

Temperley, J. (1993). Is the Oedipus complex bad news for women?. *Free Associations*, 4:265-275.

There has been a lengthy dialogue between psychoanalysis and feminism. In its more recent phase, during the last twenty or thirty years, Freud was at first often seen as the bastion and exemplar of prejudice against women. Then, largely via Lacan, the very theories of the castration complex and phallic monism, which had caused such objection among feminists, were seen instead to illuminate the position of women in a society which is structured by patriarchy in its language, thought and sense of individual identity. Classical psychoanalytic ideas about the castration complex were seen as providing an explanation of why, at levels far removed from conscious rationality, women are perceived, not as inferior, but as disadvantaged and marginalized. Psychoanalysis was turned to for help to explain the depth and intractability of the attitudes which disadvantaged and often disparaged women.

What particularly intrigued me when I first came upon this dialogue was the prominence in it of Freud's classical views about castration, carried forward by Lacan's theory that for the achievement of a sense of sexual identity and differentiation, for the use of language and logic, for sanity, the phallus must become the signifier; this means that women are particularly hampered in achieving a sense of their own agency in a world of male signification.

I realized anew that though I had been taught Freud's classical theories about the psychology of women, those are not the theories that underpin the psychoanalytic practice of most British analysts. Ernest Jones disagreed with Freud about the phallic phase of development which Freud promulgated in 1923, and which is basic to his mature and final views on the psychology of women. He challenged Freud's assertion that children know of only one genital — in his opinion, the phallic phase is a defence against the disturbance aroused in the child by an awareness of sexual difference and parental intercourse. His views were shared and elaborated by Melanie Klein, and it became — and remained — a distinctive aspect of the British psychoanalytic tradition that it differed from Freud on the development of female sexuality. What surprised me was that Freud's views, which do see women as disadvantaged, are well represented in the feminist dialogue with psychoanalysis, while the mainstream British tradition about the psychology of women has often gone unmentioned.

Freud's own views on female psychic development were not finally crystallized until the 1920s. In the only analysis of a child in which he participated, that of five-year-old Little Hans, he himself interpreted the child's phantasies of breaking and entering into a forbidden space as indicating an unconscious awareness of the vagina. As late as 1919, in the paper where he puts the Oedipus complex in its final supreme place as the nucleus of the neuroses, he makes no mention of the castration complex or of penis envy, and sees the girl's sexual wishes towards her father as springing from innate feminine desire.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, controversy over the question of female sexuality and whether or not the castration complex was basic to it or peripheral was one of the most prominent issues in psychoanalysis.

I want to draw attention to a detail in one of Freud's last papers on the subject, 'Female sexuality', published in 1931. In this paper he mentions Klein's early dating of the Oedipus complex — so he clearly had her theories in mind. It is in this paper alone that he suggests that the daughter's

tendency to feel antagonism towards her mother might not be explicable solely in terms of resentment at not having a penis. He suggests instead — and this has quite a Kleinian ring to it — that both sons and daughters will feel a peculiarly archaic ambivalence towards their mother because she is the first object. Sons deal with this antagonism by diverting it on to their oedipal rival, the father.

In an earlier article for *Free Associations* (Temperley, 1984), I suggested that this unconscious ambivalence towards our mothers could lead women to champion an equality with men which was actually a betrayal and denigration of what is specifically feminine: motherhood. I was influenced by Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, who points out that our extreme dependence on our mothers in infancy and the inequality of power and vulnerability in that relationship can lead both sons and daughters to redress this original imbalance by over-valuing the penis — what the woman does not have. Since I wrote that article, this bias in feminists' aspirations has altered. The aim of equal opportunities in a male world has to some extent been replaced by the defence of motherhood and female values in the face of that male world.

Jerry Aline Flieger, in 'The female subject: (what) does woman want?' (Flieger, 1990), categorizes feminists — using a psychoanalytic perspective — into three groups: 'Father's Daughters', 'Mother's Daughters' and 'Prodigal Daughters'. I propose to use her first two categories, and to offer an alternative to her third category.

