We can imagine we share a Hobbesian unity when we do not actually share one. You can think you have caused reciprocated delight when you haven't, as the first page of *Tristram Shandy* reminds us, when at the very moment of his father's crisis, the moment of impregnation,

> *Pray my dear,* quoth my mother, *have you not forgot to wind up the clock?*——Good G——! cried my father, making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time, ——*Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?*[59]

Tristram trembles to think what check this must have been to the "animal spirits" and what a sad foundation it must have laid for the growth of the poor dispirited fetus that became him. But then we all know lust *can* go wrong, and its trials and strains are the stuff of humor as well as tragedy. There is a nice cartoon of two somewhat disappointed-looking people in bed: "What's the matter, couldn't you think of anyone else either?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Disasters

We can contrast Hobbesian unity with Immanuel Kant's account of the matter. In a notorious passage, Kant tells us that

> Love, as human affection, is the love that wishes well, is amicably disposed, promotes the happiness of others and rejoices in it. But now it is plain that those who merely have sexual inclination love the person from none of the foregoing motives of true human affection, are quite unconcerned for their happiness, and will even plunge them into the greatest unhappiness, simply to satisfy their own inclination and appetite. Sexual love makes of the loved person an object of appetite; as soon as the other

person is possessed, and the appetite sated, they are thrown away "as one throws away a lemon that is sucked dry."[60]

The comparison of the used partner to leftover food was there earlier in Shakespeare. Antony says to Cleopatra: "I found you as a morsel cold upon dead Caesar's trencher," and Troilus says of Cressida: "The fragments, scraps, the bits, and greasy relics / Of her o'ereaten faith, are given to Diomed."[61] But these are moments of the quite special disenchantment and disgust that assails us on thinking of a third person being involved with our special partner or even ex-partner or hoped-for partner. It is quite another thing to turn those moments of disgust into the universal aftermath of lust. People do not in general see their recent partners in ecstasy as leftover food, nor expect to be seen that way themselves. Even in a post-coital slump one can go on quietly doting.

In Kant's picture, lust objectifies the other person, using him or her as a mere means, a tool of one's own purposes. It is dehumanizing and degrading, and according to Kant it is morally forbidden, since you may never use another person as a mere means to satisfy your own ends. The other person is reduced to a body part, and indeed Kant calls marriage a contract for each to use the other's genitals, so it is lucky that he never tried it. And as Barbara Herman points out in a tight and compelling analysis of Kant's sexual ethics, if sex is thought of like this, it is most

obscure why marriage goes any way toward making the use of other human beings permissible, in Kant's own terms.[62]

Kant could fairly be said to paint an obscene picture of lust, one in which all the emphasis is on body parts, and the human being, the person whose parts they are, becomes relatively invisible. The creature that lusts after Beauty is the Beast (fig. 14). Unhappily, many women, and some men, will recognize his account. Indeed, some think it universal, as Kant does, while others think it is inevitable under social and political conditions in which one partner, usually the male, has more power than the other, leading to an inevitable erasure of the personality of the weaker partner, who becomes just the servant who bears genitals to the service of the other.

Perhaps the most notorious account of lust along these lines is Freud's essay "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love," tracing the way in which the idea of the partner as degraded becomes essential to men's sexual enjoyments.[63] Freud works with an opposition between tender, affectionate feelings on the one hand and sensual feelings on the other. The former originate in affection toward the mother, and remain attached to mothers and sisters and respectable women like them. The latter are diverted from these, their desired choices, by the barriers of the incest taboo, and the disgust, shame, and morality that surround and bolster that taboo. So in order for sex to be

any good, the male needs women unlike the mother and sister, degraded women, or women who are acceptably degradable. Men may marry women who resemble their mothers and sisters, but they find mistresses among those degraded women to whom they need ascribe no aesthetic misgivings. For Freud, the full sexual satisfaction that these lower women provide comes from the fact that the man can walk away with his soul "intact and gratified" since, having no aesthetic sense, the woman cannot criticize him. Freud was not to know of the kind of conversation that goes on among women in *Sex and the City*, and his sublime conceit never permitted him to imagine it.

In a nutshell, then, sex is either too disgusting to engage in, or when engaged in, not disgusting enough to be gratifying unless one can make use of one's servants and maids. There is also the parallel problem for women, less emphasized by Freud, which results in a taste for hunky morons, such as coal delivery men or well-hung footmen. Like so much of Freud, this might all sound merely funny until we remember, for instance, how much of the lynch mentality in the southern United States was fueled by white male fears of their women's illicit lust for degrading liaisons with black men.

