

## THE FATE OF THE LEGENDARY MERMAID IN MODERN CARTOON JOKES

Cyndee Johnson

The mermaid so captures the imagination of human beings that she is known cross-culturally in many folklore genres. We expect to find her in Old World tales and legends, but her appearance in modern, Western cartoon jokes requires a closer look at the form and function of jokes, the mermaid in legend, and the function of the mermaid as a vehicle for the expression of societal anxiety about women and female sexuality. Therefore, in order to understand the modern function which the mermaid plays for Western society in six cartoon jokes, this paper discusses the jokes themselves before it turns to examine belief narratives about mermaids and other merfolk, and finally explores the modern mermaid as a psychologically significant symbol.

The joke is one of the genres of folklore which provides a forum for the release of social tension or psychological concern which cannot be addressed in other forms. In the guise of play, the joke enables an individual to express a gamut of otherwise socially repugnant attitudes. As Gershon Legman puts it, "Under the mask of humor, all men are enemies" (1975:10). The ultimate power of the joke is its means for addressing basic human hostilities and terrors as they lie beneath the veneer of social pleasantries.

As in the case of modern legends, jokes are often disseminated simultaneously through several media conduits. Using all forms of popular entertainments, the joke appears in books, newspapers, magazines, television, and movies. In these channels the joke cajoles,

educates, and expresses the saturnine, hidden emotions of its audiences through a common base of cultural knowledge. In form, a joke is an economic distillation of folk attitudes, characters or stereotypes. And it is especially effective when there is some tension between these characters, as in the case of ethnic jokes, or when there is tension inherent in the subject it addresses--as in the case of sexual jokes.

There is no waste in the oral joke. Every element must relate to the set-up so that the impact of the joke, the punchline, will be especially explosive.

The joke is an extremely succinct, polished form. Counting on general familiarity of the audience with the topic, it limits itself to a dramatic dialogue or even to a question and answer sequence. [Dégh 1972:69]

In its simplest form, the joke juxtaposes two stock characters or stereotypes which represent some social tension. It brings the conflict to the popularly desired, though socially abhorrent, conclusion, thus effecting a momentary release of tension.

The cartoon found in magazines and newspapers is an extension of the joke type. The cartoon relies on the same body of communal knowledge as the joke, and it is transmitted through many of the same printed media channels (e.g. magazines, newspapers, popular literature, etc.). Structurally, the cartoon is a visual rendition of an oral recitation which works on precisely the same criteria of economy, dichotomy and punchline. Many of the cartoons discussed in this paper can easily be turned back into oral narratives. Others merely present the unlikely juxtaposition, i.e. the punchline, with no evident narrative.

The six cartoons discussed in this study come from Lutz Röhrich's joke monograph, *Der Witz*.

They present the popular, modern concept of "mermaid" and the problems she presents to the modern mind. Horace Beck provides an introduction to the mermaid cartoons through his own brief discussion of the origin of the Celtic/Nordic "common knowledge" upon which these Western mermaid jokes rely.

It is my belief that what we are dealing with when discussing Anglo-American mermaids is really a fractured mythology--beliefs so old as possibly to reach back to Neolithic times, beliefs long since vanished into limbo, with only fragments remaining. Onto these fragments have been grafted other lore from other lands, but at the core we are confronted with a mythology northern oriented. [Beck 1973:233]

The thread of the concept of "mermaid" does indeed wind intricate patterns through the tapestry of Western fantasy and supernatural belief. As the most lovely or the most dangerous lover, throughout the ancient, medieval, and pre-industrial ages, stories of the mermaid have taken their place in the richer fabric of lore about the many races of supernatural beings who make their homes in the sea and resemble human beings in form and behavior. However, today Beck's "fractured mythology" has produced a highly stylized and consciously contrived image of the sea maid. This new mermaid smiles at us from many forums in mass culture--from popular entertainments, greeting cards, and tuna cans. And she is always in the same hybrid form of placid loveliness. The popular concept of mermaid combines this commercial presentation of the fish-woman idea and the vague remembrance of the mermaid's more ancient associations with potent sexuality. The modern mermaid, then, carries the connotations of sensuality in the form of the current, sterile image of a sexless creature. The modern mermaid is a eunuch!

