



Introduction

The Spectacle of the Female Head

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In the quest to understand femininity—what it is and how it is made—much scholarly attention has been devoted to the representation of women's bodies, especially to their reproductive and sexualized bodies, to wombs, vaginas, and breasts.¹ But it would be a mistake to think that it is simply the reproductive or erotic parts of the female body which are at issue in the representation of femininity. The female head is a particularly rich and important site in the symbolization of gender and in the linking of gender to the transcendent values of specific cultural or religious systems. For the head, which is potentially separable from the body, poses special dilemmas when it belongs to a woman. This book is about those dilemmas. It explores the role of the female head as a cultural and religious symbol, the kinds of significance it carries, and the diverse ways in which it is integrated into cultural and religious meanings. This volume thus looks at the other half of woman: the anatomical part of the female body that gives women a voice and an identity and that thereby threatens to unmake and disrupt the classic gender distinctions that have linked men to speech, power, identity, and the mind. If the head is typically thought of as masculine, then what is to be made of the female head? Our contention is that the objectification of woman as a sexual body necessarily requires coming to terms with the presence of her head.

Decapitation is one way of solving the dilemma. Removing the female head relieves woman of both identity and voice and reduces her to a mere sexual and reproductive body. But there are other, less obvious, forms of beheading. The eroticization of the female head extends the body, turning the head into an alluring and sexually provocative organ. In this way, the female head becomes part of a woman's genitalia. To see a woman's face, to look at her hair, to hear her voice, is imagined as an erotic experience.

Eroticization of the head is thus a form of beheading, since it depicts women as nothing more than a sexual and erotic body. Magritte's painting *The Rape* (see frontispiece) illustrates just how the eroticization of the female head can lead to its submersion and disappearance into the body. The eyes become breasts, the nose a navel, the mouth a vagina. What women speak, eat, and see is nothing but desire. Speaking to a woman is a form of sex, seeing her hair a violation of modesty. This sort of erotic symbolism is one of the motivations behind the practices of veiling a woman's face and/or hair and avoiding the sound of her voice. Ironically, of course, the eroticism of the female hair or face is intensified and partially created by the very acts of veiling that are intended to keep female sexuality under wraps. What is forbidden to the gaze is that much more tantalizing to the imagination.²

Covering the female head is not the only practice which simultaneously presupposes and creates its eroticism. Cosmetics and hairstyling, instead of hiding the female head, draw the gaze to it and highlight its features. These practices are enmeshed in the same eroticism as is the practice of veiling. But instead of resisting desire, they play on and provoke it. To be made up is to invite looking, to draw attention to the face and head, to signify the desire to be seen and admired. And it is precisely the desire to be looked at rather than the desire to look which is signaled by cosmetics. It is no accident that movies sometimes depict women as more erotic when they remove their glasses. To wear glasses is to be a viewer, to remove them is to become the object of the gaze.³ A woman becomes a "looker" when she draws the attention of the desiring male gaze. Ironically, then, the display of the female face can be another form of decapitation, turning the female head into a symbol of desire, rather than a symbol of identity and of the capacity for speech and language. The techniques that draw attention to women's heads may be precisely the mechanisms by which women lose their heads, and the techniques for hiding the female head can help turn it into a symbol of desire.

It is the treatment of the female head, its decapitation, covering, highlighting, and eroticization, that is the subject of this book. In the process of exploring these themes, the focus will be turned to different parts of the female head: the hair, the face, the mouth, and the voice. What each of these essays shows is how the representation of the female head is critical to the depiction of femininity and how gender in turn is the ground for and the symbol of much wider religious and cultural significances.

DESIRE, DISPLACEMENT, AND GENERATIVITY

In understanding the meanings of the female head in the context of gender and religious symbolism, this book returns to, is partly inspired by, and fundamentally criticizes the psychoanalytic theory of upper and lower body

displacement. According to Freud's episodic reflections on the subject, the head is one of the symbols to which the repressed desires of the lower body are transferred and expressed in disguised form.