All that is needed for Freud's picture is the idea of sexuality as intrinsically degrading, either to oneself or to whomever one happens to be connected. He may be right that this sad idea was

widespread among the Viennese upper middle classes of his time, and that for such minds, lust's only escape was to wallow in the supposed degradation of sex with the lower orders, but he is hardly right that it is, or has to be, universal, any more than the snobbery it trades upon.

Freud at least sees joyous degradation in terms of a kind of human relationship, albeit one reaching tenuously across the almost impenetrable class barrier. In this he is one better than Kant. But rather like medieval confessors cataloging forbidden sexual positions, feminist philosophers have carefully dissected the forms and varieties of objectification. In a classic paper, Martha Nussbaum lists seven features that crisscross and overlap in different ways.[64] First, there is instrumentality—using the other as a mere tool of one's purposes. Then, there is denial of autonomy—treating the other as not having a mind of their own, as lacking in self-determination. Third is inertness—treating the other as passive, as lacking in agency and perhaps also in activity (as with Dijkstra's sleeping household nuns). Fourth is fungibility—treating the other as interchangeable with objects of the same type or other types. Fifth is violability—treating the other as lacking in boundary integrity, or as something it is permissible to violate, break up, smash, or break into. Sixth is ownership—treating the other as something that can be disposed of, bought, or sold. Finally, there is denial of subjectivity—treating the other

as something whose experiences and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account. Following Nussbaum, Rae Langton adds the general insensitivity to the real nature of the other, as when the woman's voice is no longer heard, or the rapist takes "no" to mean "yes."[65]

There are indeed many ways of going wrong here, and we are right to be on the lookout for them. Even without digging into the darker regions of desire, it is undoubtedly true that they structure much of many people's sexual experience. Nussbaum illustrates the dangers with examples drawn from fiction, but if we are to believe them, such figures as Henry Miller and Norman Mailer, boastfully advertising the brutality of their phallic battering rams, illustrate most of these vices.[66] The rapist illustrates the fifth in a more dangerous way, while the "commodification" of women, often supposed to be an integral element in pornography, is captured in the sixth. Too many men conceive of their sexuality like their mountaineering, in terms of domination and conquest, while doubtless many people of both sexes are insensitive to the desires and pleasures of their partners. There is plenty of room for tears at bedtime.

If men are socially and economically dominant, it may most often be they who objectify women. In the brutal capitalist world, it may become easy to think that everything has a money value, and can be bought and sold. But selfishness and insensitivity are

Figure 9. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901), *In the Promenade, Lust* (Au promenoir, la convoitise). Private collection.

Figure 10. Titian (ca. 1485–1576), *Three Ages of Man.*
)uke of Sutherland Collection on loan to the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

Figure 11. Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788), detail from *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews.*
© National Gallery, London.

