with the pretense of being anti-establishment, a rising prominence of dumb, anti-linguistic expression becomes a scary prospect. Should we be alarmed that honking has replaced storytelling?

Digging up the underworld

Angela Carter offers her collection of fairy tales 'in a valedictory spirit, as a reminder of how wise, clever, perceptive, occasionally lyrical, eccentric, sometimes downright crazy our great grandmothers were, and their great grandmothers; and of the contributions to literature of mother goose and her goslings' (9)

This document also should be a reminder and a tribute though not a valediction: The Devil's Grandmother doesn't bid us farewell because she's seen enough heroes and villains come and go from her cave looking for hairs or for secrets or for the truth, to know that we will keep coming and going. She's not alarmed: her professional security is covered. She looks on omnisciently and smiles at our quest. We don't know yet whether her grin is wicked or benign. She lives off telling and retelling, on a diet of narrative artifacts, like this one. She's no snob: she'll gobble up fact and fiction, high and low, reliable and dubious; as long as the source has flavour, she doesn't care who cooked it. This egalitarian attitude, the bottom-up nature of fairy tale telling, is disruptive to hierarchies. According to Phaedrus the Roman Fabulist who first wrote down Aesop's Tales, it is with conscious intention that they determinedly and repeatedly cheer on the underdog. It is built into their original function:

Now I will briefly explain how the type of thing called fable was invented. The slave being liable to punishment for any offence, since he dared not say out-right what he wished to say, projected his personal sentiments into fables, and eluded censure under the guise of jesting with made up stories.
(Phaedrus, 245)

Sibyl, Dory, and the Goose agree. They are aware of their own storytelling purpose, taking a voice from their position as a teller: they don't just tell, they tell about telling. And not just about their own telling but about the narrative layer underneath, and the one under that, and the one under that, until eventually you reach the underworld where the Devil's Grandmother sits in her cave, the roof trembling under the weight of all those stories but somehow never falling in.

Susan Shapiro, the American author, takes up the self-

conscious excavation effort with great enthusiasm and great unsubtlety – she’s using a shovel not a brush – in her 1978 film, *Rapunzel Let Down Your Hair*. My mum, playing her part in the intergenerational story relay, told me about it on Whatsapp: ‘Hey. Do you know a film by Susan Shapiro called *rapunzel let down your hair* - an imaginative experimental and playful look at myth storytelling and female identity. Sounds like your kind of territory. I watched it. V fascinating and odd and massively strong interesting flavour of 1978 and simple simple animation and all the anxieties and aspirations and optimism of then...’

In the film, a mother reads her daughter the story of *Rapunzel*, accompanied by cut out animations. It is then retold five times, each version reinterpreting and recontextualising the relationships - from the prince as voyeuristic film noir detective trying to rescue a heroin addicted sex slave *Rapunzel* from the top of a tower block, to the witch as a feminist doctor specialising in contraception, shocked when her teenage daughter reveals that she is pregnant and intends to keep the baby, to *Rapunzel* as a struggling single mother of twins, liberated when she ‘lets her hair down’, at an all women’s party, unleashing her voice, backed by a mullet headed funk band. An essay about medieval witch hunts and the role of witches in the collective imagination today is spliced into the middle of the film. It is unapologetically clunky and explicit in laying bare the workings of the fairy tale, its symbols, its past and future lives. By watching it, you are made part of the tale relay.

To end a story, Russian narrators tell their audience: ‘The tale is over. I can’t lie any more’ (Carter, 8). With the verbal equivalent of a wink, they acknowledge the fiction of fiction, and so legitimise it: There’s no pretence going on here, officer. When we hear ‘once upon a time’, or any of its variants – like the emphatically enigmatic Armenian version ‘There was a time and no time’, or the teasey ‘There was and there was not, there was a boy’ – we know that what we are being told isn’t going to pretend to be true. We listen with awareness that asks us to appreciate the invention, and maybe we think about it, and maybe we act on it. These stories not only comprise our subconscious cultural terrain – they alter conscious opinions, they change minds.

The thirst for what happened next? is unquenchable. Fairy tales, the narratives without originators that can be remade by each person who tells them, whether they tell about local gossip, or about international affairs, or about a sausage keeping house with a cat, whether carved on a stone tablet or blasted on a car

radio, or posted on facebook will be recycled and redistributed to infinity. This is my story, I've told it and in your hands I leave it.

We took the ferry down to hell to ask the Devil's Grandmother how to build an alternative non-establishment framework from stories. She leaned close so we could feel her fiendish breath on our cheek and hear her morally ambiguous heart beating, and she told us to try it and see for ourselves.

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