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CARNAL KNOWLEDGE

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WENDY DONIGER



**Carnal Knowledge**

THE DOREEN B. TOWNSEND CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES was established at the University of California at Berkeley in 1987 in order to promote interdisciplinary studies in the humanities. Endowed by Doreen B. Townsend, the Center awards fellowships to advanced graduate students and untenured faculty on the Berkeley campus, and supports interdisciplinary working groups, lectures, and team-taught graduate seminars. It also sponsors symposia and conferences which strengthen research and teaching in the humanities, arts, and related social science fields. The Center is directed by Randolph Starn, Professor of History and Italian Studies. Christina M. Gillis has been Associate Director of the Townsend Center since 1988.

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On October 8, 1999, Wendy Doniger, Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago, visited the Townsend Center to deliver the first in a series of lectures in the Center's 1999-2000 program initiative, "Knowledge and Belief." Introduced by Randolph Starn, Director of the Townsend Center, *CARNAL KNOWLEDGE* presents the text of Professor Doniger's lecture, "Are Carnal Ignorance and Carnal Knowledge Cross-Cultural Categories?" The brisk and lively conversation with the audience following the lecture is also included here.

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## Preface

When we were planning a series lectures and conversations for the year on *Knowledge and Belief*, Wendy Doniger was, so to say, a necessary choice.

One reason for taking up this theme at the Townsend Center is that scholars working in fields ranging from philosophy, religious studies, the law, and history to the social and physical sciences would of course have different approaches that ought to be brought in contact and might otherwise not be; one reason for inviting Wendy Doniger to visit the Center early on is that she brings many of those approaches together—to think in folklore, like the little tailor, she would do seven in one blow.

Another reason for our interest in the theme is that both the received answers and the ways of posing questions about knowledge and belief are in some disarray just now. This may be a real millennial mood or only an imitation of one, but one way or another, familiar oppositions between science and religion, proof and persuasion, truths of nature and reason and constructions of culture are fuzzy these days even as the academy and the real world seem bound and determined to insist on them. So how are the boundaries between knowledge and belief being drawn or redrawn at the end of a century and the beginning of a millennium? What can be learned from analogies and connections across time and across cultures over and perhaps against the contemporary drumbeat that it's all new and unprecedented? Yet another reason for putting such questions to Wendy Doniger is that it's one of her occupational hazards to be asking them all the time.

Her interests and accomplishments defy belief, except that we know they are true. As a comparatist in folklore studies and myth, she works the lines of stories and texts that are by one definition made of credulous belief and by another the bearers of true knowledge. For her, comparative mythology is a kind of knowing about beliefs that she defends against the lumpers who would universalize too much and the splitters, those both myopically most traditional and those myopically most post-modern; but she also wants to defend the ways in which comparative work must also involve belief and even faith about knowledge. She goes on to stretch those ambivalences, trespassing, drawing on many cultures, literatures, media, and lives, always playful, erudite, and provocative. On just a page or so (56-57) of *The Implied Spider* (Columbia, 1998) she cites Zeno's paradox of Achilles and the Tortoise; a philological riff from Indo-European mythology; Pumpkinhead of Oz as a self-appointed expert on language barriers; Noam Chomsky on the unity of humanity hardwired for universal grammar, and Nim Chimpsky, the talented chimp who might have made Chomsky's point for other primates. "My aim," she writes, "is an expansive, humanistic outlook on inquiry in both its particularity and its commonality," without "closing the comparatist shop just because it is being picketed." That's the declaration, but the demonstration comes in a shower of images and tales: the need for both the telescopic view and the microscopic one; cats in the dark (all the same) and in the light (all different); the implied spider "as the shared humanity, the shared life experience, that supplies the web-building material of narrative to countless webmakers, authors, including human anthropologists and human comparatists" (61).

Wendy Doniger is one of few scholars whose books can be found on the shelves of seminar rooms and in airports, where she admits to wanting to find them. By my count there are 23 of them among monographs, manuals, a children's book on the Ganges, works edited and coedited, translations, and lecture series published. Not to mention five books in progress, including a novel, *Horses for Lovers, Dogs for Husbands* (airports anyone?). The subjects are, just for a start, Sanskrit and Greek texts; world lore and movie madness; sex and gender; methods for myths and myths for method; and, to come in March 2000, *The Bed Trick: Myths of Sexual Masquerade*, about which we heard in Wendy Doniger's Townsend lecture.



The honors and high offices range from Kalamazoo to the Collège de France, from the presidency of the American Academy for Religion to that of the Association for Asian Studies; from boards of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences to those of the Mellon Foundation and ACLS. Latest but not least, if there were a Townsend medal for distinguished service, she would win it hands down for having made an early morning's flight from Chicago in order to lecture here and share in the discussion her presentation inspired. I am particularly pleased that this Occasional Paper enables its readers to partake of that wonderful occasion.

—Randolph Starn  
Director, Townsend Center for the Humanities  
Marian E. Koshland Distinguished Professor in the Humanities

# Are Carnal Ignorance and Carnal Knowledge Cross-Cultural Categories?

Wendy Doniger

Yes. That is my answer to the question I posed in my title. You can all go home now, if you like, or stick around to see how the concept of carnal knowledge is expressed in the Hebrew Bible, ancient Sanskrit literature, and contemporary Hollywood films. It is demonstrably cross-cultural (though by no means necessarily universal, a distinction I argued for in my book, *The Implied Spider*). And I will argue that the concept of carnal ignorance is cross-cultural, too. I have been investigating the tension between carnal knowledge and carnal ignorance as it is expressed in the mythology of the bedtrick (that is, sex with someone who pretends to be someone else), and all of my examples will be from that mythology.

## Carnal Knowledge

“Knowing” is a euphemism for the sexual act in many languages deriving from the biblical Hebrew usage. (Here we may note the power of language: once someone in ancient Israel used a verb meaning “know” to refer to the sexual act, it predisposed all Jews, Christians, and Muslims to believe that they would know the people they slept with.) Sexual knowledge is the key to the biblical stories of Tamar (whose father-in-law, Judah, does not *know* her when she disguises herself to seduce him) and of Eve. The awareness of sexual difference is the fruit of knowledge, and after the Fall the book of Genesis imagines sex in a new and

striking way: “And Adam knew Eve his wife.” The metaphor of sex as knowing cannot in this context be accepted as a euphemism, or “modesty of language” as some commentators have called it. In the first chapters of Genesis the same verb “YADA” means to know and distinguish between moral categories and to be aware of one’s own and another’s physical difference (nakedness). Underlying all the first instances of knowing is the concept of distinction rendered physically immediate by the image of the opened eyes.<sup>1</sup> Just as lack of knowledge originally made sex possible for Eve, so knowledge and discovery finally forbid it for Judah.<sup>2</sup>

The verb appears in the negative form for the man at the end of the story of Tamar and Judah: “And he knew her again no more.” Not surprisingly, the usage of this verb is gendered in an asymmetrical way: *Genesis* never says that a woman ‘knows’ a man. Hebrew, it seems, could not say that (although it could say it in the negative, as Lot’s daughters are said not to have known man, Gen. 19:8).<sup>3</sup> When the pun extends into New Testament Greek, however, woman can use it actively (though still negatively): when the angel tells Mary that she is going to have a baby, she replies, “How can that be, since I do not *know* a man?” (Luke 1.34).<sup>4</sup>

It has been argued that the term “carnal knowledge,” from medieval canon law, suggests that embodied knowledge of oneself and another human being can be attained in the intimacy of lovemaking. But this intimacy is merely physical: the qualifier ‘carnal’ effectively canceled recognition that either intellectual or spiritual understanding can occur. Tertullian said, “The flesh will still be the thinking place of the soul.” Is “carnal knowing” then a contradiction in terms? To have carnal knowledge means that the body transmits to the brain a knowledge that the brain would not otherwise have. Terence Cave has speculated on the nature of such knowledge in tales of disguise and recognition: “What emerges if one puts together these different aspects of the idiosyncrasy of recognition is first of all a sense of a means of knowing which is different from rational cognition. It operates surreptitiously, randomly, elliptically and often perversely, seizing on precisely those details that from a rational point of view seem trivial.”<sup>5</sup> In these stories, all differences fall apart, trumped by sex, which is irrational and hence cannot be disproved; it is in the body and hence cannot be subjected to mental criteria.

