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### Psychoanalysis, sexual difference and the castration problematic

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V. Bozalek

## Chapter 4

# *Psychoanalysis, sexual difference and the castration problematic*

Derek Hook

### **Sexual identification as mode of constitution**

It is useful to open with a few comments underlying the importance of a psychoanalytic perspective to an understanding of sexual identity. In her introduction to a collection of Jacques Lacan's writings (*Feminine Sexuality*) Juliet Mitchell (1982), the great defender of psychoanalysis to feminism, makes the following comments:

For all psychoanalysts the development of the human subject, its unconscious and its sexuality go hand-in-hand, they are causatively intertwined. A psychoanalyst could not subscribe to a currently popular sociological distinction in which a person is born with their biological gender to which society – generally environment, parents, education, the media – adds a socially defined sex, masculine or feminine. Psychoanalysis cannot make such a distinction: a person is formed *through* their sexuality, it could not be 'added' to him or her (2).

For psychoanalysis, the issue of *sexual difference*, by which we mean to refer to issues of psychical masculinity or femininity, can never simply be the outcome of social construction. One of the reasons for this is that it is exactly through the assumption of a sexual identity – the *unconscious* process of taking on a feminine or masculine identification – that the subject comes into being as a *social and symbolic entity*. What this means is that the designation of sexuality is not something that occurs in addition to, as a kind of 'top up' to a subject who is already formed, it is rather the case that there is *no subject prior to this process*. The taking on of a sexual identity is the means through which the subject as a social being is constituted in the first place.



We should qualify 'sexual difference' here: this chapter focuses on the psychosexuality of masculinity and femininity, i.e. those categories typically understood as issues of 'gender'. Issues of sexual orientation are not discussed and the term 'sexual difference' is not meant to apply to questions of *heterosexuality*, *homosexuality*, *bisexuality*. We are concerned here with how a *speaking being experiences sexuality on the level of the psyche*. Our discussion here has nothing to do with biological sex; as Wright (1998) points out, and we should be clear from the start, a biological male can function according to feminine sexuality, and a biological female according to masculine sexuality.

For psychoanalysis it is exactly through the process of *taking on a sexed role* that we are able to enter the social and symbolic world. If this is the case, then it makes no sense to think of a subject who assumes a given gender role, who is 'gendered' by a set of social processes after she or he is a socially-competent speaking agent. How we come to be 'sexed', to *unconsciously* adopt a psychical masculinity or femininity, is exactly how we enter the world of culture, rules, language, society. Put in stronger terms, the issue of one's sexual identity is not something that is divisible from the unconscious core of the human subject. Sexual identity cannot, furthermore, be reduced to biology (that is, to the body, to various physical or genetic components) or to social construction (that is to 'gender', to discourses of masculinity and femininity, to various gendering forms of social interaction and practice). Wright poses exactly this problem: if sexual difference is not reducible to a biological given, nor wholly constituted by social practices, she asks, if male/female sexualities are not essential categories and masculine/feminine not just historical constructs, *then what creates sexual difference?* For psychoanalysis the answer to this question is to be found in a particular mode of unconscious identification made by the subject, one that locates her or him in a particular position to the socio-symbolic world of which she or he is part. It is this particular process that we describe in this chapter, and in the next one.

### Problems with construction

We can emphasise the importance of a psychoanalytic approach to issues of sexual difference by posing a problem. In understandings of the social construction of gender, what is it that the discourses or social constructions in question act upon in the first place? We know what these constructions produce: 'gender' itself, as a category of understanding, knowledge, and, typically, discrimination. What though is its 'initial object', the anchoring point that supports the construction of different sexual positions? What is it that makes them possible in the first place? Leader (1996) makes a similar point in a different context: to argue that a psychological feature is a social construct implies precisely that there is some natural, non-socially constructed reality behind it, something more real.