The problem is perhaps best illustrated in a

popular song performed by Glen Yarbrough called "The Mermaid." The light-hearted ditty tells the "sad" story of the ill-fated infatuation of a young sailor for a mermaid. While she is described as feminine perfection from the waist up, he quickly loses his heart to another:

Just then her sister swam on by  
And set my heart awirl,  
For her upper part was an ugly fish,  
But the rest of her was girl!

The popular mind recognizes the incongruity of the mermaid's double nature and puzzles over it in the cartoon joke. Since the mermaid is generally presented in the nude or in a skimpy, bikini bra, the artist has offered the mermaid's entire body for the public's critical scrutiny. Modern renditions of the mermaid portray her with no visible genitalia. Thus, the six cartoons address this mystery by asking, "How can the mermaid be the perfect sexual fantasy when she is incapable of sexual intercourse?"

The first cartoon joke (Figure 1) is a visual narrative. With superb economy, it poses the question--the punchline--in an immediately recognizable setting while bringing together several unlikely characters. A mermaid is basking winsomely on a rocky shore, looking out to sea while behind her are two storks, one with an empty baby carrier in its mouth. The empty-mouthed stork turns to its companion and asks with a puzzled expression, "Where do you bite her?" This joke depends on an elaboration of the folk saying told to children to explain the origin of babies. Young German children are told that pregnant women are "bitten by the stork." Hence, the stork's confusion. He wonders, "How is she impregnated?"

Cartoon #2 shows the same bewilderment on a young man's face when he sees a provocatively

dressed young woman driving an amphibious, sporty convertible out of the sea towards him. He is broadly pleased until she opens the car door and reveals herself to be a most shapely mermaid. His down-drawn mouth, step-backward stance and his eyes directed at her lower fin instead of her voluptuous, barely-covered bosom expresses the unspoken question, "How does a man make love to a mermaid?"

Cartoon #3 poses the same question without a narrative. It reduces the joke to the punchline and some dark implications. Two bandit-type characters are halted in the process of their attempt to rape or seduce a mermaid, when one, already on his knees and stripped from the waist, can't figure out where to enter her. His companion has his hand on a half-drawn knife. It is not clear whether he is putting the weapon away in defeat, or drawing it out to do the mermaid some further harm. This may refer to the fool in black comedy who insists on putting the mermaid to good use--whether the use be sexual or culinary. This implication is explored to its grisly end in Cartoon #4, another punchline cartoon which merely juxtaposes the two unlikely characters, the half-eaten mermaid and a satisfied looking cat. This cartoon in particular underscores the cruel assumption that if the mermaid is not a sexual woman, she is a fish, i.e., she is food.

Cartoon #5 is a more complex example which combines two hybrid creatures, the mermaid and the centaur, in a joke about secrets and impossible consummation. As a visual narrative the joke places the trysting lovers on opposite sides of a fence which hides their lower portions from one another's sight. As they stand in the foliage, the centaur whispers to the mermaid, "I must confess, I have a little secret." And she responds, "I, too." The fact

that the mermaid is represented as standing precariously on the blade of her lower fin indicates that she is a symbol in this cartoon as it focuses on the astounding implications of the "little secrets." Taking into account the heightened sexual potency of the horse in folklore, this cartoon relies on the exaggeration of the puzzle for its comic effect. If a human man cannot gain entry to a mermaid, then a horse-man certainly cannot. Naturally, the cartoon uses mythical creatures to make a profound statement about the disastrous potential of secrecy in human relationships, but this message does not relate directly to the mermaid. However, her asexual image provides the perfect vehicle of the larger message of the cartoon.