In Shakespeare’s play *Measure for Measure*, Mariana substitutes for Isabel in the bed of her husband Angelo, and Angelo is fooled. The play climaxes in a

wonderful passage of puns and riddles on “knowing.” Mariana argues, “I have known my husband; yet my husband knows not that ever he knew me.... Angelo, who thinks he knows that he ne’er knew my body, But knows, he thinks, that he knows Isabel’s.” When the duke asks Angelo, “Know you this woman?” a bystander interpolates, “Carnally she says,” but Angelo confesses that he does, in fact, “know” the woman, though he denies any but public knowledge, to which Mariana replies, “But Tuesday night last gone, in’s garden-house, He knew me as a wife” (5.1).

That the sexual act is the ultimate key to unlock a concealed identity is a Freudian assumption which Michel Foucault (building on the insights of Bachelard) sums up well:

[W]e also admit that it is in the area of sex that we must search for the most secret and profound truths about the individual, that it is there that we can best discover what he is and what determines him. And if it was believed for centuries that it was necessary to hide sexual matters because they were shameful, we now know that it is sex itself which hides the most secret parts of the individual: the structure of his fantasies, the roots of his ego, the forms of his relationship to reality. At the bottom of sex, there is truth.<sup>6</sup>

So, too, the work of the Lacanian feminist Luce Irigaray seems to assume, or imply, that sexual difference is more fundamental than other forms of difference and is not to be understood as articulated through other vectors of power—indeed, that other forms of difference might be *derived* from sexual difference.<sup>7</sup> In the context of the bedtrick, this means that the failure to distinguish sexual difference—by which I mean not only the difference between one sex and another, but the difference between the sexuality of one person and another, that is, the difference between partners in bed—creates a vector of power through which other vectors such as race or class may be filtered.

But Freud did not invent the belief that sex is where we find the truth about an individual’s often-masquerading identity: he learned it from the texts of stories from other times and other cultures. These texts insist that the body tells the truth: the real person is the person glimpsed in bed, while the person whom we see at other times is a veneer, a superficial double. The extreme form of this

view, which denies individuality and reduces sexuality to animality, is characteristic of pornography, as John Hubner has remarked: “Sex strips away identities it takes a lifetime to build. A naked aroused man is not a brain surgeon or a university president or a Methodist bishop. He is an animal with an erection.”<sup>8</sup>

A number of texts in several cultures express or imply the view that, in bed, the victim might put his or her finger on the sexual trigger of identity. Milan Kundera’s womanizing hero sought the secret of each woman’s minute difference in bed, and Kundera tells us why:

Why couldn’t he find it, say, in a woman’s gait or culinary caprices or artistic taste? To be sure, the millionth part dissimilarity is present in all areas of human existence, but in all areas other than sex it is exposed and needs no one to discover it, no scalpel.... Only in sexuality does the millionth part dissimilarity become precious, because, not accessible in public, it must be conquered.<sup>9</sup>

Ignoring other signs of identity, such as the gait of the foot, which distinguishes humans from animals,<sup>10</sup> and tastes in food, the womanizer wants not only to know a woman, to cut her open like a surgeon (the man in question, Tomas, actually is a brain surgeon), but also to conquer her in her sexuality, in her hiddenness.

Supernatural or magical bedtricksters in myths can often be identified not by any constant criterion, such as their lack of a shadow, but rather by things that they do at certain moments—such as, for instance, the moment of making love. Bedtrick myths abound in literal projections: a god or demon projects from his mind, like a beam of light from a film projector (or what, in my childhood, we still called a “magic lantern”) an illusion that envelops the mind of his victim. Such a trickster is, however, compelled to take his (more rarely her) own true form when he loses mental control and hence inadvertently turns off the current from the magic projector in his head. When the king in a Sanskrit play asks, “How can you find a deity who has concealed herself by her magic powers?” the jester replies, “Sometimes they fail to conjure up the concealment.”<sup>11</sup> This happens, according to various texts, when the trickster sleeps, dies, eats, laughs, gets drunk, angry, frightened, very happy, or, in the case of a demoness, gives birth. It also happens when the trickster makes love, when sexual passion strips away the

disguise and reveals the true identity. This cluster of beliefs centers around the intuition that the truth is encased in the subconscious—in sleep, in dream, in bed, in sex.

The Hindu demons Adi and Jalandhara inadvertently resume their own forms when they shed their seed in lust. The Buddha is said to have claimed that there are two occasions when a *naga* (a cobra-god, frequently a snake lover) will reveal his true form (*svabhava*), presumably after assuming a human form: when he engages in sexual intercourse with a female of his own species and when he sleeps thinking he is safe from detection.<sup>12</sup> The specification of a female of his own species (*sajatiya*) suggests that it is not just the power of sexuality but the pull toward the form corresponding to that of his partner—toward sameness, away from difference—that draws this bedtrickster back to his true self.

Supernatural creatures are well aware of the fact that they may be unmasked by sex. A Hindu bedtrickster in a Sanskrit text from c. 700 CE knows that he may reveal his true form when he makes love, and so he takes precautions:

A celestial courtesan fell in love with a Brahmin and begged him to stay with her, but he rejected her, saying, “Don’t touch me! Go to some other man who is like you.” He went away, and a demigod who was in love with the courtesan and had been rejected by her observed her now and reasoned, “She is in love with a human. If I take on his form, she will suspect nothing and will make love with me.” Disguised as the Brahmin, the demigod approached her and said, “You must not look at me during the time of our shared sexual enjoyment [*sambhoga*], but close your eyes and unite with me.” She agreed, and when they made love, and her eyes were tightly closed, she thought, because of his hot energy, it was the form of the [Brahmin] suffused with the sacrificial fire. Then, after a while, she conceived an embryo, who came from the demigod’s semen and from (her) thinking about the Brahmin’s form. The demigod went away, still in the form of the Brahmin.<sup>13</sup>

The demigod’s “hot energy,” or semen (*tejas*), is heated by his lust, not (as the nymph imagines) by his sacrificial power. Her belief that she is making love with the Brahmin (never dispelled in this episode—the trickster leaves before he is

unmasked) gives the child the Brahmin's form, through parental imprinting: the belief that if a woman thinks of someone other than her actual partner during the sexual act, the child she conceives may resemble not the actual partner but the imagined partner.

The revelatory sexual act is a recurrent theme in the American cinema. When the heroine of *American Gigolo* (1980), all starry-eyed and worshipful in her post-coital glow, says to the hero (if we can call him that), "I want to know all about you," he replies, "We just made love, didn't we? Then you know all there is to know." Maybe this is meant to apply only to gigolos, whose meaning is entirely circumscribed by sex. But it is all that the woman needs to know about her man in Pedro Almodovar's *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1989), in which the heroine is abducted by a man who claims that he once knew her (carnally and otherwise), which she vehemently denies. When he finally makes love to her, at the moment when he enters her she says, "Now I know." "What?" "I remember you now. You told me that we had screwed before. I said I didn't remember. Well, now I sure do remember." To which he simply replies, not skipping a beat, "It's about time."