This is a vital question: what was the initial 'centre of objectification' for the social construction of gender? We pose these questions to draw attention to the fact that we need to be wary of presupposing an unsexed object, a world *before the distinctions of sexual difference*. The danger of this is that we risk 'reading back' into such objects the sexual differences that are instrumental to structuring the social and symbolic world in which we exist. This is an obvious problem for feminism, because it suggests that we are replicating sexual difference even in our attempt to free ourselves from such categories. We should be clear here: the approach we elaborate is not one which is opposed to discursive or social constructionist

approaches to gender; quite to the contrary, they should be viewed as *an integral part of the critical project of gender studies*. However, they may be insufficient on their own, and may stand to benefit by being complemented by a different order of critical conceptualisations, in particular that afforded by the register of psychoanalysis. To return to the above problem: how do we halt this infinite regress of constructions, where the very object we take as the target of gendering discourse, that pre-discursive thing, has *already* been constructed as an effect of sexual difference? How do we safeguard against the inadvertent ‘essentialism’ that may thus creep into our critical analyses of masculinity/femininity? By offering a substantive account of that event, or process, by which sexual distinction *first* and most profoundly occurs. In this respect we do well to note that for a theorist such as Lacan, psychoanalysis is not concerned with how men and women do, or *should* live as sexually differentiated beings, instead it hopes to analyse *how they come to be such beings in the first place*.

### Approaching psychoanalysis

Our objective in this chapter and the one following is to offer a series of psychoanalytic conceptualisations of sexual difference, not to offer a definitive treatment of the subject, but rather to provide the basis for a series of critical reformulations of how we might go about thinking ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’. These ideas, although perhaps vague at first and resistant to understanding, nevertheless demand serious consideration.

The writings of both Freud and Lacan are crucial if we are to get to grips with the most important psychoanalytic understandings of sexual difference and identification. A problem is posed here, however: many of Lacan’s writings in particular are notoriously difficult and opaque. This is perhaps due to the counter-intuitive nature of this particular brand of theory; it is also due to the particular jargon it brings with it. Squabbles over correct applications of this esoteric body of thought are legion. Complicating matters still further is the issue of an intricate, diverse, self-contradictory (and changing) collection of ideas that Lacan has left behind. Wary of these problems, and yet intent on finding some point of access, we have opted to introduce Freud and Lacan, not in a purist vein, but via their interlocutors. Given the importance of a critical approach to issues of sexual identity, we have relied chiefly on a set of feminist interlocutors. In many ways this chapter is a patchwork of the contributions of a series of feminist scholars – Mitchell, Rose, Wright, Grosz, Silverman, Adams and Minsky – who have explored the terrain of psychoanalysis with the objective of contributing to critical gender studies.

### Freud and forward

For Freud, sexuality is always psychosexuality, the sexuality of the subject of the unconscious, as Mitchell (1982) reiterates. To fail to grapple with these issues of the unconscious of sexuality is to miss much of the complexity of what underwrites identifications of masculinity and femininity.

Although it is true that questions of anatomical distinction are of great importance to the Freudian view – a view often caricatured in claims of reference to the notion that ‘anatomy is destiny’ – it is necessary to emphasise that for Freud questions of sexuality cannot simply be reduced to biology. The important distinction to be aware of in Freud’s work is

not that of anatomical distinctions per se, but that of the *psychical consequences*, in other words, unconscious processes of desire, fantasy, anxiety which attach to the perception and understanding of such distinctions, particularly as they come to be understood with reference to ideas of absence and presence. So, although Freud will go on to suggest that there may in fact be certain psychical characteristics that might typically be called 'masculine' and others that may be called 'feminine', these are by no means fixed, or essential. Importantly, the meaning of certain anatomical distinctions – and how such distinctions are understood in terms of absence and/or presence – might, conceivably, be taken up differently in different contexts. We might speculate that the meaning of possessing or not possessing a penis (or a vagina, or a womb, for that matter) means different things for, say, a patriarchal versus a matriarchal culture, and will come to have different social loadings in each. (Although, for both Freud and Lacan, something will certainly operate as the 'phallus' in such processes).