Freud's speculations about the erotic symbolism of the head and hair spawned an interesting debate between psychoanalysts and anthropologists over both the extent of and the reasons for the sexual meaning of hair. These essays pose a critique of that debate and should be read as a commentary upon it. While this book confirms the frequent association of the female head and the vagina, it fundamentally reinterprets the meaning of that association, by making gender the operative category for thinking about its significance.

As is well known, Freud saw the upper body, particularly the head, as a symbol for the lower body and its desires. He worked this association out in different ways. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) he explored the process by which the mouth, which serves as an erogenous zone in early childhood, is repudiated on the way to maturity when the libido is concentrated in genital sexuality. The association of genital symbolism with the mouth can thus be interpreted as a symbolic return to the site of an original eroticism. Freud's views on the connection of the lower and upper body were also grounded in his understanding of evolutionary theory and embryology and were influenced by the writings of Wilhelm Fliess.⁴ Later Freud came to believe that the symbolic displacement from the lower to the upper body was the result of repression. When the desires of the lower body could not be admitted into consciousness, they found indirect expression and relief through other symbols, including, among other things, the head. In his case study of Dora (1909), for example, Freud assumed that the symptoms affecting her mouth were symbols of erotic desires which she could not consciously acknowledge. Subsequently, Freud was to formulate his understanding of the Oedipus complex and to seek evidence for it in Greek myth—which, like dreams, he believed had escaped the monitoring of the conscious.

The convergence of all of these assumptions led Freud to see Medusa's head as a symbol of castration. Medusa was one of the Gorgons of Greek mythology, monsters that were portrayed in Greek art as winged female creatures with snakes for hair and with large sinister teeth and a protruding tongue. Medusa was the only Gorgon to be mortal. When Perseus cut off her head, two sons sprang from her blood. And her decapitated head had the power to turn to stone anyone who gazed on it. Freud's terse reflections on Medusa's head were published posthumously and may have been notes for a longer and more extensive treatment.⁵ Not surprisingly, Freud interpreted Medusa's head as evoking castration anxiety:

To decapitate = to castrate. The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. Numerous analyses have made us

familiar with the occasion for this: it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitalia, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother.

It is important to note that it was the decapitated *female* head that Freud believed provoked castration anxiety in males. Medusa's gaping mouth and her long curly hair symbolized the female genitals, the sight of which Freud believed generated male castration anxiety. In *The Unconscious Significance of Hair*, Charles Berg, a psychoanalyst, developed Freud's insights into a cross-cultural theory of hair practices. Drawing on ethnographic evidence, Berg argued that castration anxiety was behind various hair practices the world over, irrespective of a person's gender.

The psychoanalytic tradition thus posed a variety of important questions: Is there a recurring symbolic displacement between the upper and lower body? If such a recurring symbolism exists, is there an alternative to the psychoanalytic explanation? To what extent is such erotic symbolism confined to the female head? And what are the implications if the male head is entangled in a similar symbolism?

ANTHROPOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON HAIR SYMBOLISM

As the discussion moved beyond the confines of psychoanalytic discourse and into the discipline of anthropology, other scholars found confirmation for certain aspects of the psychoanalytic interpretation. In his essay "Magical Hair," the British social anthropologist Edmund Leach argues that while Berg drew on outdated ethnographic sources, more reliable ethnographies frequently confirm the erotic symbolism of hair. Leach notes that in many different contexts cutting the hair is associated with asceticism. Shaved heads frequently signify that the person is expected to have no sexual relations, while long, unkempt hair signifies unrestrained sexuality. Leach concludes that the anthropologist has to agree that hair is indeed a symbol of desire. But symbolic meanings, Leach argues, have public rather than private and personal significance and are thus accessible to the consciousness of agents.⁶ The cutting of the hair is therefore a public statement with public meanings, and does not necessarily say anything about the unconscious.