Cartoon #6 expands the discussion of the mermaid's sexual/asexual puzzle to the figure of the merman. This cartoon, too, presents a full narrative with the merman on the analyst's couch who says, "I suffer from wet dreams." This joke may be seen as a jab at the psychiatric profession, inferring that "everyone has an analyst these days!" But it also operates as another comment on the asexual merfolk which incorporates word-play. By linking the facts of nocturnal ejaculation in human males, called "wet dreams" in the vernacular, the cartoon gets a laugh because, indeed, what other kind of dreams would a merman have? Not only does he presumably sleep in water, therefore being "wet" while dreaming, but more importantly, if the mermaid is incapable of sex, the merman has no mate. This kind of forced abstinence, or impotency, has always provided the human mind with comedic potential.

In her article, "The Symbiosis of Joke and Legend" (1979), Linda Dégh establishes the compatible relationship between these two genres of

oral performance in one household of narrators. She explores ways in which the joke deals with universal themes of uncommon occurrences in commonplace situations just as the legend does, both narrative forms relying on much of the same material. In fact, the more important a subject is to a culture, the more often it will be found in a number of different genres. Therefore, it is not surprising that the mermaid, a popular character in legend, appears in modern jokes. However, it is quite surprising that she did not take her sexuality with her when she went into the modern joke. Perhaps this is due to modern ignorance of the mermaid's ability to transform to human shape when she comes on land. This aspect of her mythology was an essential part of her role in merfolk belief in the Celtic lands most recently and the Germanic lands less recently. To fully understand the role of the mermaid in the cartoons, it is necessary to examine the role of the mermaid in legend. The juxtaposition of these quite dissimilar functions is most revealing. Here, then, is an example of the mermaid legend which contains elements common to narratives about the mermaid on land:

A poor but nobly born young man named Raymond was befriended by a wealthy kinsman and they became fast friends. One day while hunting the two were separated from their party and lost their way. When they stopped to rest they were set upon by a boar, which Raymond killed. In the fracas he also inadvertently killed his benefactor. The young man fled the scene in great dismay and blundered onto a marvelous spring by which sat three beautiful women with golden hair and white dresses. To one of these, named Melusina, he told his tale, and she, in turn, advised him how he could fabricate a story that would divert suspicion from himself. She also told him to ask his benefactor's heirs for the amount of land that could be encompassed in a bull hide around the spring. After this, she promised to marry him providing he would promise never to look at her on Saturdays. He agreed and went off to ask for the land, which request was readily granted, although his

relative was somewhat startled when he subsequently discovered the bull hide had been sliced into a thread and encompassed considerable acreage.

On the third site Melusina built a castle and married Raymond. Each year she brought forth a child, and each one was a monster. One had a scarlet face, another a red and green eye, one was a Cyclops, and another had a great tusk instead of teeth. All were successful in their chosen fields, one becoming a famous monk, another a warrior, and so on. For each the mother built a magnificent home--for Gyot, her third monster, she built La Rochelle.

For many years all went well, until one Saturday Raymond was persuaded to peek through the keyhole. He saw his wife taking a bath and was distressed to find that from the waist down she was shaped like a fish. When she discovered he had spied on her, the lady uttered a great shriek and abandoned her house and children, returning only to prophesy the death of a member of the family. This she did for years, flapping around the castle on bat's wings and uttering doleful shrieks not unlike those of the banshee.

[Beck 1973: 235]

Beck's legend contains many elements which are typical in mermaid legends, tales, and memorates. First, the suitor originally sees the mermaid as a beautiful woman and not as a fish-woman. She marries the mortal (AT B81.2.) on the condition that he not break some tabu--in this case we have the Cupid and Psyche tabu against the human lover's sight of the undisguised deity. The mermaid lives most of her married life in the form of a human being, and she bears children (AT B81.2.1.). Beck's legend is unusual regarding her bearing of supernatural children. In Celtic lore, she begets human beings which found clans that remember her for many generations. It is not unusual that she returns to meet with her offspring periodically to advise them, give them magical talents, or prophesy (AT B81.7.1.).