### Sexuality and the unconscious as 'co-substantial' in the subject

Lacan's return to Freud's theorising will likewise emphasise the link between sexuality and the unconscious, two fundamental themes of psychoanalysis which are considered to be 'co-substantial' and hence inseparable. For Rose (1982) and Wright (2000) alike psychoanalytic explanations have run into trouble when they have neglected this crucial interdependence of sexuality and the unconscious. To treat sexuality as something that is wholly conscious, for a start, is to imply that our sexuality is something we have full rational control of. Furthermore, to keep these two categories separate suggests that sexuality is somehow separable from identity itself, from the most fundamental questions of who and how we are within the world. As I have already suggested, for psychoanalysis, sexuality is not something that we can put on and take off, something that we can consciously choose, or select. To make assumptions of this sort, that sexuality is separable from the unconscious and from identity, that it is something we have an uncomplicated sense of agency over, is to risk making the mistake of assuming a pre-given sexual difference that has somehow secured distinct sexual identities for both sexes.

### So what then produces sexual difference?

In Freud's emphasis on sexual distinction we are focusing on discoveries of early childhood, *where visible difference* in the body of others (and often the bodies of other children) counts. Hence we can only stretch his ideas so far. (So, although breasts, for example, might be said to make for a physical marker of sexual difference, they are not present in the bodies of children.) My point here is simply to suggest that there are routes through Freudian psychoanalysis that might provide a potentially anti-essentialist account of sexual difference. Questions of sexual difference (like those of sexual orientation) are elements of subjectivity for Freud that are by no means pre-determined, or somehow genetically predisposed, but are instead outcomes of a process of cultural formation in tandem with certain basic structural conditions of possibility, *within the psychical domain*. The complexity of this process mitigates against ideas of a pre-set or genetically predetermined sexual role. Evans (1992) puts this well:

Freud limits himself to describing how a human subject comes to acquire masculine or feminine characteristics. This is not an instinctual or natural process, but a complex one in which anatomical differences interact with social and psychical factors (178).

The answer to the question, then, as to what produces sexual difference is a complex interplay of bodies, social forces, certain structural conditions, and various psychological representations.

### The 'polymorphous' nature of sexuality

Sexuality for Freud is always the sexuality of the subject of the unconscious, whose operations, of course, take place within a given social and historical context. This psychosexuality, to be clear, is a system of conscious and unconscious human fantasies involving a range of excitations and activities that produce pleasure beyond the satisfaction of any basic physiological need. It arises from various sources, seeks satisfaction in many different ways and makes use of many diverse objects for its aim of achieving pleasure. Only with great difficulty and then never perfectly does it move from being a drive with many component parts – a single 'libido' expressed through very different phenomena – to being what is normally understood as sexuality (Mitchell 1982: 2).

Mitchell is here emphasising the famous polymorphous nature of the Freudian conceptualisation of sexuality, which becomes detached, through pleasure, from the rudimentary imperatives of biological need, which is rooted in different erotogenic zones of the body, which partakes in different kinds of sexual pleasures, with a variety of potential partners or objectives of desire and hence appears far more consolidated and stable than it is. There is very little about this sexuality that may be said to be 'pre-formed'.

### Rooted in the body: inevitable recourse to the penis?

These are important qualifications of Freud's understanding of sexual difference, but we should perhaps be wary of being too sympathetic to the Freudian view, or, put differently, we should be equally prepared to confront head-on what is most problematic about it. What we have in mind of course is the notorious notion of *penis envy*. Vanier (2000) suggests that Lacan's conceptualisation of 'sexuation' – i.e. the unconscious taking on of either masculine or feminine subjectivity – is an attempt to correct the Freudian dictum that 'anatomy is destiny'. We have tried to show, above, that anatomy itself is not simply gender destiny for Freud; having made this point, however, it is necessary that we remain aware of the degree to which Freudian accounts of sexual difference remain rooted at some level in the body, requiring what certain feminists (Grosz 1990) have objected to as a kind of 'inevitable recourse to the penis'.

