

BEASTLY BODIES

Beastly Bodies, an extract from their book *Deeper in The Pyramid* Melanie Jackson and Esther Leslie, 2018.

Milk is enmeshed industrially in various operations that shape it metaphorically and abstract it from the producing body. But the producing body of the milk giver is no simple entity. It is monstrous. It refuses. It takes on other shapes. For example, humans have engaged and imagined other milk suppliers, which take on the figure of nonhuman caregivers. In myth, a nanny goat called Amalthea (tender goddess) was said to have nursed the baby Zeus. Her horn, the *cornu copeia*, or horn of plenty, is said to have been donated to the caregiving Nymphs who had facilitated the transfer, in gratitude for their provision of honey as well as milk. Other versions of the myth of Zeus have him suckled by a sow, fed ambrosia by a dove and nectar by an eagle. A she-wolf fed Romulus and Remus, the abandoned twin offspring of Mars and Rhea, whose story recounts the founding of Rome and the Roman Kingdom. Goats often let the Gods and heroes of Antiquity suckle: Dionysus, Asklepios, God of medicine, Aegisthus, killer of Agamemnon. Telephus, the son of Heracles and Auge, while exposed on Mount Pathenion, was said to have been suckled by a deer as portrayed on the 1st century CE fresco at Herculaneum – his name is perhaps derived from a dug and a doe. The altar of the Pergamon transposes this milk provider to a lion. Aeolus and Beotus, the sons of Melanippe, were exposed by king Desmotis, but saved by a suckling cow before becoming heroes. Hippothoon was twice exposed and twice fed by a mare, while the abandoned Miletus was suckled by she-wolves under Apollo's command. The grandfather of Habis, King of Tartessos, exposed his grandchild five times in different environments and every time Habis was breastfed by animals – pigs, hind and doe. Cyrus I of Persia was said in some accounts to have been nursed by a wild dog. With this milk, came characteristics, transfers of personality, qualities that marked out these babies as chosen ones.

Brigid, a Celtic Goddess or a Saint, the patron saint of Ireland and protector of dairymaids, cattle, midwives, Irish nuns and new-born babies, mingles with milk in many ways and her milk is miraculous. Some say her mother was a milkmaid and Brigid was born out of a milk pail, or at least doused in warm new milk, or *lemlacht*, on the threshold of the home, at sunrise, as her mother returned from milking. She drank only the milk of a white cow with red ears, a faery cow, as an infant, and when she grew up, she, in turn, gave away the animals' milk so freely, dispensing butter to the poor from a dairy that endlessly replenished itself. Brigid's milk was as freely given as the cows that gave their milk to her. Brigid could also turn water into milk or beer. Brigid's festival on 1 February is named Imbolc, but its etymology is obscure – perhaps it stems from the Old Irish meaning 'in the

belly' and may be a reference to the pregnancy of ewes, or to the Old Irish for cleansing oneself, or to a proto- Indo-European root that means both milk and cleansing.

Animals are expected to donate their milk to humans, yet unlike humans, an animal who desires the milk of another species is cast as an outcast and a thief. A persistent and widespread rural story tells of how the snake steals cow's or goat's milk straight from cow's udder, having slithered up its hind legs. It is as if the Devil himself stole milk. The legend, for that it is, of course, as a snake cannot even digest milk, extends to the human world with the fear that snakes are attracted to breastfeeding women. A black snake waits until a mother is sleeping. It will latch onto the breast, while pressing its tail into the baby's mouth, to muffle its cries. The snake will steal the milk. The baby will die of malnourishment. Milk snakes earn their name from this imagined milk theft.

Between myth and rumour, Wild Peter, who appeared in North Germany in 1724, was covered with thick hair, said to have grown as a result of him suckling from a bear – he imbibed with the milk his nursing mother's characteristics. Carl Linnaeus shared this belief in the transfer of characteristics through milk – he professed that to suckle from a lioness would confer courage. In Egypt, donkeys were not favoured as wet nurses for it was believed that donkey's milk transmitted the animal's characteristic stupidity and obstinacy.