Thus the mermaid acts as a magical benefactor for her human husband, and it is not unusual for the mermaid to bring an enviable dowry in land



and cattle to her marriage with a mortal. However, in its final lines this legend associates the mermaid with her ancient cousin, the siren, as she flies and shrieks about the castle. This flying mermaid, who is associated only with death, is of vital importance to this discussion.

Mermaids are often depicted in ancient and medieval art as a kind of harpy with a long fish tail held straight out the back rather like an unfurled peacock tail. This classical siren/mermaid had wings and was in the habit of shrieking or singing to passing ships thus maddening their crews and driving the hapless sailors to wreck their own vessels. Gwen Benwell and Arthur Waugh, authors of *Sea Enchantress*, one of the few monographs on merfolk, give considerable attention to the discussion of this confusion between the mermaid and the siren. As early as 250 B.C., Athenian artists rendered the mermaid as a mournful, winged woman whose legs ended in fins (Benwell and Waugh 1965:47; cf. Thompson 1968:100). Well into the Middle Ages the names "mermaid" and "siren" were used interchangeably to describe the sailor's horror, the female sea creature who lured men to their deaths in the merciless, watery depths. These deadly creatures were described as either harpy/sirens or fishwomen. It is important to note that, historically, believers in merfolk did not feel it necessary to stick to a specific or exclusive terminology as they talked about merfolk in memorates, legends, and tales. For instance, it seems apparent from early collections that by the 1920s in the Celtic Isles, the terms "mermaid," "merry-maid," and "silkie" often seemed to be used interchangeably, although they certainly referred to different creatures. Added to this confusion are the discrepancies between sailors' "siren stories" and the romantic legends told by the coastal farmers who claimed descent from captured sea

maidens.

These small points are important because they establish the relationship which the mermaid had with her believers. When she came on land, she often remained the benefactor of her descendants long after she ceased to appear to them. She was an eloquent speaker and a majestic presence. However, it was only on land, in human form, that she was considered safe to approach or capture. In the sea or other body of water, she was a fearsome menace.

Up to the nineteenth century old people who lived round the shores of Lough Neagh related that when they were young, mermaids were believed to dwell in it. They would pass the Lough at dusk in fear and trembling, 'expecting every moment to be captured and carried off by the witching mere-maidens.'

There were other encounters between saints and mermaids. St. Olaf met one at sea, whose practice it was to lull sailors to sleep by her sweet song and then drag them beneath the waves.

According to Irish legend, St. Patrick transformed old pagan women into mermaids and banished them from the earth, thereby adding further hazards to the life of "those in peril on the sea." [Benwell and Waugh 1965: 63-64]

Throughout history, the mermaid has been transformed from devoted wife to deadly temptress and then from vengeful sea-hag to the current lithesome eunuch. This list of "mermaid types" by no means reflects a linear or static progression. The mermaid is still changing. The description of her nature--kind, cruel, or winsome--has always depended on the beliefs of the groups which include her in their narratives, be they sailors, farmers, or modern Westerners. But what could account for such a startling range of traits in the lore of this fabulous creature? The answers to these questions are to be found in the cultural impact of 19th century Romanticism on Westerners' ability to believe in the fabulous, and in the

explanations of modern psychology.

During the late 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century, the Celtic lands experienced the full impact of early folklorists' enthusiasm for the supernatural beliefs of the peasantry. Not only folklorists but also poets and other dreamers gave over their energies to the collection or study of Celtic and Germanic lore. On the coasts of Ireland, Scotland, and the Shetland and Orkney Islands, all those interested found a thriving legend body about the mermaid in her many forms. The foreign minds of whimsical collectors were so taken with the fantasy of the fish-woman that they placed her in their popular literature, e.g., Matthew Arnold's "The Forsaken Merman" and Hans Christian Anderson's "The Little Mermaid." But the poets did not transfer whole legend cycles, and so they "froze" the mermaid in her hybrid form by introducing her to foreign cultures and new generations as a fanciful, moralistic idea removed from belief.