Leach overstates his case by seeming to deny that public meanings can also have private or personal significance, and by assuming that the connection between hair cutting and asceticism is always something of which actors are consciously aware.⁷ Still, he provides an impressive array of examples that seem to bear out the connection of the head and the genitals. While Leach sometimes follows Berg's emphasis on the phallic significance

of the head and hair, he also imperceptibly shifts the discussion (at least at times) by talking about the ways in which hair signifies desire generally and not the penis specifically. In sometimes freeing hair of its specifically phallic associations, Leach is able to see that the cutting of female hair has female desire, and not male desire, as its referent.⁸ A woman's shorn hair has to do with her own asceticism and not male castration anxiety. Ironically, then, while Leach understands himself to be confirming the symbolism that psychoanalysis had revealed, he actually reinterprets it in important ways. To say that the hair is symbolic of desire generally is fundamentally different from seeing it as a symbol of castration anxiety.

Leach's argument has evoked responses of two kinds. In *Medusa's Hair*, Gananath Obeyesekere, a psychoanalytically oriented anthropologist, argues that Leach went too far in his rejection of the psychoanalytic paradigm. Studying female Hindu ascetics who had grown long matted locks and thus resembled "Medusa," Obeyesekere argues that these matted locks are "phallic" symbols and indicate the marriage of these women to a male God. The life histories of these women and personal interviews with them reveal that each had suffered severe personal trauma related to marriage and sexuality, traumas which led to the women's asceticism and symbolic marriage to a god. These "psychological" symbols, as Obeyesekere calls them, are phallic symbols which spring spontaneously from the personal unconscious of these women, though they may take on public meanings subsequently. Leach was therefore mistaken in assuming that all symbols are public and conscious.

By contrast, two other social anthropologists, C. R. Hallpike and Mary Douglas, argue that Leach did not go far enough in breaking with the psychoanalytic paradigm.⁹ Hair does not so much represent desire as symbolize social control and deviance. Shorn hair signifies a person who is constrained by social rules (a monk, a soldier, a prisoner in jail). Long hair signifies a person who stands outside the rules (certain kinds of ascetics, hippies, women). Wearing long hair also symbolizes being more like animals and hence closer to nature. In general, this understanding of hair symbolism flows from the presuppositions of British social anthropology, which sees religious and cultural symbolism as reflecting the tensions and powers inherent in the social structure. Douglas understands the connection between hair and control as part of a larger symbolic process in which the human body often symbolizes society in general, particularly the boundaries of the social body.¹⁰

There are exceptions which disprove the universality of either Douglas's or Hallpike's theory. But the question is whether there are enough positive examples to make the transcultural nature of the phenomenon significant. Both theories are supported by an impressive array of examples. An exception proves only that a symbolism is not universal; it does not prove that

the association is unreal.¹¹ Although Hallpike and Douglas offer their interpretations as an alternative to a sexual understanding, the two views are in fact compatible. Sexual asceticism is obviously one extreme form of social control. When symbolizing desire, therefore, hair may simultaneously signify a relationship to social control. The long hair of hippies signified both the breaking of norms generally and “free love” specifically. But these two symbolisms may vary independently. Jewish law, for example, forbids men from cutting their hair or shaving during the period of mourning, a period in which they must also forgo sexual relations. In this case, the growing of the hair occurs while the Jew is outside his normal status and exempt from religious duties (such as saying certain prayers) which are otherwise obligatory. Here, however, the growing of the hair does not signal unrestrained sexuality but the reverse: the restraint of desire. Thus the erotic and the socially deviant meanings of hair are potentially but not necessarily convergent.

GENDERED MEANINGS OF THE FEMALE HEAD

In this debate about the significance of hair, gender has unfortunately remained of secondary concern. Consequently, the discussion has missed the ways in which the head and hair symbolize different things for men and for women. And in missing this asymmetrical treatment of men and women’s heads, the theoretical discussion has been misleading.