Some gay men say that each of the two partners can know simultaneously what both of them experience separately, that they can know what it is to penetrate while being penetrated, or the reverse—the Teiresias paradigm. Daniel Mendelsohn argues, "If the emotional aim of intercourse is a total knowing of the other, gay sex may be, in its way, perfect, because in it a total knowledge of the other's experience is, finally, possible."<sup>14</sup> This is, as Jonathan Lear put it, "a fantasy of the total transparency of the other's experience."<sup>15</sup> It assumes that because your partner is *doing* the same physical act that you have done and will do, s/he is *feeling* what you have felt and will feel. The cross-sex (or heterosexual) fantasy, by contrast, is the challenge of knowing someone who is otherwise opaque to you, someone as different from you as you can imagine or find (not just someone of the other gender but, ultimately, someone of another culture or even another species, as in the tale of *Beauty and the Beast*). Mendelsohn's assertion that "sex between men dissolves otherness into sameness"<sup>16</sup> makes no allowance for the sexual individuality that applies equally well to same-sex and cross-sex experience: the chance to know the unique qualities revealed both in sexual sameness and in sexual difference, the different ways in which each of us is penetrated or penetrates.

The sadistic aspect of sexual knowledge as power was chillingly depicted by Nicholas Delbanco in *In the Nature of Mercy*, in his glimpse into the mind of a serial killer named Trip:

Control: Trip liked the way he kept it and his partners lost it—the weepers, the screamers, the polite ones swearing shamelessly and then the proud ones begging, stripped of pride. He liked what he learned about women from the way they behaved in the dark. There was nothing else—well, drowning or torture maybe, but he wasn't into drowning—that could teach you so much, and so fast.... From the moment he first understood how people change without their clothes, how what they're hiding *matters* and you can get their secrets when you get them into bed, Trip understood the game. And everybody played. He *knew* her, says the Bible, and Eve swallowed knowledge when she ate the apple and offered a piece to Adam and then got dressed and left.... The satisfaction was *discovery*—how you never knew beforehand what a person would reveal to you when you had your cock or hand inside them and were bearing down. You never knew till you were trying them how they would respond.<sup>17</sup>

The casual dismissal of drowning, but not torture, as an equivalent to the sexual manipulation of knowledge is one of the minor terrors of this passage.

Annie Dillard balances the assertion that sexual love is the best (and the counter-assertion that it is the worst) source of knowledge of personal identity in her novel, *The Living*, in a passage about a man named Clare:

Clare knew that common wisdom counseled that love was a malady that blinded lovers' eyes like acid. Love's skewed sight made hard features appear harmonious, and sinners appear saints, and cowards appear heroes. Clare was by no means an original thinker, but on this one point he had reached an opposing view, that lovers alone see what is real. The fear and envy and pride that stain souls are phantoms. The lover does not fancy that the beloved possesses imaginary virtues. He knew June was not especially generous, not especially noble in deportment, not



especially tolerant, patient, or self-abasing. The lover is simply enabled to see—as if the heavens busted open to admit a charged light—those virtues the beloved does possess in their purest form.

June was a marvel, and she smelled good.<sup>18</sup>

The animal sense of smell, transmuted into the human seventh sense of sex, simultaneously encapsulates and triggers the boundless, ineffable appreciation of the “marvel,” the shining wonder, of another living being. And this combination of physical and emotional factors outweighs the intellectual assessment of the object of desire.

This is not a universal belief, though it is demonstrably cross-cultural; I have found it in certain cultures at certain moments (ancient India, the Hebrew Bible, Renaissance England and Europe, Hollywood films), from the great religious mythologies of the world to contemporary popular culture. It is common to argue that you get to know people through love rather than through sex, but people in various cultures tend to mix up sex and love as ways of knowing. Thus some texts argue that you *do* know people through love and that you do *not* know people through sex (regarded as inferior to, and indeed opposed to, love); others that you *do not* know people through love and that you *do* know people through sex (regarded as embedded in the body, which is closer to the essential self). Still others muddy the waters by regarding sex as caused by or causing love, or love as a form of desire, lust, or sex. Classical Indian texts, for instance, distinguish sex (*kama*) from love (*prema*), but different genres disagree as to which of these a woman experiences with her husband, and which with her lover. Ideas about love vary greatly from one culture to another, and often we must rely on our rather shaky knowledge of what a particular author means by “love.”<sup>19</sup>

## Carnal Ignorance

In contrast with the argument for the revelatory power of sex, many texts present a powerful counterargument, testifying to the power of sexual fantasy and the evidence that sex is a lie.

Sex can raise or lower our perception of a partner, moving us (according to later, retrospective judgment) from illusion to truth, or from truth to illusion. The permutations are complex, if not infinite, because there are several variables,

each of which may prove illusory. Sometimes we are deluded about our partners, over whom we project our own fantasies (before, after, or during the sexual act); sometimes we delude ourselves with fantasies about ourselves, thinking that we are animals seeking animal partners when in fact we are looking for gods, or the reverse; sometimes, all of the above. “Whatever can he see in her?” we ask one another about our friends, and often, when emotion is recollected in tranquillity,<sup>20</sup> “Whatever did I see in him?” (*see*, indeed—or rather, project onto him as a visual image). We all suffer from *bovarysme*, named after the heroine of Flaubert’s novel *Madame Bovary*, who deluded herself constantly, especially about sexual love. It is easier to find someone to go to bed with than to find someone to wake up with; we need a different sort of morning-after pill, a mental rather than physical retro-active contraceptive.<sup>21</sup>

Lust functions to cloud the mind, to throw a monkey-wrench in the rational machine. The anti-rational power of the genitals was already enshrined in the ancient Greek concept of “hysteria” (literally, the wandering of the womb in such a way as to drive women mad) and is still encoded, for the other gender, in the contemporary phrase that accuses a man of “thinking with his little head” (immortalized in the rock song, “Don’t Use Your Penis for a Brain”<sup>22</sup>) as well as in the belief, widespread in India and elsewhere, that semen is stored in the head.<sup>23</sup> This anatomical fantasy of upward displacement, conflating the organs of generation and cogitation, implies that both sexual experience and lust rise to the head, i.e., that sex both provides and corrupts knowledge, that it is a source of both truth and lies.

We trick ourselves in bed when we lie about who our partners are and about who we are. Though we may think we are “our real selves” in sex, we may actually be least so. Victims, therefore, lie to themselves, while tricksters lie to their victims and, often, to themselves as well. To seduce is to deceive; although not every masquerade is sexual, every sexual encounter is in a sense a masquerade. So basic is deception to sex—and so tight are the bonds between sex and text—that several languages have a pun linking sex and deception. In English “deceive” means both to fool someone and to violate a sexual promise, a pun that Robertson Davies puts in the mouth of a man who slept, disguised as a man named Arthur, with Arthur’s wife, Maria: “I know that I deceived Arthur. I can’t say if I deceived

Maria.”<sup>24</sup> By saying that someone who has been sexually unfaithful has “deceived” his or her partner, do we also imply that if you sleep with someone other than your partner you will lie about it? English abounds in such *double entendres*, it is only partly an accident of the English language that we lie *to* the people we lie *with*. As Shakespeare puns, in Sonnet 138: “Therefore I lie with her, and she with me,/ And in our faults by lies we flattered be”; and, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, when Lysander is negotiating how close he will lie to Hermia in the night, “Therefore I am not lying when I lie.” Or, as the author of a book about infidelity put it: infidelity isn’t about “whom you lie with. It’s about whom you lie to.”<sup>25</sup> In 1963, long before the Zippergate scandals of President Clinton, the British Profumo affair, involving callgirls named Christine Keeler and Mandy Rice-Davies, destroyed a Cabinet and produced one memorable limerick:

“What on earth have you done?” said Christine.