The early collectors did not pursue the different narratives about the several races of merfolk believed to live in the sea, nor did they keep the narratives separate in their publications. In their zeal, early folklorists and poets collected oral literature about mermaids *en masse*, and they published the material in popular collections for children which combined the divergent motifs indiscriminately, retaining only the hybrid form of the merwoman as the focus of the new tales.

Except for Francis Child's ballad 113, "The Great Silkie," the other merfolk were weeded out of popular collections. The mermen, the silkies (seal people), the kelpies (horse men), the wild Fin (wild men), the sea people who retained human form in and out of the water--all were absent from literary collections which were presented to readers who were taught not to believe in the fabulous. By mixing the

narratives of sailors and farmers, the collectors actually created a creature which did not exist in any single literature before the 20th century. As a collector or poet chose a particular group of details from a native legend body to publish in his folktale collection--designed especially for the modern nursery--the specific outline of the localized beliefs regarding races of merfolk became more obscure, and the modern mixture of all of them formed in its place. Writers wove the threads of the siren, harpy, sea harlot, Lady of the Lake, silkie, fairy, water spirit, and the noble races of the sea kingdoms together to create the basis for the modern mermaid as a literary and symbolic vehicle. They created an "Ur-Mermaid," the most complete mermaid form. She was no longer a fabulous, supernatural creature but rather an "empty" image capable of reflecting a panoply of archetypal possibilities. We, as the descendents of the readers of their popular collections, have inherited this amalgamated mermaid!

The mermaid is one example of a legendary creature whose form and magical abilities are radically different depending on whether she is a character operating within a living belief system or just a whimsical idea existing in the fantasy of literary or popular forms. As a member of a magical race which enjoys a living belief tradition, the mermaid explores all human emotions and activities in both human and hybrid forms. Belief narratives describe an ambivalence toward her similar to the ambivalence felt for other magical races like fairies, elves, etc. Sometimes helpful, sometimes malevolent, the mermaid is the bane of seafarers and the ancestress of several Celtic clans. Yet, in her pre-industrial legends, she is restricted by belief in ways that a cultural symbol cannot be. That is, there are things that a mermaid cannot do or represent as a

character in a legend cycle. But limits imposed on the popular mermaid, as a symbolic idea, are governed by the function she plays in the modern narratives rather than by the facts of what mermaids are believed to be capable of doing. For example, in a legend, a mermaid could never stand on her caudal fin as she does in cartoon #5. But as a symbol of impossible consummation, how she stands is irrelevant and passes unquestioned.

Our discussion, then, has returned to the cartoon jokes which feature the mermaid as a frozen symbol, sexless and comedic. Realizing that the modern mermaid is now capable of representing any--or all--of her legendary types from fairy mother to siren, we must ask again, what is the function of the mermaid in these jokes? And which of her many "types" is the mermaid playing? If the joke provides a safe forum in which to covertly address and resolve specific, volatile tensions within a society, what tensions do these jokes address? And what menace do they disarm?

The dynamics behind the success of the jokes rests in their use of the siren/mermaid as an archetypal form of Woman. In this context, the jokes rely on the body of legend which describes the mermaid as a powerful and deadly female force. It is clear that the mermaid is used to address the deep-seated fear of feminine power which has characterized Western cultures as they trace their own histories back to ancient Greek civilizations.

At last we realize that the jokes, published in 1980, are quite up-to-date as they express covert, but current, concern about the tensions between women and men in Western societies during the rise of the feminist movement during the last two decades. The jokes attempt to reinstate the status quo by making fun of a representative "sex symbol." Therefore, the disarmed menace of the jokes is one form of the

modern Western woman, seen as the sailor's nightmare. Desexed, the mermaid, and by extension the modern Western woman, becomes an object of derision.