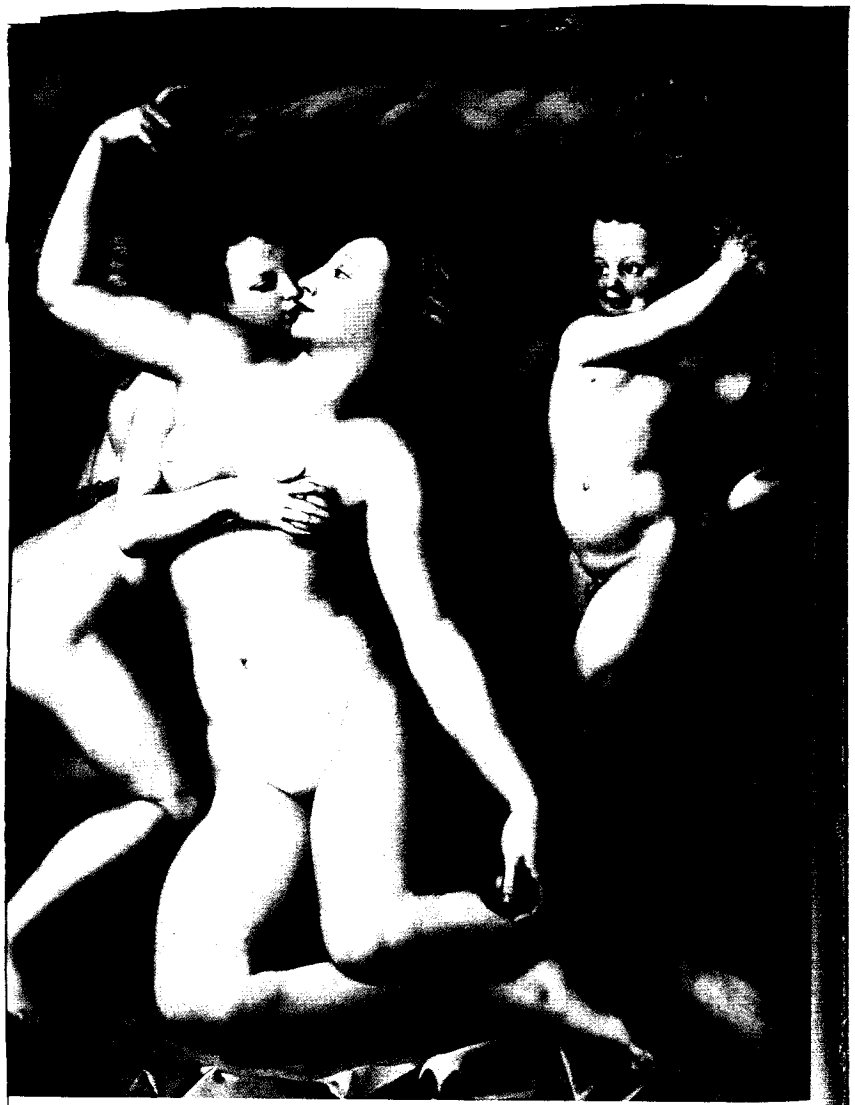

Figure 12. Agnolo Bronzino (1503–1572), *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid.*
© National Gallery, London.

Figure 13. Bronzino, detail from *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (Fig. 12).

Figure 14. Walter Crane (1845–1915), *Beauty and the Beast,* (Routledge, 1874). By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

Figure 15. John Collier (1850–1934), *Lilith,* 1887. Atkinson Art Gallery, Southport,

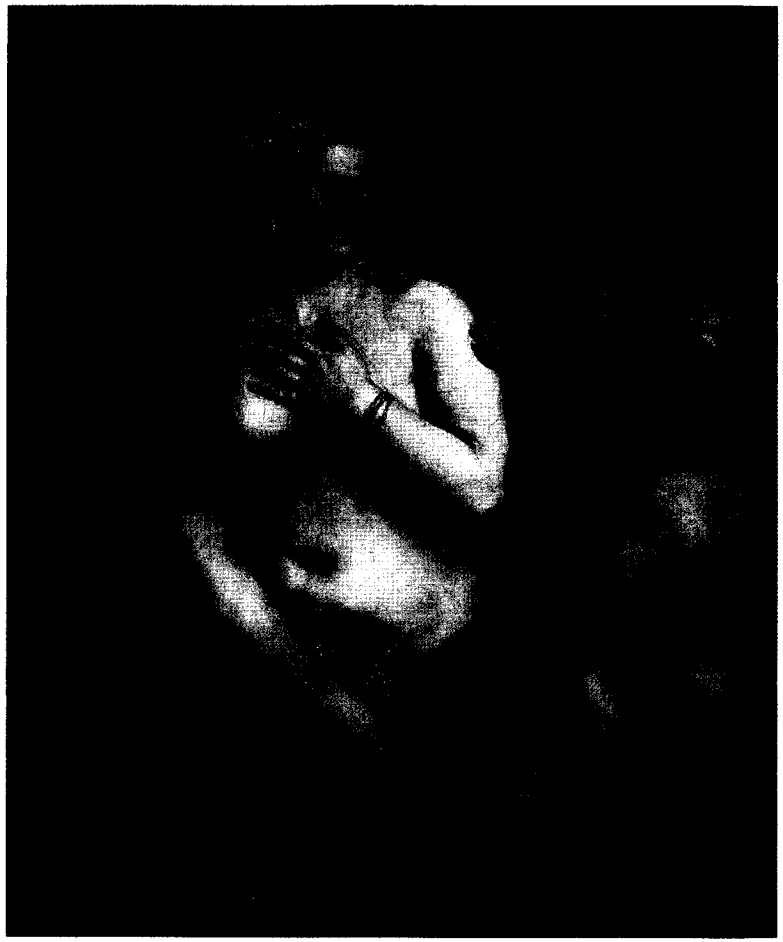

Figure 16. Titian (ca. 1485–1576), *Venus with a Mirror,* National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. ca. 1555.

nobody's monopoly, and it can work the other way around. The most elegant, if ironic, literary expression owning up to such a lust is actually by a woman, Edna St. Vincent Millay:

> I, being born a woman and distressed
> By all the needs and notions of my kind,
> Am urged by your propinquity to find
> Your person fair, and feel a certain zest
> To bear your body's weight upon my breast:
> So subtly is the fume of life designed,
> To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind,
> And leave me once again undone, possessed.
> Think not for this, however, the poor treason
> Of my stout blood against my staggering brain,
> I shall remember you with love, or season
> My scorn with pity, —let me make it plain:
> I find this frenzy insufficient reason
> For conversation when we meet again.[67]

There is a more general male anxiety that women objectify men. The seventeenth-century poets Sir Thomas Nashe and John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, each wrote despairingly (or perhaps mock-despairingly) of the inadequacy of men faced with competition from the dildo, imagining, that is, that women only want to use

men for one thing, and that one thing more reliably provided without a person on the other end of it.