In her important essay “Castration or Decapitation?” H el ene Cixous responds to this imbalance from within psychoanalytic theory. She suggests that the fear of decapitation could be regarded as the female equivalent of castration anxiety. “If man operates under the threat of castration, if masculinity is culturally ordered by the castration complex, it might be said that the backlash, the return, on women of this castration anxiety is its displacement as decapitation, execution, of woman, as loss of her head.”¹² Women can only keep their heads “on the condition that they lose them, lose them, that is, to complete silence, turned into automatons.” Women are denied the privilege of speech, and when they do speak what they say is regarded as simply idle chatter.

Cixous’s description of “decapitation anxiety” as a female equivalent to male fears of castration is intended as a blow at psychoanalytic theory with its near-exclusive focus on male gender development.¹³ Castration anxiety, of course, was the foundational concept in Freud’s understanding of a boy’s psychic development. It was the fear of losing the penis, Freud believed, that made the boy renounce his incestuous wishes for his mother, a founding act of culture, and come to identify with his father. Psychoanalysis never generated an equivalent concept for female development. Indeed, Freud suggested that because women did not fear losing an organ, their superego

did not develop to the same degree. Because they had nothing to lose, they did not gain as much. By suggesting that there is a corresponding female fear of loss, Cixous subverts the understanding of gender construction that informs psychoanalytic theory. If women fear losing an organ, then their fears and the psychic consequences of those fears can become the object of analysis and attention. Women can no longer be viewed as passively acquiescing to their gender identities (as in the Freudian model) but as actively responding to the threat of losing their heads. Cixous thus denies the lack which psychoanalytic theory ascribes to women: lacking a penis does not mean that women “lack a lack,” as she puts it; the task of becoming a woman is in fact fraught with a greater potential loss than the task of becoming a man.

Cixous thus employs the concept of beheading as a way of redressing the imbalance of psychoanalytic theory and exposing it as an example of a tradition that itself decapitates women by silencing female experience.¹⁴ To be silent, to have no subjectivity, is to be decapitated. More specifically, Cixous’s essay can be read as a reinterpretation and critique of Freud’s reflections on Medusa’s head. She follows Freud in seeing a connection between castration anxiety and female decapitation. But rather than viewing female decapitation as a symbol of castration anxiety, Cixous treats it as an effect: the beheading of women is the result of male fears about castration. Cixous thus rejects Freud’s conclusion that Medusa’s decapitation is simply a story about male fears. Instead, it is a symptom of the real dangers that women face in a culture that is anxious about the powers of masculinity. From Cixous’s perspective, Freud’s misreading of Medusa is illustrative of this very problem, for he erases the meaning of Medusa’s head for female experience.

In this understanding of Cixous’s essay, the concept of decapitation would appear to depend logically on the concept of castration anxiety and thus be problematic for those who find the psychoanalytic perspective unconvincing. “If man operates under the threat of castration . . . it *might* be said that the backlash . . . is its displacement as decapitation” (emphasis supplied).¹⁵ But what if man does not operate under the threat of castration anxiety? What if psychoanalytic theory is a fiction, a modern myth, as many interpreters of culture reasonably assume? Should the concept of decapitation still play a central role in feminist analysis? Cixous does not answer this question directly. But the truth or nontruth of psychoanalytic theory may be beside the point. The power and continuing influence of psychoanalytic discourse and the psychoanalytic institution is itself sufficient reason to contest psychoanalytic theory.¹⁶ Like other post-Lacanian feminist theorists in France, Cixous engages psychoanalytic theory not because of its truth but because of its power. And one of the most powerful ways of destabilizing a practice is by undermining it from within, on its own terms.

Whatever Cixous's intentions, we believe it would be a mistake to treat the concept of "decapitation" simply as a successful stratagem for subverting male privilege in psychoanalytic theory. The concept of female decapitation is a much more powerful analytic tool and points to a phenomenon which, though not universal, does have cross-cultural significance. This becomes evident as we translate from the overly anatomical language of castration anxiety into symbolic language about the prowess of masculinity. Restated, Cixous can be interpreted as saying that male fears about losing their manhood (and their power, which is much the same thing)¹⁷ are frequently dealt with by removing or covering the female head, that is, by denying women the power of identity, language, thought, and selfhood. We are not talking here about a threat of actual decapitation, although in certain contexts that threat is real. Rather, we are dealing with symbolic processes, how women's heads are imagined, in myth, stories, plays, religious texts, and medical manuals, and how these symbolic processes are enacted in practices that affect women's power, subjectivity, and identity.