Hindu laws of Manu and the teachings of the Jewish Torah restrict milk from one-hoofed animals. But the Talmud ascribes bravery, strength and endurance to the goat and the milk of a white goat is especially beneficial. The Hottentots were said to tie babies to the stomach of a goat to nurse. Others believed that goats were libidinous beasts and some recommended donkeys instead as wet nurses, for the donkey represented morality. Hippocrates, Galen, Aretaeus and Alexander of Tralles all recommended the milk of asses – considering it the best antidote against poisons and disease. Galen had it brought directly to an ill patient's bedside, as he believed that, as with semen, air would contaminate it. The warmth of milk in the teat was deemed to contain its invigorating spirit, a belief that persisted in science into the eighteenth century and in folklore beyond. The practice of cross-species feeding extended into the modern age. In 1816, the German physician Conrad Zwierlein published *The Goat as the Best and Most Agreeable Wet Nurse*, a treatise recommending wet nursing by goats, which was dedicated to vain and coquettish women, who would not feed their babies, and sick and weak ones, who could not.

Recent research into cockroach milk, a pale yellow liquid that seeps from the brood sac of a Pacific beetle and crystallises in the gut of the embryonic beetle roach, proposed it as a protein-rich 'superfood of the future'. In this extremely protein and calorie rich milk, four times more protein rich than a cow's milk, a relation between human and non-human

milks is extended to the insect world, and researchers attempt to reverse-bioengineer it for mass production, possibly as a supplement.

Whereas in the pre-modern period the animal aspects of breastfeeding were acknowledged, such that images of interspecies nutrition were available without concern or horror, the modern period introduces a series of separations and divisions of class and status. Attendant on this is a philosophy of Humanism dependent on hierarchies of beasts and humans, as well as within humankind, which render these other hierarchies problematic. The very act of breastfeeding, of women feeding babies, begins to appear as an animal act, suitable only for those who live amongst animals and are themselves considered more animal-like. Why would a woman of status wish to turn herself into a *Milchkuh*? At other times and on other women's breasts, animals have fed – puppies, kittens, piglets and monkeys – to toughen up the nipples and improve the milk flow, to relieve engorgement or to prevent conception. In the case of Mary Wollstonecraft on her death bed suffering a post-partum infection, puppies were placed at her breast to suck out her milk that was falsely believed to be tainted with 'milk fever' - to divert poison milk from the lips of her newly born daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (later Mary Shelley).

This extended the theory prevalent in Europe that the first milk, colostrum, was diseased. In Thomas Newton's 1577 translation of Guilielmus Gratarolus' *De Literatorum et eorum qui magistratibus funguntur conservanda praeservandaque valetudine*, colostrum was warned against: 'the thicke and curdie Milke... commonly called Biestings, is very dangerous'. In 1577 too, the translation of Konrad Heresbach's *Foure Bookes of Husbandry* evidences an early use of the word 'colostrum' in English. The book warns: 'you must be sure to milke out the fyrst milke called Colostra... for this, except some quantitie be drawn out, doth hurt the Lambe'. Yet knowledge of the benefits of colostrum was emerging by Wollstonecraft's time. In 1737, Henry Bracken stated in his *Midwife's Companion* that 'The Colostrum or first Milk is a medicinal Nourishment which Nature hath prepared for the Purpose that it should moderately nourish'. But in 1825, in the first paediatric guide to be published in the USA, Dr. William Dewees advised that in the eighth month of pregnancy a woman place a young but sufficiently strong puppy to her breast to toughen and accentuate the nipples, prevent inflammation and improve the flow of milk. Piglets were used for the same purpose.

Into this epoch, there are various peoples across the globe who do not initiate breastfeeding until a few days after birth, to allow the colostrum to pass through, passing the new-born sometimes to another lactating woman to feed, or sometimes to a cow or goat. An account from a foundling hospital in Aix in France would have its readers believe the goats were enthusiastic feeders of human babies:

The cribs are arranged in a large room in two ranks. Each goat which comes to feed enters bleating and goes to hunt the infant which has been given it, pushes back the covering with its horns and straddles the crib to give suck to the infant. Since that time they have raised very large numbers in that hospital.

Abandoned syphilitic children suckled from mercury- infused goats and other creatures. Teats, not nipples, were for their mouths. Today's plastic bottles have teats rather than nipples too, linking these artificial feeding mechanisms to cross-species wet nursing, which has now become, for the most part, an alien practice.

<https://grand-union.org.uk/product/esther-leslie-deeper-in-the-pyramid/>



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