“You have ruined the party machine.

To lie in the nude

Is not at all rude,

But to lie in the House is obscene.”<sup>26</sup>

“True” and “false” lovers resonate with both the philosophical connotations of the English words (“Speak the truth”) and their moral-sexual connotations (“Be true to me”). The moral-sexual meaning of “false,” in normal usage, implies that a woman is “false” to her lover if she sleeps with someone else; its philosophical meaning grows much stronger in narrative texts, where she is “false” to him if she *is* someone else—a bedtrickster. In the first case, the oath of love is a false copy of the true oath; in the second, the person is a false copy of the true lover.

The legal scholar Jane E. Larson points out an underlying assumption of our culture: “lying is integral to the ‘dance’ of sexual initiation and negotiation. Exaggerated praise, playful suggestions, efforts to impress, and promises intended to reassure and trigger emotion (but not to be strictly believed) are all part of the ritual of escalating erotic fascination that makes up a ‘seduction’ in the colloquial sense. To lie to a sexual partner is to share a leap of fancy—all very harmless and justifiable.” This leads Larson to ask, “[I]s it ever reasonable to believe a lover? Were our grandmothers right in telling us that men always lie for sex, and the

woman who listens is a fool? This counsel rests on the presumption that lying for sex is in `the rules of the game.’”<sup>27</sup> Larson argues that the courts must change the game, but the myths reveal how deeply entrenched a game it is. Indeed, *The Rules of the Game* (*La règle du jeu*) is the title of Jean Renoir’s great film about a bedtrick.

The ancient wisdom of the grandmothers persists in the cynicism with which we regard sociological surveys of sexual behavior. Ned Zeman, reviewing *The Janus Report on Sexual Behavior* (a two-headed report? dedicated to Janus, god of closet doors?), advises us to “remember this one sexual truth: men lie.”<sup>28</sup> R. C. Lewontin, reviewing another sex survey, writes:

Anyway, why should anyone lie on a questionnaire that was answered in a face-to-face interview with a total stranger? After all, complete confidentiality was observed. It is frightening to think that social science is in the hands of professionals who are so deaf to human nuance that they believe that people do not lie to themselves about the most freighted aspects of their own lives, and that they have no interest in manipulating the impression that strangers have of them.... In the single case where one can actually test the truth, the investigators themselves think it most likely that people are telling themselves and others enormous lies.<sup>29</sup>

Anthony Lane, reviewing the same sex survey, related the matter with his characteristic wry humor:

These books are not about sex. They are not even about dancing. They are about lying. They are constructed with admirable clarity, but they represent the *ne plus ultra* of fuzziness—the unalterable fuzz of our duplicity, the need to hide the truth from other people in the hope that we will cease to recognize it ourselves. Read a sentence such as, “Men report that they experience fellatio at a far greater rate than women report providing it,” and you find yourself glancing down a long, shady vista of self-delusion. This is not a question of inefficient research, or of culpable hypocrisy, or even of that much loved villain of the piece, the male boast; it is simply what T. S. Eliot called *bovarysme*,

“the human will to see things as they are not,” and throughout *The Social Organization of Sexuality* it never once failed to give me a good laugh.<sup>30</sup>

The fellatio ratio is one of many asymmetries between male and female perceptions of the same act. The American public’s reaction to President Clinton’s revelation of the fact that he had had a sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky and had lied about it was simply, “Why make such a fuss? Everyone lies about sex.” A 1999 survey of lie-detection apparently established, statistically, that “not surprisingly, the most common of such lies were about affairs.”<sup>31</sup>

The evidence of our myths, too, indicates that the mating game is one whose rules were designed to be broken. Men lie in sexual situations: Pinocchios all, their noses stretch in resonance with (a Freudian might say upward displacement from) their lower noses. (In the aftermath of the Clinton scandals, some entrepreneur marketed a Clinton watch, with a picture of the president on the face, and a computer mechanism that makes the nose grow, suggestively, longer and then shorter.) Men are particularly inclined to lie in cultures, such as ours, where with one hand (the right hand of the superego) they impose monogamous constraints that, with the other hand (the left hand of the id), they evade. If tyrants make liars, monogamous societies make sexual liars, and those who are, as it were, maritally challenged often turn bedtricks. In the film *Liar, Liar* (1998), about a man—more precisely, a *lawyer*—magically compelled to tell the truth, the first place the curse manifests itself is where it is most obvious, the place where everyone lies: not in court, but in bed. When his adulterous partner asks him, in post-coital languor, how it was for him, the lawyer responds, to his own shocked dismay and her fury, “I’ve had better.”

It is easier for women than for men to lie physically in some ways, faking orgasms, for example, a widely attested, and debated, skill. But it is more difficult (though by no means impossible) for women to lie about other physical aspects of sex, such as maidenheads.<sup>32</sup> When Isolde substituted her maid, Brangane, for herself on her wedding night with King Mark to disguise the fact that she had lost her maidenhead to Tristan, she “devised the best ruse that she could at this juncture, namely that they should simply ask [her maid] Brangane to lie at [her husband] Mark’s side during the first night.” And the author of this version of the story, Gottfried, remarks, “Thus love instructs honest minds to practice perfidy.”<sup>33</sup>

Getting pregnant is a big truth teller. Pregnancy may be the problem, proof that adultery has taken place; hence the accusations against Tamar, Mary (Matthew 1.18-25), and many other women.<sup>34</sup> But sometimes pregnancy is the solution, proof that the woman is fertile (when barrenness, rather than fertility, is the problem) or that her husband enjoys sleeping with her after all (when rejection, i.e., *his* barrenness, is the problem). In *Measure for Measure*, only a pregnancy provides a sure distinction between the ‘imagined’ body and the actual one.<sup>35</sup>

Men, on the other hand, lie about other physical aspects of sex, such as desire. Although Pinocchio’s nose declared to the world that he was lying, a man can fake<sup>36</sup>—or conceal—an erection; even chimpanzees can conceal it.<sup>37</sup> Thus there is an asymmetry, or double standard, in both the timing and the concealment of the physical lying and truth-telling of men and women: men’s physical truth-test comes earlier, with desire, and is relatively easy to fake, while for women, the truth test comes later, with pregnancy, and is harder (though not impossible) to fake. These double standards suggest one reason the stories about bedtricks are not symmetrical or interchangeable: that is, you cannot take the stories about men and tell them about women, or the reverse; different details give them different shapes.