Reformulated, then, the debate regarding the sexual meaning of hair has failed to take seriously the way in which sexuality is itself a public symbol. Sexuality is shot through with conceptions of power, vitality, divinity, language, and so forth. As Leach insightfully observes,

For society, sexuality itself is a 'symbol' rather than a first cause; it 'stands for' the creative reproductive element in the world at large. For the psychoanalyst sex comes first. Therefore in the Hindu context, the head represents the phallus and the *linga* represents itself. The anthropologist repudiates this cause-and-effect interpretation. God (i.e. Society) comes first and *linga* and the head alike both represent the power of God.¹⁸

Obeyesekere seems to miss this point when he argues that some symbols, such as the matted locks of female Hindu ascetics, are continually born anew from the personal unconscious. For the gods, too, are imagined in some cases to have matted locks. The women who sprout matted locks are thus *appropriating* a characteristic of the gods themselves. While the appropriation of such symbols may be motivated by deep personal and even inner psychic struggles, the symbols do not spring spontaneously from the unconscious; they already are pre-endowed with cultural meanings, which may or may not be consciously articulated. Hair is associated with sexuality because both are associated with ideas about generativity, life, and vitality. And it is precisely here that the question of gender reasserts itself, for notions of generativity, divinity, power, and life are thoroughly gendered. We are then in a circle from which there is no hope of escape. To privilege any one of these—whether desire, gender, generativity, or divinity—is arbitrarily to break out of an interlocking and circulating set of symbols. The repression and displacement theory breaks the circle and grounds the sym-

bolism in blocked desire. But if desire itself is developed within and is mediated by cultural symbols, such as images of divinities, notions of gender, and ideas about power, then any entrance into this circulation of signs is an arbitrary one. To pull on any symbol is to pull on all of them.

In seeing the symbolism of the head as entangled in gendered meanings, we thus return to where we began: to the difference between the female and the male head. The theory of displacement does not explain why there should be a differential treatment of men's and women's heads. It is only through attention to gender, and the realization of how symbols of desire, power, and generativity enter into the construction of men and women, that such differences in erotic symbolism can be explained. Eroticizing the female head is one way in which the power of speech and thought can be denied to women. And this is one reason why the female head is in fact more of a pub(l)ic spectacle than the male head.

The chapters which follow explore these themes in several different religious, mythological, and cultural contexts. The first two essays, by Doniger and Lang, focus on the symbolism of the female head in Hindu, Buddhist, and Tantric mythology and practice. The other chapters probe one or more of the religious or cultural traditions that originated in the Mediterranean: the mythology and practices of the Greeks and Romans (Levine and Richlin), the religious symbolisms of Judaism (Eilberg-Schwartz), Christianity (D'Angelo), and Islam (Delaney). In this way, these essays widen the scope of and thus correct what has been a feminist stereotyping of Islam.¹⁹ They show that the eroticization of the hair, which is presupposed by veiling practices, also lies at the heart of various Western traditions including early Christianity, Judaism, and Greek and Roman society.

While most of these chapters focus on ancient traditions, Delaney explores the above meanings in the ethnographic context of a Turkish village, thus providing a window into how these symbols work in the practical flow of everyday life. The meaning of the female head is examined in different cultural domains: in religious mythology (Doniger, Levine, Richlin, Lang), religious practice (Delaney, D'Angelo, Eilberg-Schwartz), religious poetry (Lang), and medical and cosmetic manuals (Richlin).

All of these chapters reveal ways in which the symbolization of the female head is connected to women's loss of subjectivity and identity. In "Put a Bag over Her Head," Doniger explores how Hindu myths of decapitation dehumanize women. She follows the fate of these severed heads, how they get recombined with the bodies of women of different castes and what effects such recombinations have on the status of the newly formed woman.