'Father's Daughters', as I understand Flieger, are those feminists who accept Freud's and Lacan's views about the psychological position of women. They see Freud's and Lacan's position as clarifying the situation with which feminists have then to contend. They do not challenge the basic validity of their phallogocentric theory. According to Freud, children know of only one genital: the penis. At first they assume that everyone has one or, in the case of girls, will develop one. When, at the time of the Oedipus complex, they realize that this is not true, both boys and girls regard females as castrates. Girls are in fact psychologically little boys who have to reconcile themselves to their deficiency by seeking an indirect substitute for the penis by turning to men in the hope that they will get from them a child, preferably male. I don't think it has been sufficiently stressed not only what a limiting view of female sexuality this is but how it reduces what is sexually desirable about men in women's eyes to their capacity to give them babies. For Freud, 'It is not until development has reached its completion at puberty that the sexual polarity coincides with male and female'; then 'maleness combines the factors of subject, activity and possession of the penis: femaleness takes over those of object and passivity.'

Lacan, basing himself on Freud, describes how the possibility of order, of language, of sanity and of gender depends upon the establishment of the Law of the Father. In his reading of Freud, the essence of the Oedipus stage is that the father interposes his authority to put an end to the illusion of unity between mother and child. This is necessary for the establishment of the Symbolic Order, which is basic to our capacity to use language, to think and to live in an ordered society. It means, however, that the phallus, the symbol of the male organ, becomes the signifier. Women — as in the passage from Freud quoted above — become elusive objects, sought for and inquired after by men, but with questionable capacity to speak or think in their own right as active subjects. They are profoundly marginalized. Jane Gallop describes how, in the social reality behind the Oedipus

complex, men exchange women for heterosexual purposes, but the real intercourse is that exchanged between men.

Some of the 'Mother's Daughters' also accept Lacan's account. If the Symbolic Order is so inevitably phallic, they suggest, women should repudiate it, elevating in its place what is pre-oedipal and not constrained by logic. Flieger points out that this group is in danger of reinforcing the most reactionary of prejudices against women, by retreating from logical thinking as an area fit only for men. They also conflate the pre-oedipal, Lacan's Imaginaire, with the maternal, subscribing to a notion that because the child's relationship to the mother is at first pre-oedipal, that is where the mother herself belongs.

There are also non-Lacanian 'Mother's Daughters'. I will take Nancy Chodorow as an example. She turns to British object-relations theory to vindicate the mother's importance in infantile psychosexual development. She emphasizes identification with the primary object, thereby postulating that both boys and girls start from a feminine position. This theory is the opposite of Freud's: he postulates that before the Oedipus complex children of both sexes take their mothers as objects, and believe themselves to be little men. In Freud's theory, it is little girls who have painfully to readjust their whole view of themselves, and whose subsequent sexual identity is problematic. In Chodorow's theory, girls have a security in their sexual identification with their mothers, and it is boys who have to differentiate themselves and whose masculine security is always vulnerable (Chodorow, 1978).

To my mind, the theories of 'Father's Daughters' and 'Mother's Daughters' share two characteristics. The first is an undue preoccupation with power and ownership. Freud postulated that after the oral phase we pass through the anal and phallic phases before reaching the phase of genital primacy and the Oedipus complex. The importance of these psychosexual phases has been overlaid in later psychoanalytic theory by the increasing stress on the nature of the object relations the child is experiencing. Nevertheless, the anal phase is usefully linked with object relations which emphasize control and ownership of the object — 'mother (if she is the object) belongs to me and should do as I wish'. Freud's phallic stage lays particular emphasis on display and performance — the object is to be impressed or made to feel inferior. The genital phase, with the arrival of the Oedipus complex, meant — according to classical theory — the transcending of these controlling, dominance-minded attitudes and the establishment of the capacity to love the object, to feel concern for the object, and to recognize the object's separate autonomy.

Lacan's account of the Oedipus complex and the Symbolic Order seems to me to import into it an excess of those elements of control, dominance and ownership which ought — according to the classical theory described in the previous paragraph — to have been largely superseded with the passing of anal and phallic phases. It certainly corresponds with such practices as the wife's assumption of her husband's surname, and with the attitudes reflected in the Christian marriage service — 'Who giveth this woman?', addressed to a male member of her original family. The fact, that such essentially anal elements exist in our present culture does not mean that they are integral and necessary elements of the Symbolic Order. Ruth Salvaggio suggests that in fact Lacan was struggling to find a way for readers to relate to the study of texts, and for men to relate to women, which subverted the idea that they were to be 'mastered'. The phallus of Lacan's Symbolic Order is that of the phallic phase — it is concerned with mastery. It should be differentiated from the

procreative male genital which Klein described children regarding as the organ which gratifies and restores the mother, and gives her babies.