Simply put, Freud's initial theories of sexual difference pivoted around the child's discovery of the fact that (for little boys) not all bodies have penises, or (for girls), that some bodies do. For the little boy, this realisation that girls do not have penises is experienced as a kind of potential loss of *his own penis*, hence *castration anxiety*. For the little girl, this discovery is experienced as a sense of lack, the awareness that boys have an anatomical component that she does not (although she has a smaller equivalent in the clitoris) which she then wishes she had, hence the infamous notion of penis envy. It seems immediately apparent why this notion is offensive to a feminist standpoint: it treats the penis, as, in many ways, the fulcrum of human identification, for males and females alike (Horney 1967; Millett 1969). (Freud uses the term 'castration complex' to refer jointly to castration anxiety

in boys, penis envy in girls.) As ideologically dangerous as this idea of penis envy is, there is the possibility that it contains something of conceptual value. Furthermore, it may not be rationally inconsistent, certainly not within patriarchal societies; if this is the case then, Freud deserves to be 'heard out'.

### **Sexual researchers: body as surface of experience and distinction**

It is worthwhile bearing in mind that Freud's hypothetical children (discovering the absence and presence of the penis) are at a very early, indeed egocentric point of cognitive development. Thus, the relevance of external events and eventualities in the world is understood as they impact upon the child itself (hence the fact that the boy imagines that everyone has a penis, and the fact that he experiences the 'penis-less' body as a source of anxiety, a suggestion that he might lose his own penis). Furthermore, although it may seem absurd that the girl should want the penis (after all, she has a clitoris, just as capable of the bodily pleasure that the penis affords), one needs to bear in mind that at this stage of development both size and presence 'count'; having something is always better than not having it; the bigger, more demonstrative organ is better than an organ which is concealed.

We need bear in mind furthermore that the scenario Freud asks us to imagine is one that happens between very young children, toddlers even, who, crucially, do not approach and understand the world with the more mature and rational cognitive schemas that adults do. Here we are dealing with a very bodily-centred 'identity' – not to mention a state of pronounced sexual curiosity and fascination. At this point in life the pleasures, sensations and distinctions of the body prove an important 'surface of experience' and understanding for how the child comes to know itself and to formulate its young identity. Clearly, none of this happens outside of a social context. 'Doctor doctor' and 'show and tell' games occur within a specific political and historical situation, in which children are gradually becoming aware that differential rights and privileges are accorded to different bodies. Something like having a penis (as being recognised by adults as a little boy), for example, may well in fact connote a higher status of sorts than not having one (being recognised as a girl), at least within patriarchal societies. Also, this absence/presence distinction of 'not having it'/'having it', potential loss/lack refers not simply at the most direct and deterministic level to anatomical distinction alone – it is not mere bodily distinctions that Freud has in mind, but (to reiterate again) the psychological consequences of these distinctions, and how they connote certain relations of presence and absence, of 'having' and 'not having', which impact on fantasies, desires, anxieties.

### **A narcissism of lack and loss**

There is an additional component to these dynamics of possession and lack (and potential loss), which we should not overlook. Freud emphasises that a considerable amount of the child's nascent subjectivity is invested in the phallus. A vital distinction here: the phallus for Freud, in this respect, refers to the penis in boys, the clitoris in girls; it is the leading zone of sexual pleasures in the body, a zone in which the subject takes an active role in pursuing its sexual objectives, with others as its sexual objects. (At the earliest points of development both little boys and girls are thought to attain a phallic sexuality; there is, until the advent

of the castration complex, no fundamental ‘gender’ distinction between the two, neither masculinity nor femininity has been chosen.) Here we need to emphasise again that the budding ego is essentially bodily in origin; the phallic area of the body is hence a potent element of bodily-identity, a means, we might say, of pleurably experiencing one’s self.