Finally, the rest of the answer to the riddle of the asexual mermaid is provided in Legman's work, *The Rationale of the Dirty Joke*. The key to understanding the sexless mermaid lies in her legendary status as an insatiable lover. At this point we may recall and revise Legman's statement at the opening of this essay, for indeed, "under the mask of humor, all men [and women] are enemies." Legman addresses the complex series of anxieties represented in these cartoons in three sections of his two-volume work: "Ophelia's Crime," "The Unsatisfiable Female," and "Tooth-Breaker." Guided by his analysis, it is possible to see the cartoon jokes as a comment on Western society's underlying fear of women, particularly the fear of unchecked female sexuality.

Legman discovers that Ophelia's crime was the implication that she attempted to seduce Hamlet. Legman regards this act to be, in actuality, an attempt to dominate Hamlet through seduction. "Dominance is the really nameless sin for women--unforgivable and apparently even unmentionable" (1968:349). If the seductress is a contender for power in the sexual/political arena, we must admit that the mermaid's own legends condemn her as a most ancient "domineering woman." She has ultimate supernatural control in her natural element. And she often expresses this power through her sexuality by stealing men to stock her harem, by making love to them continuously until they die, or by consuming them outright. Legman discusses the particular fear of being killed by too much intercourse. As part of this discussion, he includes the following joke:

Nine daughters force a travelling salesman into unwilling intercourse by threatening to wake their sleeping father who is holding a shotgun. When the fifth daughter tries to force the tired traveller, with the whispered threat, "I'll tell Papa," he says, "O.K. tell your papa. I'd rather be shot than fucked to death." [1968:354]

The fear expressed in this joke relates directly to the lethal sexual powers of the mermaid. Legman ties this phenomenon to the larger societal fear of female sexuality and the belief in both the 19th and 20th centuries that the sexual female is a terrifying threat to the personal and political male psyche. He points out that patriarchal societies have dealt with this threat by the use of laws to regulate heterosexual intercourse, and by the official denial of the existence of female passion and orgasm. Legman attacks the famous "Kinsey Report" for writing that "because women have not 'evolved' biologically as far as men ... [they] should not really expect to have orgasm in the first place" (1968:356).

It does not take much intellectual penetration to see that what is being resisted here is any touch of dominance in the woman, who suddenly becomes the demonic red-head (like Judas), the 'devoradora,' or eater of men, when she asks for the natural satisfaction of the orgasm that the man DOES NOT INTEND to bother to give her. Whether the excuse is that the orgasm is morally (19th century) or biologically (20th century) beyond her, or that no man can last long enough to give her an orgasm, is quite immaterial. [1968:357]

The subject of female orgasm has become a forum in which modern Westerners discuss female sexuality and social power. The orgasm is not the subject of mermaid legends, but her sexuality has always been seen as a menace by sailors. In "Tooth-Breaker," Legman discusses the cross-cultural idea of the "Vagina Dentata" as part of his larger commentary on the fear of

castration. He offers several grisly examples of the mythical character, the Tooth-Breaker, who breaks the teeth out of the vagina and thereby makes intercourse safe for men. Often this character is not satisfied to take the "teeth" from the vagina, but actually takes all of the female's genitalia and reproductive system as his prize. This kind of ghastly vengeance and fear of intercourse are implied in Legman's specific mention of the mermaid:

A final expression of the fantasied "vagina dentata" danger is perhaps the curious fish-lure, illustrated as the laugh climax in A. E. Brown & H. A. Jeffcott's Beware of Imitations! . . . a fascinating collection of eccentric patented devices . . . showing a naked-breasted mermaid with a three-pronged hook emanating from her pubis. . . . This has since been manufactured and sold as a novelty or conversation-piece, in a catalogue of "kitsch" items for home "playrooms" and cellar bars. [1975:433]

The mermaid as a fishing lure--designed, presumably, to catch men--makes an explicit statement about the kind of fear she engenders as a supernatural, voracious lover. She is both the perfect fantasy of unlimited sexuality and the terrifying consumer of men. The cartoons then give evidence that the mermaid, a modern symbol of erotic potential, is now a caged menace. As a eunuch, she cannot seduce, dominate, or devour. The jokes address her fearful reputation and resolve it by making her sexless.