Doniger's reflections on the severed female head provide the point of departure for the subsequent chapters, which take up the meanings of the female head when it is still attached to the body. Four of the chapters (Lang, Delaney, Levine, and D'Angelo) discuss the polyvalent meanings of female

hair, and in particular how the erotic associations of hair are intertwined in larger religious, cultural, and political meanings. At one level all of these essays confirm that hair has erotic and sexual significance. More importantly, however, they show how this generalization simply misses what is most interesting, namely, the way in which sexual desires are themselves part and parcel of wider layers of symbolism. But it is not just the hair that has sexual significance. The female head itself is also in some sense viewed as a genital organ whose exposure is considered shameful (Delaney, D'Angelo, Eilberg-Schwartz, Richlin). And it is not just the hair that is eroticized but also the female voice and mouth (Eilberg-Schwartz and Richlin).

Generally speaking, these essays reflect how men make sense of the female head. In explicating this symbolism, there is therefore a danger of assuming the position of the desiring (presumably male) subject and thereby becoming complicitous in the very phenomenon being described.²⁰ To see female practices of making up and covering over as simply expressions of male control or phallogocentrism is to participate in the process of decapitation, of denying women agency in these practices. Because these practices are multivalent and carry many meanings for both agents and observers, they are continually under renegotiation and reappropriation. They have no meaning that is fixed once and for all. Like all practices, their meanings emerge through their strategic employment.²¹ A practice can simultaneously be a sign of women's debasement and decapitation even as it is a source of their resistance to control and objectification. The female head, precisely because of its importance, can become a site of contestatory practices that undo and threaten the ruling symbolic system, a point made by D'Angelo in her essay on the Christian women who prophesied bare-headed at Corinth.

In exploring how the female head is symbolized, these chapters keep in view both the larger transcultural processes by which the symbolisms of the female head tend to converge and also the local and culturally specific meanings that operate in different cultural and religious contexts. These essays demonstrate how the symbolization of the female head is overdetermined: entangled in much wider cultural meanings, in ideas about generativity, procreation, animality, divinity, power, nationality, and religion. What is intriguing is both the cross-cultural convergence of these symbolisms and their unique modes of expression in each local context. This volume, then, poses a fundamental critique of the psychoanalytic theory of displacement, by making gender the operative category through which the entanglement of upper and lower body symbolisms is conceptualized and understood. The essays give substantial support to Cixous's claim that "decapitation" should be a central concept in the understanding of how femininity is made and unmade. But they also show how the full meaning

of decapitation cannot be understood outside of much wider frames of cultural reference.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Millet 1970, O'Brien 1981, Spellman 1982, Laqueur 1990.
2. See, for example, Steele 1985 on the issue of eroticism and clothing.
3. Doane 1982.
4. See Geller 1992.
5. Freud 1922.
6. Geertz 1973 makes a similar kind of argument about the public nature of symbols and their accessibility to understanding by an interpreter.
7. See Obeyesekere 1981, whose views I return to below.
8. Hallpike 1972 and Delaney (this volume) criticize Leach for treating the cutting of female hair as linked to castration anxiety. A more sympathetic reading of Leach, I suggest, reveals that he was already moving well beyond the psychoanalytic model, though at times his language had not yet caught up with his insight.
9. Hallpike 1972 and Douglas 1966, 1970:65–82.
10. Douglas 1966:115.
11. Eilberg-Schwartz 1990:87–114.
12. Cixous 1981:43.
13. See Kuhn 1981.
14. The equation of male castration anxiety with female fear of decapitation also has the consequence of equating the female head with the phallus.
15. Cixous 1981:43.
16. See Grosz 1990:1–19.
17. MacKinnon 1987:4, for example, argues that gender difference is simply a reflection of power relations. Without differential power relations there cannot be two genders.
18. Leach 1958:159.
19. See Lazreg 1990.
20. On this danger, see Butler 1990 and Wittig 1980, 1981, 1982.
21. See Bourdieu 1977.

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