In this way the phallus represents a particularly powerful node of narcissistic investment, especially given the amount of pleasure it affords children, and the fact that they remain active subjects of their desire, rather than objects of another’s desire. As such a potent (and narcissistic) element of bodily-identity, one begins to appreciate why its potential loss, or its depreciation, might be experienced as so vexing for the young child. As Young-Bruehl (1990) suggests, to give up the confidence of the narcissistic investment in the phallus is to experience a huge threat to self-love and self-esteem. Laplanche and Pontalis (1973) are enlightening in this regard: the phallus is an essential component of the child’s self-image, so any threat to the phallus – or by extension, any detrimental comparison with another

#### Other castratable objects: penis envy as template for a politics of lack

Freud’s notion of castration, along with its prioritisation of the penis, has come in for no small amount of criticism, both from outside of psychoanalysis, and from within (in respect of the latter see Leader 1999; Mitchell 1974; 1982). This, indeed, is a deservedly controversial conceptualisation. I will not enter into a critique of Freud’s notions here; suffice for now to say, as Mitchell has intimated in her feminist engagement with the notion of penis envy, that psychoanalysis is an approach to the ‘history of the human subject in its generality (human history) and its particularity (the specific life of the individual) as it manifests itself in unconscious fantasy life’ (1982: 4). More directly:

It is only [the theoretical context of psychoanalysis] that gives meaning to such notorious concepts as say ‘penis envy’ [or castration anxiety] – without their context such notions certainly become either laughable or ideologically dangerous. In the briefest possible terms, we can say that psychoanalysis is about the material reality of ideas both within, and of, man’s history; thus in ‘penis-envy’ [or castration anxiety] we are talking not about an anatomical organ, but about the ideas of it that people hold and live by within the general culture, the order of human society (Mitchell 1974: xvi).

Furthermore, we need to bear in mind that the (largely unconscious) anxiety of loss or lack described by Freud as castration anxiety may be played out with a different set of objects; there may be ‘castratable objects’ other than the penis itself around which the dynamics of castration and fetishism play themselves out. It is important here to appreciate the psychoanalytic distinction between penis and phallus. While the penis, for Freud, is the literal organ, the ‘anatomic reality’, the phallus is the symbolic function the penis takes on. Focusing on the phallus rather than the literal penis in castration anxiety would suggest that different aspects of the self-image may be socially prized – for the phallus is not reducible to the penis. What may come to be particularly socially prized in this regard – a nodal point of social desire and individual anxiety alike – may be any of a variety of phallic substitutes, tokens of masculinity, or, in the case of racist formulas that may come to operate on a similar basis, tokens of whiteness. I need to emphasise this point: what ultimately comes to take on the role of the phallus may not necessarily be the penis, or, debatably, even something typically emblematic of masculinity. It is conceivable that blue eyes, for example, as in Toni Morrison’s (1970) novel *The Bluest Eye* may come to be that element of bodily-identity most prized in a given socio-historical location, and hence that facet of bodily-identity that represents the strongest concentration of narcissistic investment.



seemingly superior phallus – represents a radical danger to this image. The anxiety and/or devaluation that occurs in primal discoveries of the fact that some bodies have or do not have penises is then rooted in two fundamental factors: the primacy of the phallus and the result of a narcissistic wound to the individual. This explanation helps broaden our sense of the dynamics at play in the castration complex, emphasising that the essential threat in question is that of a kind of ‘identity damage’ which occurs most fundamentally at an unconscious level – as a function of fantasy – a ‘wounding’ of subjectivity which is deeply repressed, and that corresponds to a sense of *lack* in females, a sense of potential loss in males.

### Rethinking issues of castration

The concept of ‘penis-envy’ is hence quite understandably rejected by many women, as is Freudian theory’s apparent centralisation of the male genital organ (and male desire) as that which structures all relations of gender. Whilst sympathetic to these arguments, Minsky (1996) attempts to qualify Freud’s concept of the castration complex, calling attention to the fact that it is, quite crucially, an *unconscious process*, one based on fantasy, that we have no conscious access to. Furthermore the most vital meaning of Freud’s concepts is at a symbolic rather than a literal level of application:

In relation to penis-envy this means not just ‘I feel castrated and I wish I had a penis’ ... but, perhaps more recognisable to women ‘Who I am has been found lacking ... therefore there must be something wrong with me: I cannot be good enough as I am’. In the case of the small boy’s castration anxiety ... ‘I am terrified of the little sense of self I have ... being totally annihilated therefore I must continually be in control and on my guard’. It is these kinds of unconscious meanings lived out in the minds of men and women which Freud’s theory suggests we cannot ignore in our analysis of how women’s subordination within culture has come about (50–51).