The tales and legends about the mermaid wife are an essential part of the examination of the modern concept of the mermaid because when the mermaid was taken out of the European belief systems and placed in literary fantasy, she lost the ability to transform to human shape and be the sexual creature she is in legend. However, she retained her legendary association with devoted and even dangerous sexuality. Therefore, in the popular mind, she becomes a symbol of



impossible love, erotic potential, and impotent desire. Through these stock elements of comedy and burlesque, the mermaid inevitably winds up as a symbol for Western misogyny, and a vehicle for aggressive sexual humor.

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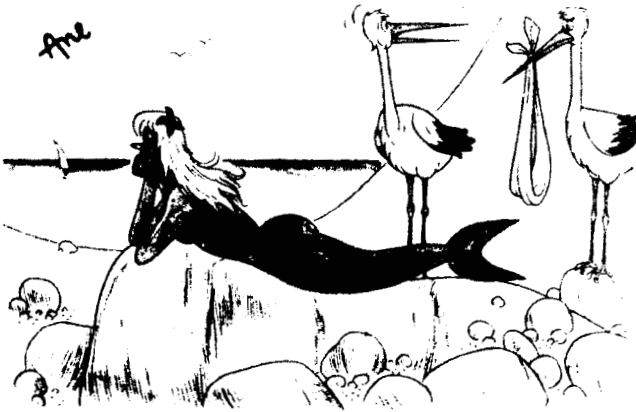
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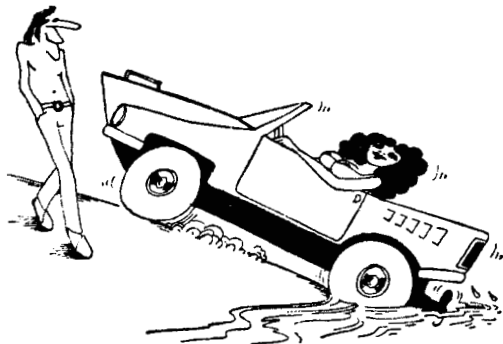
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## Appendix: Figures

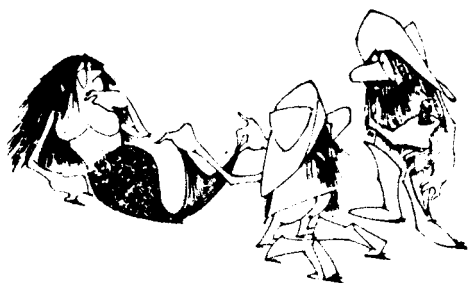


*Wo würdest du hinbeifenz?*

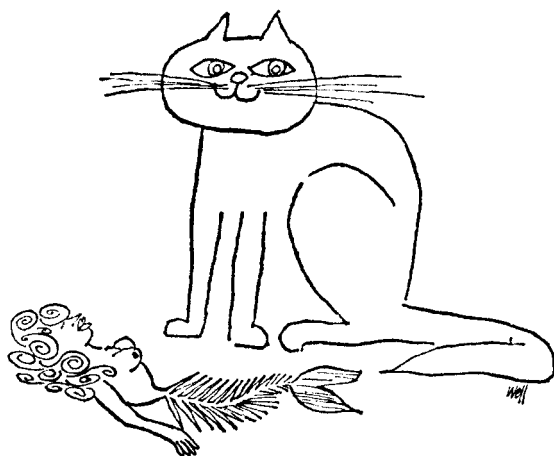
1.



2.



3.



4.



»Ich muß gestehen, ich habe Ihnen etwas verschwiegen.« —

»Ich auch.«

5.



»I suffer from wet dreams!«

6.