It has even been said that lying is not simply something that occasionally happens in the course of our sexual life but rather is its very essence. Janet Adelman reads in the Shakespearean bedtricks “the suggestion that mistrust and deception are at the very root of the sexual act, as though the man is always tricked, defiled, and shamed there.”<sup>38</sup> Angela Carter’s character soliloquizes, “Now I remember how everything seemed possible when I was doing it, but as soon as I stopped, not, as if fucking itself were the origin of illusion.”<sup>39</sup> So, too, Salman Rushdie’s narrator suggests that betrayal might be the very heart of sexuality: “What if she made you love her *so that she could betray you*—if betrayal were not the failure of love, but the purpose of the whole exercise from the start?”<sup>40</sup>

Sexual lies, however common, are not cheap; we pay dearly for them. Precisely because sexual truth is posited as the ultimate truth, sexual betrayal is posited as the ultimate betrayal. The protean quality of sexual passion, unfortunately coupled with our foolish tendency to use sexual love as the rock on which we build the church of our identity, drives us to use highly charged words like

“betrayal” (with its political overtones) and “unfaithful” (with its religious overtones) to describe the sexual lie. For this is the betrayal and infidelity that cuts closest to the bone, encompassing within it the other two, the political and the religious. When we deceive others about our sexual identity, or are deceived by them, we lose one of the main anchors of our *own* sense of identity, since we are lying to ourselves when we betray, or are betrayed by, those whom we desire and/or love. Why, then, do we speak of the sexual act as carnal knowledge? We would do better to call it carnal ignorance.

## False Ignorance and False Knowledge

But what sort of knowledge is obtained in the sexual act, and by whom? One could answer, knowledge of the body of the other, of course, on the most superficial level, and of the emotional vulnerabilities of the other. But the range of stories about bedtricks teaches us that when we ask, “Who is being fooled?” different stories will give different answers. And one aspect of this asymmetry is gender. If power is gendered, is knowledge gendered? Can she “know” him as he “knows” her? It may well be that because men have given most of our texts their final form, those texts speak primarily of a woman being entered and known, and of a man as having (carnal) knowledge of the woman. The man is the knower of the woman-as-field (of knowledge and of progeneration). The Hindus speak of the soul as the knower of the body-as-field (*kshetrajna*), just as they speak of the legitimate son as the one born from the wife’s body-as-field (*kshetraja*).<sup>41</sup> In these texts, the man goes inside the woman’s head as well as inside her body,<sup>42</sup> and in this sense he claims to know more about her than she, who does not physically penetrate him in the same way, knows about him.

But the inadequacy of the assertion that men know women sexually is often demonstrated by the very text that makes it in the first place: all that the man learns is a lie. A woman can conceal a number of things, including her very identity, by virtue of that very passivity that was to give him the advantage in knowing. This asymmetry is compounded by the asymmetry of public knowledge concerning who is the father (uncertain) or the mother (more certain) of the child, made yet more asymmetrical by the fact that the mother usually knows perfectly well who the father of her child is, though the father may not know what children he has fathered.

Moreover, women can know through being penetrated. Sexual knowledge, like power, can flow both ways, as Yeats pointed out in his poem about the rape of Leda by Zeus: “Did she take on his knowledge with his power, before the indifferent beak could let her drop?” The Swan’s penetration of Leda is a source of Leda’s knowledge; women (like Delphic oracles) are possessed and thereby become not only mediums for knowledge but also knowers. Thus when a man “knows” a woman, he may not know her at all, but she may very well know him. A man may know a woman (physically) and be mistaken about her identity. He may even know her carnally without any awareness whatsoever; he may be drunk. On the other hand, a woman being possessed in sex, apparently the object, may yet be the subject, the only possessor of the volatile element of awareness. She may know the man who mis-takes her. This striking fusion of body and mind in the verb to know contains the seeds of its own reversal. For there is no way in which this pristine clarity, this strict division into sexual subject and object can withstand the facts of human experience in the world, the deviousness and duplicity, the lies and illusions that mark the relations and especially the sexual relations between people.<sup>43</sup>

There is also such a thing as false knowledge, and there is false ignorance. True ignorance characterizes the victims of most bedtricks, who are simply fooled. It also characterizes unwitting bedtricksters, who do not actively mean to trick anyone but are, passively, mistaken for other people, as is the case in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, where neither Oedipus nor Iocasta knows that she is his mother, and in Shakespeare’s *A Comedy of Errors*, where neither of the twin brothers is aware that the other is there. False ignorance (which is not the same as actually *being* carnally ignorant) is fairly straightforward: the victim of a bedtrickster who impersonated the victim’s spouse claims, falsely, not to have recognized the trickster and therefore, falsely, not to be guilty of infidelity. Thus it is argued that the wife of Martin Guerre did know it was someone else in the form of her husband and falsely claimed ignorance because she preferred the impostor. This claim is seldom made against a man, but in the film *Body Language* (1992), an adulterous psychiatrist interviews a man who is brain-damaged: the psychiatrist shows the man a picture of Marilyn Monroe, whom he does not quite recognize. The doctor assures him that this is someone he knows. After a while he says, “Is that my wife?”



to which the psychiatrist's colleague remarks, "Hey, that would be a great line. You could cheat on your wife and say, 'I thought she was you.'"

False knowledge begins as the other side of the same coin, another way out of another sort of adultery. The unanswerable argument that the victims of bedtricks can use to bail themselves out when their spouses pretend to be someone else and succeed in seducing them is to say, with simple common sense, "I saw through the trick from the start, and just pretended to be fooled." The major drawback to a husband's testing his wife's fidelity by means of a bedtrick is the fact that she can always claim, retroactively, to have recognized him.<sup>44</sup> Victims of the bedtrick can foil the trickster in this way even when, in fact, they may have been tricked. In the *Arabian Nights* story "The Wife's Device to Cheat Her Husband," the woman whose husband catches her sending out for a lover (who turns out to be her husband) makes a preemptive strike; by pretending that she knew about his infidelity *before* she set out to commit her own, she can argue that she acted merely to entrap him.

But this excuse carries with it a more subtle form of betrayal, vividly depicted in Kobo Abe's novel and film, *Face of Another*. After the husband has, he thinks, bedtricked his wife (that is, seduced her while masquerading as another man), she leaves him, and he finds a letter that says, in part:

From the very first instant, when, elated with pride, you talked about the distortion of the magnetic field, I saw through you completely.... Even you knew very well that I had seen through you. You knew and yet demanded that I go on with the play in silence. I considered it a dreadful thing at first, but I soon changed my mind, thinking that perhaps you were acting out of sympathy for me.... My insides have almost burst with your ridicule. I shall never be able to get over it, never.<sup>45</sup>

But her assumption that he knew that she knew is not, apparently, justified, as we learn from his reaction to her letter:

What a surprise attack. To imagine that you perceived that my mask was a mask and nevertheless went on pretending to be deceived.... To imagine that you had seen through everything! It was as if I were putting on a play in which I was the only actor, thinking I was invisible, believing in a fake spell.<sup>46</sup>

Like her, he finds the knowing deception—*her* deception of *him*, her pretense not to know—even more terrible than he had felt her apparent infidelity to be—though it occurred via *his* deception of *her*.

False knowledge may also come into play when someone asserts falsely that a bedtrick has taken place. Casanova lies like this when he discovers that a woman he despised had substituted herself in the night for a woman he desired, and he had not noticed the difference; afterwards, he says, falsely, that he was not there at all, but had suspected the trick and sent his servant in his place.<sup>47</sup> This might make us wonder about other texts in which characters *say* that a bedtrick has taken place; perhaps they, too, are lying. Or, stepping out of the text for a moment, did the authors of certain texts invent bedtricks, arguing that their heroines were not in fact in inappropriate beds but had sent substitutes in their place, in order to absolve their heroines of the guilt for inappropriate sexual acts? Thus, sometimes you get off the hook by falsely claiming carnal ignorance (“Oh darling, I thought he was you”) and sometimes by falsely claiming carnal knowledge (“Oh darling, I knew it was you all along”).