Too much of the debate between the 'Father's Daughters' and the 'Mother's Daughters' seems to be conducted in terms of genital rivalry: 'My genitals are the really significant ones — yours don't exist or, though important at a later stage, have only belated and precarious recognition.' This is the attitude of the phallic phase. Sexual difference seems to be about establishing for one sex vis-à-vis. the other that it has the genitals that are really important. Lacan and Freud marginalize women. Chodorow reverses the Freudian imbalance, with its excessive stress on the penis, but marginalizes men in the process.

The second characteristic the 'Father's Daughters' and the 'Mother's Daughters' share is a tendency to overlook the mother's sexuality. The 'Mother's Daughters' celebrate the girl's strong, confident identification with her mother, but they do not explore the specifically sexual implications of this happy identification. To identify with a mother is inevitably to confront the reality that to be a mother involves being a man's (originally father's) sexual partner. This produces a double sense of rivalry. To acknowledge that a sexual relationship with father is intrinsic to being a mother faces the girl immediately with a realization that mother has an order of relationship from which the child is excluded. The daughter feels excluded and rivalrous with the father but also, in so far as she identifies with her mother, she becomes her rival. To want to be like mother — whatever mother's present relationship with father — puts the girl in sexual competition with her mother. Recognition of mother's sexuality causes further ambivalence — if she has a sexual relationship with father to produce one baby, they can produce more, and this stirs multiple rivalries — with the parents for being able to do this, and apprehension of the advent of baby rivals. Much of the disparagement of women comes not from men but from daughters who have never been able to forgive their mother's sexuality and who, consciously or unconsciously, subscribe to the marginalization of such contemptible creatures.

Flieger's third category was 'Prodigal Daughters' — feminists who escaped from the constraints of the old discourse and brought in a new and altering perspective. What Flieger did not consider was the possibility of a feminist who was the daughter of a mother and father, of a parental couple — a strange and telling omission. In so many feminist accounts the sexes vie with each other for dominance and power. They rarely come together in sexual intercourse, to please themselves and each other and to produce babies. Do we have here an enactment, among theorists of sexual development, of our universal resistance to the significance of parental sexuality?

Freud's account of the Oedipus complex emphasizes the child's sexual rivalry with the parent, particularly the parent of the opposite sex. The father's prohibition of the boy's incestuous wishes is experienced by the boy as the threat of castration and he relinquishes these wishes, accepting oedipal reality and internalizing the father's prohibition. The emphasis in this account, and in that of Lacan, is on the child's sexual wishes and their prohibition by the father.

Kleinian analysts have put a different emphasis on the nature of the Oedipus complex. What the child has to accept is not primarily the prohibition of his incestuous wishes but the reality of his position in relation to his parents' sexual relationship. Chasseguet-Smirgel conceptualized this as accepting the difference between the sexes and between the generations. Ron Britton, in 'The missing link: parental sexuality and the Oedipus complex' (Britton, 1989), described how the child

needs to relinquish the omnipotent control of the object (through projective identification) to mourn the loss of this controlling relationship, and to accept that his parents have a relationship with each other which excludes him. If he can make this transition he can internalize a capacity to think, based on his separateness from — but relation to — a creative parental couple. Kleinians stress the link between the depressive position and the Oedipus complex. The mechanisms of the paranoid position — in particular the use of projective identification in order to control the object and to deny separateness — have to be relinquished, and the separateness of the object, including mother's relationship to father — must be accepted.

Hanna Segal, in her paper on symbol formation (Segal, 1957), highlights the way in which projective identification interferes with symbolic thought. Symbolic thought, she suggests, requires the autonomy of the three agents involved — the symbolizer, the object to be symbolized, and the symbol. Where there is projective identification, the autonomy and separateness of these categories is infiltrated and the result is concrete thinking, the confusion of symbol and symbolized that characterizes psychosis. The child must accept the separateness and independent intercourse of his parents in order to avail himself of his own capacity to think — a triangular activity — and of his own sexual potential — another triangular activity. The symbol user has to allow the autonomous creative marriage of symbol and symbolized in order to think. Similarly, the child has to allow the autonomous creative intercourse of his parents in order to internalize and avail himself of such a capacity in his own sexual life.