Although the items on Nussbaum's list look bad and are bad, unfortunately some of them are close neighbors of things that are quite good. We have already met three of them: the way in which ecstasy takes over other cognitive functionings, the intertwining of love and illusion, and the limitations of Aristophanes' myth. Consider the first. At the time of crisis, it is probably true that lovers are not treating their partners decorously or with respect or as fully self-directed moral agents. But that is because strictly speaking they are not treating them any way at all, either as persons or as objects. In the frenzy they are lost to the world, way beyond that. But that is no cause for complaint; indeed the absence of this feature is more often a disappointment, to either the person who does not get there, the partner, or both. Even Nussbaum, who is very sensitive to context, falters here, talking of the loss of boundaries, the surrender of identity, as objectification.[68] But it is not objectification, because it is not treating the other either in an inappropriate way or in a particularly wonderful way. The player is sufficiently lost in the music to become oblivious even to the other players. The body has taken over, saturated with excitement and desire. But this is marvelous, even if moments of rapture mean a pause in the conversation.

Crystallization and the creation of illusions about the self and the other also border on objectification, as Rae Langton notices. We want to be loved for ourselves, not treated as blank canvases on which a lover inscribes his or her own dreams and fantasies. We are not even comfortable when put on a pedestal. Pedestals restrict movement, and there is a long way to fall. But as we have already discussed, imagination may be integral to love. Others cannot discover what she sees in him or he sees in her, because they do not share the crystallization. We do not mind a bit of this, and if it is integral to love we can drink in quite a lot. Perhaps we prefer Cupid to have dim sight rather than to be totally blind, but it is also just as well that he is not totally clearsighted.

Imaginings and fantasies can lead people into the kind of playacting when lovers infantilize each other (surely much more common than Freud's allegedly universal degradation). And here again a genuine distortion and flaw may be quite close to something that is a harmless part of the repertoire. Intimate behavior is quite often infantile. Lovers are silly. They tease and giggle and tickle each other, and they use childish endearments. We talk of love play, and sex toys and romps, and play it often is (fig. 7). On Valentine's day, newspapers in Britain are full of personal advertisements along the lines of "Pooh loves Piglet, yum, yum." These may offend against good taste, but they are scarcely a problem for the moralist.

A theatrical performance of being less than a full adult, and therefore happily dependent upon the other, seems to be a perfectly legitimate signal of private trust. It displays that you can put yourself in the other person's hands, let your guard down, and throw your dignity to the winds, and yet feel perfectly safe. The same might be said for more lurid actings-out of scenarios of domination and surrender, in which case the bondage gear of the pop concert doesn't answer to anything more sinister than a desire for safety and trust. Perhaps this is confirmed by the femininity of the dominating male (fig. 8).

Such intimacies are properly private. We would be embarrassed at being discovered during them. The intense desire for sexual privacy is frequently misinterpreted as shame at doing something that therefore must be intrinsically shameful or even disgusting. But the desire for privacy should not be moralized like that. Our intimacies are just as private as our couplings. Embarrassment arises because when we are looked upon or overheard by someone else, there is a complete dissonance between what they witness—infantile prattlings, or, if their gaze is obscene, just the twitchings and spasms of the bare forked animals—and the view from the inside, the meanings that are infusing the whole enterprise.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Substitutions

The fourth mode of objectification, fungibility, is the most difficult item on Nussbaum's list. It is worth noticing, however, that there is no immediate connection between fungibility and objectification. If I feel lonely and would like a conversation with someone, I may talk to A, although if B or C had happened along they would have done just as well. It surely doesn't follow that I am "objectifying" A in any sinister sense.

But we like Aristophanes' myth that for each of us there is just one soulmate, the unique other, and in turn we want to be unique to our own lover. We do not like the thought that if the other loves us for our bank balance, manly jaw, or baby blue eyes, then anyone else with the same bank balance, manly jaw, or baby