The bedtrick is an exercise in epistemology: How could you know? How could you *not* know? The answer to the question, “Is it the same person?” will be expressed differently according to the different points of view of several different characters within the story. The very premise of the bedtrick is that there are two different points of view about the identity of the masquerader: that of the trickster who plays the bedtrick and knows the true identity of both partners, and that of the victim who is the object of the bedtrick and does not know the identity of the bedtrickster. In the case of inadvertent bedtricks, where neither the trickster nor the victim knows that a bedtrick is taking place, only we, the audience, and the author, know the truth. And sometimes the narrative forces us, the readers or hearers, to change our point of view mid-stream, even several times, as we discover that the protagonist (or the author) has been hiding something from us.

Point of view determines subject/object: if you know the trick and the other doesn't, you are the subject and the other is the object. This knowledge is what turns the tables (or beds) in the balance of sexual power. In the bedtrick, for the partner who knows, or who keeps his/her eyes wide open, sex is a source of knowledge. For the one who is fooled, or who allows lust to dupe him or her, sex is a lie. The bedtrick, like all masquerades, is situated on the cusp between

knowing and not knowing, more precisely on the narrow divide between not knowing, knowing while pretending to yourself that you don't know (self-delusion), and knowing while pretending to others that you don't know (lying).

The question is not simply whether one “knows” one's partner in the sexual act but which of the many aspects of the partner one recognizes in this most revealing, and concealing, of human interactions. The theme of “knowing” is particularly crucial to the many incest myths in this corpus, which ask, each in its own way, “How do you know it is your mother (or father)? Are you let off the hook if you do not know?” But the more pertinent question, coded in the story and relevant not just to incestuous bedtricks but to all bedtricks, is perhaps “How is it that you do not know who is in bed with you?” Or “How is it that you do not know that you do not know who is in bed with you?” Or, better, “Who are you who do not know that you do not know who is in bed with you?” Or, finally, “How is it that you do not know who you are?”

## Endnotes

1. Zvi Jagendorf, “‘In the Morning, Behold It Was Leah’: Genesis and the Reversal of Sexual Knowledge” (in *Biblical Patterns in Modern Literature*, David H. Hirsch et al eds., Brown Judaic Studies 77; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984, 51-60), 51.
2. Jagendorf, “‘In the morning,’” 55.
3. Jagendorf, “‘In the morning,’” 52.
4. *Pos estai touto, epei andra ou gignosko?*
5. Terence Cave, *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 3.
6. Foucault, *Hercule Barbin*, introduction, x-xi.
7. Luce Irigaray, discussed by Judith Butler, “Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen’s Psychoanalytic Challenge” (in Elizabeth Abel et al., *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, 266-284), 266.
8. John Hubner, *Bottom Feeders: From Free Love to Hard Core—The Rise and Fall of Counterculture Heroes Jim and Artie Mitchell* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1993), 62.
9. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 200.
10. Wendy Doniger, “The Mythology of Masquerading Animals, or, Bestiality,” in *In the Company of Animals*, ed. Arien Mack. *Social Research, An International Quarterly of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Fall, 1995), 751-772.
11. *Tapati-Samvaranam: The Sun God’s Daughter and King Samvarana* [attributed to Kulasekhara Varman], ed and trans. N. P. Unni and Bruce M. Sullivan. Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1995.
12. *Vinaya Pitaka*. Vol. 1: *The Mahavagga* (ed. Hermann Oldenberg. Pali Text Society. London: Luzac, 1969), 1.63.5.

13. *Markandeya Purana* (Bombay: Venkateshvara Steam Press, 1890), 58-61.
14. Daniel Mendelsohn, (*The Elusive Embrace: Desire and the Riddle of Identity*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1999), 74.
15. Jonathan Lear, "The Geography of Desire," review of Daniel Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace*; in the *New York Times Book Review*, Sunday, July 4, 1999, 7.
16. Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace*, 73-4.
17. Andrew Delbanco, *In the Nature of Mercy*, (New York: Warner Books, 1995), 230.
18. Annie Dillard, *The Living* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 269-70.
19. John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*. New York: Villard Books, 1994.
20. As William Wordsworth defined the origins of poetry, in his preface to the second edition of his *Lyrical Ballads* (1800).
21. This philosophy is reflected in Norman Mailer's alleged statement that you never really get to know a woman until you confront her in divorce court.
22. Written by Ron Romanovsky in 1985 and recorded by Romanovsky and Philips in an album called *Trouble in Paradise*, in 1986.
23. Gananath Obeyesekere, *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
24. Robertson Davies, *The Lyre of Orpheus* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 273.
25. Dr. Frank Pittman, cited by Jerry Adler, "Adultery: A New Furor Over an Old Sin," *Newsweek*, September 30, 1996, 54-60; 56.
26. P. D. J. Weitzman cited this in a letter, under the heading, "Is it ever acceptable for ministers to lie to Parliament?," in the *Times* of London, March 10, 1994.
27. Jane E. Larson, "'Women Understand So Little, They Call My Good Nature 'Deceit'": A Feminist Rethinking of Seduction," in *Columbia Law Review* 93 (1993: "Seduction and Sexual Fraud," 374-472). 449, 465.

28. Ned Zeman, review of *The Janus Report on Sexual Behavior*, by Samuel S. Janus and Cynthia L. Janus. *Newsweek*, March 8, 1993, p. 56.
29. R. C. Lewontin, “Sex, Lies, and Social Science,” a review of Edward O. Laumann et al., *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). In *The New York Review of Books*, April 20, 1995, 24-9.
30. Anthony Lane, “Sex in America.” Review of *The Social Organization of Sexuality*, in *The New Yorker*, December 19, 1994, 110-114.
31. Erica Goode, “To Tell the Truth, It’s Awfully Hard to Spot a Liar,” the *New York Times*, Tuesday, May 11, 1999, D1 and 9; reporting on a study by Dr. Bella DePaulo at the University of Virginia.
32. Japanese doctors, using a technique invented by the Chinese, are now able to sew up the hymen in a kind of reflowering operation. It is, therefore, possible to fake a maidenhead.
33. Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan and Isolde* (trans. by A.T. Hatto and supplemented with the surviving fragments of the *Tristan* of Thomas. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960), 205.
34. But pregnancy, too, can be concealed; the *New York Times* in August, 1997, documented the case of girl who gave birth to a baby in the bathroom at her senior prom, destroyed the baby, and went back to the prom and danced, with no one the wiser; she was convicted in 1998.
35. Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare’s Plays* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 101.
36. The widespread marketing of the drug Viagra, that claims to cure impotence, has now made it possible, in a sense, to fake an erection.
37. Frans De Waals, (*Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Primates*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996), 77: “Dandy and a female were courting each other surreptitiously. Dandy (a young, subdominant male) began to make advances to the female, at the same time restlessly looking around to see if any of the other males were watching. Male chimpanzees start their advances by sitting with their legs wide apart revealing their erection. Precisely at the point when Dandy was exhibiting his sexual urge in this way, Luit, one of the older males, unexpectedly came around

the corner. Dandy immediately dropped his hands over his penis, concealing it from view.”

38. Janet Adelman, “Bed Tricks: On Marriage as the End of Comedy in *All’s Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*” (in *Shakespeare’s Personality*, ed. Norman N. Holland, Sidney Homan, and Bernard J Paris; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989, 151-174), 158.

39. Angela Carter, *Wise Children* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1991), 221-2.

40. Salman Rushdie, *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (New York: Pantheon, 1995), 425-6.

41. Wendy Doniger, “Playing the Field: Adultery as Claim-Jumping.” In *The Sense of Adharma* by Ariel Glucklich. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, 169-88.