So, although Freud stubbornly clings to the body, and basic bodily difference as the anchor-point of these processes, it seems that we start to discern here a means through which we might transcend this necessary limit point, which, after all, risks returning Freudian sexuality to a version of essentialism. (We say ‘risk’ here, and ‘a version’ of essentialism, because, as we hope this is by now clear, Freud does not espouse a deterministic relationship between body and sexuality, but rather a complex relation which is mediated by unconscious and discursive representations of the body alike in which symbolic rather than merely literal understandings of the body are at stake.) What do we have in mind here? The fact that we have a child subject, male or female alike, who experiences a narcissistic wound; its body must be experienced as threatened, either by potential loss to come (the actual losing of the penis in fears of castration), or by comparison (a sense thus, of lack, a ‘coming off second best’ relative to another subject).

The model that Freud offers seems already to suppose the cultural over-valuation of the phallus, or more directly, the penis and masculinity within patriarchal societies. Might not something else be the phallus in different conceivable societies (see the two following inserts)? Might we not be able to transfer this set of dynamics, the dynamics of presence (of possessing the phallus), of lack (of not possessing it) and loss (the potential of losing it) into a different field of conceptualisation? Put differently, if for the moment we suspect that

Freud is 'on to something' with his underlying basis of masculinity and femininity, might we attempt to find another way of articulating these positions (of possession, lack and loss) which are not reliant on the register of anatomy/biology, which may, hence, be more easily experienced across genders?

The reason we are focusing so much on the above issues is that they will prove directly

### The phallus and other dimensions of 'primary difference'

There may as such be 'castratable objects' other than the penis itself (see insert p. 51) around which the dynamics of what psychoanalysis calls *castration* play themselves out. If this is the case, then other elements of bodily difference, tokens of race rather than tokens of masculinity, for example, may come to play the part of the phallus as a focal point of narcissistic investment and vulnerability. Frantz Fanon's (1986) exploration of the valorisation of whiteness in colonial contexts seems to verge on this territory. This line of thought poses two interesting questions.

The first concerns the point at which we limit extrapolations from the Freudian theory of castration. The second concerns the issue of what would appear to count as 'primary difference' in different locations, and, indeed, whether such 'primary difference' might be understood in the dynamics of the phallus. Developing the point of what may count as the phallus, Freud himself emphasises the symbolic equations that play their part in the linked set of values associated with the penis (i.e. penis – faeces – child – gift), even if the penis is, again, arguably, the initial and fixed point of reference in a whole series of references. Second, Laplanche and Pontalis speak of the phallus as the symbolic function of the penis 'in the intra- and inter-subjective dialectic' (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973: 312), like Freud, thus opening up the possibility of an element of social mediation in what comes to count as phallic. Certain elements of social construction, of discourse, of historical context may certainly thus play a mediating role in what comes to count as the phallus, as the 'phallic element' in the dynamics of identification and difference. For these reasons it seems useful to experiment with applying Freud's model of castration in a flexible manner, to imagine its use in reference to other elements of bodily difference and, furthermore, in relation to broader social theories of categorisation. It is important here that we note that Freud's schema can only, of course, be stretched so far: the dynamic of the castration complex seems to require, as a basic condition of possibility, a certain anatomical distinction, clearly evident in the body, which is present/absent across a given population during formative years of individual development. Racial difference, of course, would hence seem susceptible to incorporation within this schema.

In respect of issues of 'primary differences', it would seem difficult to deny that in distinct political spheres different dimensions of difference, so to speak, come to be prioritised. Different societies, simply put, would appear to operate distinct 'orders of difference' such that religious affiliation may 'over-ride' considerations of ethnicity as the dominant variable of discrimination. In other socio-historical contexts one can imagine 'race' playing a more forceful role than gender in what counts as the most important dimension of difference between subjects. Of course, such 'orders of difference' intersect, and combine in highly complex ways, so we should be wary of reducing issues of difference to any one factor. Then again, it does seem that very specific dimensions of 'primary difference' have operated in certain societies at specific times. The factor of race in apartheid South Africa, and religious loyalty in Northern Ireland, for example, seemed at certain historical junctures to 'count more', at least immediately, than differences (or similarities) of gender. In such societies where there does seem to be such a clear-cut dimension of 'primary difference', it is certainly conceivable that this mode of categorisation might take on the dynamics of the absent or present phallus, and may correspondingly lead to identities of possession (and entitlement and power) and of dispossession (of lack, inadequacy, inferiority).