Klein and Lacan are in agreement about the importance of the Symbolic Order, and also that the father and his penis are experienced as interposing a limit between mother and child. Often this is enacted over the parental bed. The child would like to stay in the parental bed, preventing and denying parental intercourse and the possibility of new babies. The father is often experienced as the one who intervenes to put the child in a separate room and to assert the separateness and reality of the parents' intercourse. What is experienced by the child as an intolerable exclusion and loss offers him the possibility of a room, a mind and a sexuality that is his own. The father, as third term in the triangle, challenges the projective system that can entangle mother and child. In Kleinian theory he does this not to establish his authority but to defend the possibility of a creative relationship between woman and man that should be as free of mutual control and dominance as all three terms in Hanna Segal's delineation of symbol formation. The Oedipus complex is not bad news for women but the possibility both of autonomy and of a sexual relationship to men which respects and avails itself creatively of the difference.

Kleinians and Lacanians share the view that the Oedipus complex is a nodal psychic transaction, and that the way we each negotiate — or fail to negotiate — it has the most profound effect upon our sexuality. It also has the most profound effect on the use we are able to make of our minds, on our ability to think and to use symbols, including words. Kleinians and Lacanians would also argue that this transition involves at some level a tremendous sense of loss, a caesura — a transition which is necessary in order to participate in the world of speech and symbolic expression, but one which makes the subject feel shorn and incomplete in a new and sometimes terrible way. For Kleinians this transition involves the relinquishment of phantasies of omnipotent control of the object (through projective identification with it) and the acceptance of separateness. Separateness in turn involves the pain of exclusion from the object's other relations, particularly the primal scene. It is the loss of

this illusion of omnipotent control via projective identification which is the true 'realization of castration'.

I will illustrate such phantasies in a patient who sought to maintain an idealized identification with her analyst, transferring on to him the way in which she had lived in projective identification with her father's penis or her mother's body. This idealized identification, however, involved an extremely rigid control of the analyst and an intolerance of any unanticipated divergence, even a minor one, in the analyst's physical conduct of the session. The analyst was invasively tyrannized by the patient, but the patient's mind was in turn taken over and tyrannized by ruminations about the analyst. She had little mental latitude for anything but her analyst, and the concreteness of her need to control her analyst was always liable to make symbolic understanding meaningless. In the external world, builders had been called in to do repairs on her house, but her need to control the house and the builders threatened her literally with insanity. The house represented her mother's body, in which the patient lived by projective identification, and the arrival of the builders represented her realization that if the house was to be of use to her, she had to acknowledge an intercourse between her parents that she did not control. Psychically she had to distinguish between the house, as a building which needed repair, and her concrete equation of it with the maternal body within which she held sway. When she relinquished her omnipotent phantasies of being inside and in control of her idealized analyst, she was faced with a deep sense of desolation which led her to bewail that her analyst was now no more than her analyst. The possibility of using the house as a home which needed builders or the analyst as someone whose thoughts, though not under her control, might help her (that is, as her analyst) seemed at this stage to be a very dubious compensation.

This is a Kleinian account of a patient struggling with the sense of lack intrinsic in the transition to oedipal reality and the Symbolic Order. The recognition of the father's relationship to the mother — that the builders must have access to the house — is central to this caesura. To call it a caesura is to refer to the violence of the obstetrician father's intervention to pluck the child from within the mother, and so save both of them. Where Kleinians differ from Lacanians is on the question of whether this transition, brought about by the limits the father's role puts upon infantile omnipotence, involves a lasting disadvantage to women, rendering them 'objects' in a world of male signification. The Kleinian view is that it is not primarily the limiting power of the father which has to be accepted but the reality of our separateness, our dependence on objects which we do not control, and of our relationship to parents whose independent intercourse has to be acknowledged. Freud wrote of the internalization of the parents as the nucleus of the super-ego, following the Oedipus complex. Kleinians would stress the nature of the relationship between those internal parents: the degree to which, as man and woman, they are allowed to enjoy each other. It is the acceptance or the restoration of a parental couple, not just the father's authority, which marks the painful birth into psychic reality and the Symbolic Order. There is no intrinsic reason why parental intercourse need confer on the man the qualities of subject and on the woman those of object unless the child is still, in his unseparateness, projectively identified with the phallus and seeking thereby still to control the mother.

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