42. See Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Other Peoples’ Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (New York: Macmillan, 1988; Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995), chapter 1, for the Hindu embodiment of this metaphor, the myth of the sage who goes inside the hunter.

43. Jagendorf, “In the morning,” 52.

44. Marliiss E. Desens, *The Bed-Trick in English Renaissance Drama: Explorations in Gender, Sexuality, and Power* (Newark, N. J.: University of Delaware Press, 1994), 75.

45. Kobo Abe, *Face of Another* (trans. E. Dale Saunders. Tokyo, New York, London: Kodansha International, 1992; New York: Alfred Knopf, 1966), 222 and 224.

46. Kobo Abe, *Face of Another*, 225.

47. Giacomo Casanova, *The Memoirs of Jacques Casanova de Seingalt* (trans. Arthur Machen, London: 1894), 3.15, 469; *Casanova Mémoires* (ed. Robert Abirached. Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 2.17, 425.

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## Audience Comments

**Audience Comment:** I'm wondering about something that struck me during your talk. Is this just about exploring knowledge and has it nothing to do with love or sex?

**Wendy Doniger:** It's never true that it has nothing to do with these—sex always has to do with sex and love always has to do with love, but a great deal of it is about....

**Audience Comment:** I was interested in this in terms of the space between or tension between knowledge and belief. How much of this ability to deceive has to do with what we want to believe about love?

**Doniger:** I didn't use the word "belief" but I thought in a way I was talking about it. If you define "knowledge" as information that you get via contact with things that are in the outside world, if you believe that knowledge has some element of objectivity in it, and if you define "belief" as something that you hold to be true in the absence of corroboration by objective knowledge, then sex is precisely about the tension between knowledge and belief.

What I described as self-delusion occurs in the true story of M. Butterfly, of a French diplomat who for twenty years had a liaison with a Chinese woman who turned out to be a spy, and a man. Finally both were indicted for treason, and only during the trial did it become known that his mistress was and always had been anatomically male. Now the question is, how could he have not known for twenty years? This is not just a roll in the hay; it is an ongoing relationship. How could he have not known? David Henry Wang (?) wrote a wonderful play about it called “M. Butterfly,” in which one of the reasons he gives is “orientalism,” namely, the belief that Westerners have that all Orientals are female, and that therefore he assumed that she was a female. I would also add another kind of orientalism. The woman was an opera star. The Westerner just didn’t know that all the female roles in Chinese opera at that time were played by men. That was just cultural obtuseness. But, at some level, it has been well argued that he did know, that he perhaps was a man who had homosexual feelings that he did not want to acknowledge or something of the sort and that his belief was that she was a woman but his knowledge was that she was a man.

The tension between those which goes on all the time in all of us is precisely what makes the more outlandish examples of deception—you read them if you, as I do, always pick up magazines in the grocery store, wherein serious mythology is being disseminated in the *National Inquirer* and the *Weekly World News*, etc. And almost every week there is a headline about someone who was married for some period of time to someone who turns out to be anatomically of an entirely different sex than the person thought, as in the case of Tina Brandon, subject of a wonderful new film, “Boys Don’t Cry.”

So the question is where are knowledge and belief in all of these situations. Tina Brandon was a woman living as a man with several women and she would frequently throw out here tampons at certain times of the month and still they didn’t know they were living with a woman. So we’re dealing with really epistemological contradictions.

**Audience Comment:** I’m sure you are going to talk about the [Indian story]....

**Doniger:** Yes, that is what *Splitting the Difference* is about....

**Audience Comment:** And if you do, don't forget the version where she doesn't know about the bed trick, she discovers it only at the moment when she's at the height of ecstasy.

**Doniger:** That's exactly the point I'm making. [Indian story] is the Indian story—and there is a very stunningly close Greek parallel in the story of Amphytrion and Alcmaea that's famous in European literature—in both cases, the king of the gods falls in love with a woman who simply cannot be seduced and the only way he can get into bed with her is to take the form of her husband and seduce her. In both traditions, the Greek and the Hindu, for centuries this tale is told over and over again, its audience always arguing, did she know? Some say she did, some say she didn't, and different texts go on. That's what it is about. Anon wrote about it and Giraudoux wrote about it and Kleist wrote about it in Europe and all the good Indian texts including Koranic texts have it. The tradition can't leave it alone... knowledge and belief... it can't decide, yes, no, what if, and so forth.

[Indian story-Al Halya?], even when she was entirely fooled was regarded as spoiled and is defiled and is cursed to take the form of a dark stone until Rom(?) cuts it with her foot. I've been told that in Sri Lankan marriages of Hindu women, in the marriage ceremony there is a black stone and the wife is supposed to put her foot on it and is told "Don't be like Al Halya." So it is a very important story, one in which there is a real debate about knowledge and belief.

**Audience Comment:** A striking story of physical evidence is told in an Isak Dinesen story called, "Blank Page." It starts out to tell the story that one is not capable of writing, it is the blank page—the metaphor that she uses is an infamous nunnery in Portugal in which, in a dark basement crypt, they display the wedding sheets of all of the grand families of Portugal. You go down this incredible hall full of hangings, and there towards the end is one entirely white sheet, and it is said that this sheet tells the best story.

**Doniger:** I don't know that one, but it's wonderful. There is another Isak Dinesen story which I do know well, called "The Ruins around Pisa," which tells the story in a very convoluted way of an aged and impotent nobleman who wants to

produce an heir and so insists that this beautiful young girl who is madly in love with someone else marry him, and has her defiled on her wedding night on by sending somebody else in his place. For years there is a great unhappiness in all quarters until it is found out that she had also sent someone else in her place—a double bed trick. Once they know this, they're freed. The young man, who was a nice guy but needed the money desperately, who was sent in place of the nobleman, has felt terrible for years that he has done this to the young girl and he is enormously relieved when he meets the young girl who was sent in the place of the married girl who in turn feels horrible that she was defiled by this filthy old man. Once she realized that it was this lovely young nobleman, she feels better about it too, and everyone lives happily every after.

**Audience Comment:** I was waiting for the modern story of this and couldn't wait any longer. The story goes that Adam went off for a business trip and when he came back Eve started counting his ribs. She wanted to see whether he had made another woman. [laughter]

Doniger: That's a wonderful story. I thank you for that.

**Audience Comment:** I wanted to ask you if you considered any other word besides "victim" for the epistemological encounter of the trickster because I don't know if in fact that is a bit misleading if it isn't clarified. [background noise drowns out most of this, something about the status of the word. —do you remember?]

**Doniger:** That's a nice point. I used "victim" in its old-fashioned sense, I really didn't take into account the heavy overlays of meaning that word has had in the last ten years. It's the classical folklore word—there's the trickster and there's the victim.

**Audience Comment:** A good word might be "dupe."

**Doniger:** Yes.

**Audience Comment:** That is better, and different than victim.

**Doniger:** But can you say “the dupe of the trick” as you would “the victim of the trick”? You say that someone is duped, but are they “a dupe”? I will give thought to those overtones of “victim.” It has some I do want, but some I don’t. But I don’t want “dupe.”

**Audience Comment:** But you want knowledge. I thought that in what takes place, the trickster preserves the ignorance, so that [can’t hear end of this].

**Doniger:** You’re right. I don’t know what I’m going to do about it. It is what the whole book is about in a sense, and I don’t like “dupe,” but now I like “victim” a lot less than I did ten minutes ago...[laughter] Let me think about it.

**Audience Comment:** For a modern example of trickery, someone was just awarded a patent for a device that simulates virginity in females.

**Doniger:** Oh yes. There are many footnotes to this effect in that section I read to you about faking erections and faking virginity and the like. It’s made in Japan and it’s a very effective tool. There are many ways of faking an erection as well. And there are of course many ways of faking pregnancy and of concealing pregnancy.

**Audience Comment:** Have you heard of the case of the French woman who dressed up like a man, created for herself a leather genitalia and married a woman, and eventually was executed?

**Doniger:** Yes, it’s in Foucault’s book. There are ways of faking everything. In a way that’s part of what my argument here is. Then there is another section on ways of doing the trick. There are fingerprints and DNA now, and all this sort of stuff, but whenever you find a new way to identify someone, criminals find a way around it. In the film *Wolf*, starring Jack Nicholson and Michelle Pfeiffer, in which the Nicholson character really is a werewolf and Pfeiffer wants to prove this, she takes some of his blood and has it analyzed, and the results come back as



mistaken, because “somehow a bunch of dog’s blood was mixed in with the sample.” Results have to be interpreted, and this rests on believability.

Natalie Zemon Davis makes a good argument, as does Carlo Ginsberg,(?) about how difficult it was to know someone’s identity in pre-modern Europe, when there were no fingerprints, when you could say “I have a scar,” but who remembered that you had that scar twenty years ago? These stories about bed tricks really come down to an assertion that in the absence of reliable hard objective data subjectivity is all there is. “I don’t care what you say, that’s not my mother.” This is what you get in the “Body Snatcher” films. And the “snatchers” reproduce what would have been DNA. The clones are perfect representations, there is no way to tell, same fingerprints, but the little kid knows. And people say, “there’s something about him that’s not right...”

**Audience Comment:** I’ve read a study about the social uses of DNA testing in which some sources are worried that about 1/3 of children will find out they are not their father’s child.

**Doniger:** There are things we don’t want to know.

**Audience Comment:** Will your upcoming book discuss the ultimate knowing of the sexual act of God, the dropping of the epistemological barrier and the end of the illusion of separateness—that knowing?

**Doniger:** There are ten chapters with ten themes, like sex with husbands, sex with an animal, incest and so forth. And there are also ten approaches: psychological, feminist—the theological approach is where I do talk about mythologies which include the Christian and the Hindu in which God is known sensually, and what that means. In the case of the Hindu He is known in illegal sexuality, in adultery or rape. What does it mean epistemologically to be raped by God? So yes, that is a major theme, and not only is it the knowing of God but the deceptive knowing of God.

In Indo-European mythology, and the pattern of the impregnation of Mary follows the pattern of the trickster impregnation of Alcmaea and of other women, and she is accused of adultery as they always are. This is a real trickster

motif in the story of Mary. In the Hindu case—this is in *Splitting the Difference*, the first volume—the argument is that the human race was born in the following manner: the sun god in the sky, who is mortal because he dies every night and is born every day, although he is a god, married a woman who was in fact immortal, of higher theological status than he was, and she left him for various reasons, one being that he burned too brightly, the other being that he was too dark. She left in her place an identical copy of herself, a shadow or a reflection, and he did not know the difference. He impregnated that imperfect false replica and she gave birth to the ancestors of the human race. That is a very strong statement about the inauthenticity of the human race, but in the form of a mythology about a divine bed trick. I think this is an important theological theme.

**Audience Comment:** What about Eve? We interpret her as having done something wrong, but was this not a something she was supposed to do?

**Doniger:** Well that's the Romantic view, that she is the heroine of the whole piece. If it wasn't for Eve and the serpent we'd all be in this garden and no one would ever have eaten apples or gotten laid! Interpretation of mythology can have very different results.

**Audience Comment:** I'm interested in the different kinds of knowledge that are involved in the varied identities of the partner, the trickster, because it seemed to me that the stories involving animal-shaped tricksters would embody different kinds of knowledge. For instance, there are many stories in the Amazona in which dolphins turn into humans....

**Doniger:** And there are the selkies amongst the Norse. Chapter Three is about animal stories—these are basic to this mythology and they are very interesting. They differ in a number of ways. One difference is: sometimes you have a human being who is magically temporarily bewitched into appearing in the form of an animal and the purpose of the story is to turn that person back into his or her true human form. More often, or also—I never did a statistical survey—you have someone who is genuinely an animal, like the fox woman in Japan, who pretends to be a human and who must go back to the animal form in the end for the story

to regain its authenticity. So the experience of sex with the animal will be very different depending on whether that moment is the authentic or the inauthentic moment—are you experiencing something false or true when you are intimate with a being coming into or out of a deceptive mode? That is one enormous difference.

Then it depends on what you think the animal is. Is it a higher or lower form than the human? Are you dealing with a god or some low form trying to steal something from humanity? Then there are the differences between the animals. The whole snake-lover story is very different when men tell it and when women tell it. Indeed, last but not least, gender makes a difference. There are all kinds of important distinctions as to what is being known or found out, depending on who everybody is.

**Audience Comment:** It just seemed at least in the case of the Amazonian stories that in the end what's at stake is not sexual knowledge at all but the possibility of knowing the physical world, that really in the moment of intercourse what becomes unknowable is whether any level of human [can't hear] abstract.

**Doniger:** Certainly the medieval Melosine(?) stories are also not about sex; they are really about the immortal soul. This refers back to the earlier question, isn't this really all about knowledge, never about sex? I agree with Marge Garber (?), as she writes in *Vice/Versa* of what she calls “the progress narrative,” when she writes of a man who puts on a dress to get a job, or the like—it's always about gender, whatever other reason there may be, there are other ways to do all of those things. So sex is always on some level about sex, but it very often is also about something that the author of the text may care about a lot more than sex, and sex becomes the story that she or he uses to tell it. I think that those medieval stories that were told by Paracelsus and all sorts of people really were about our relationship with the other world and the status of the human soul vis-à-vis other parts of God's creation. The Melosines did not lust for men, they seduced them to get their souls. Which is, in a way, what the Nicholas del Banco quote is saying, too. He doesn't desire these women, he's trying to find out something about them and sex is a tool to pry something open. A scalpel, in the Kundera metaphor.

**Audience Comment:** Do you think that cultures that are more likely to posit stronger body/soul dichotomy, to privilege one over the other, are they more likely to see sex as conferring ignorance rather than knowledge or vice versa?

**Doniger:** A wonderful question. I guess when you say that you know someone through the sexual act, unless all you mean is “the body,” i.e., I found out whether or not you have a wart on your thigh, if that’s all you mean, that’s not very much. When you say you know someone sexually, you have to imply that you know their soul or some aspect of their non-physical essence, their personality, their mind, something like that. So I guess the statement that sex is an instrument of knowledge is in its own sense an anti-Cartesian statement. It implies that the body is access to the soul in some way. And yet in a lot of the gender transformation myths you have people who retain their entire personality and just happen to change from a man into a woman, which is a very Cartesian way of looking at it. So you would have to see what is really at stake.

At the University of Chicago, Professor WENDY DONIGER, Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Religions, is affiliated with The Divinity School, the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, the Committee on the Ancient Mediterranean World, and the Committee on Social Thought. Her research and teaching interests concern both Hinduism and mythology: her courses in mythology address mythological themes in cross-cultural contexts; her work in Hinduism covers a broad spectrum that includes, in addition to mythology, law, ritual art, and dance. Among Wendy Doniger's long list of publications, the most recent are *Mythologies*, an English-language edition of Yves Bonnefoy's *Dictionnaire des Mythologies* (1991), *Other Peoples' Myths: the Cave of Echoes* (1995), *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* (1999), and, in press, *The Bedtrick: Tales of Sexual Masquerade*.