pertinent to the conceptual reformulations of sexual difference that Lacan will go on to offer. One last component of Freudian psychoanalysis needs be revisited before we move onto Lacan though: the Oedipus complex. This is vital, because it emphasises those aspects of the castration complex and the meaning of ‘the phallus’ that Lacan will go on to conceptualise in a broader and more enabling way.

## The Oedipus complex

Freud’s Oedipus complex is understood to be a process that is largely symmetrical in regard to how it is initially experienced by boys and girls. In brief, the child exhibits a powerful relation of desire towards the *opposite* sex partner, and, accordingly, an equally powerful relationship of rivalry and hatred towards the same-sex parent who blocks the possibility of such a relationship. Realising, ultimately, that it will not be able to oust the rival parent the child must eventually take the route of substitution if its desires are to be met. So, although it cannot have mommy or daddy, it can have someone *like* them, a substitute for this person who resembles certain key features of the desired parent. Fearing the rival parent and not able to challenge their hold on the desired parent, the most realistic means of reconciling this situation is through a form of identification with the rival. One becomes *like* mommy or daddy (i.e. the parent of the same sex) rather than attempting to replace them. By making a strong identification of this sort, the child is in a much better position to find and secure its own version of the desired mommy or daddy as a sexual partner. It is worth emphasising the role of identification in processes of this sort; there is within the Oedipus complex a very powerful imperative to make a sexual identification, both so as to resolve rivalry with the same-sex parent, and to open the possibility of a future sexual relationship.

We have here the template of two major kinds of relation: *identifying* and *desiring*. The implicit law being, within heterosexist societies, that one should desire one type of person (of the opposite sex) and set up a relation of *difference* with them, and identify with another (the same sex) with whom one sets up a relation of *likeness*. In a hetero-normative context these two kinds of relation should not cross over; one should not desire and identify with the same object. (There are of course, historically, other social contexts that are not heteronormative, where such ‘rules’ do not apply in the same way.) The basic components of this account, the functioning of desire and loss for one, and the procedures of likeness, difference and substitution, will be absolutely crucial in Lacan’s structural version of the Oedipus complex. In the following chapter we discuss how the most fundamental structuring relations of the Oedipus complex, the ‘rules’ of difference, substitution, exclusion, absence (as touched on above), are also present within the basic operations of language. This will enable Lacan to offer a somewhat different, yet nevertheless compatible explanation of the Oedipus complex.

Although Freud’s notion of the Oedipus complex makes some important early contributions to the understanding of sexuality – especially in light of setting up formative relations of desire and identification – it seems to smuggle a set of hetero-normative assumptions into how one understands the early sexual dynamics of children. Why the automatic attraction to the opposite-sex parent? Freud’s later conceptualisations of the Oedipus complex take this problem into account, and pose instead a situation in which either boy or girl child initially desires its ‘first object’, namely the mothering figure. This

is hardly surprising in as much as this person is responsible for attending to its biological needs (feeding, cleaning, nourishing the child) and subsequently also *gratifying* it. In the 'all or nothing' nature of early childhood and infancy, the child wishes to have and possess this figure, for this 'motherer' to be its and its alone. Involved here is not only the desire *for* the figure of the mother, but also the desire to be everything the mother desires, *to be the object of her desire*. They want to be for her what is most valued, most cherished. At this bodily and egocentric stage of life, the most important focus of pleasure and identity, as we have already suggested, is that which psychoanalysts refer to as *the phallus*. What this means, therefore, is that the child both wishes to have and possess the mother – and here we are looking forward to what Lacan will add to the theory – and to *be* the phallus for her. This is the child's unconscious fantasy: that it will be the phallus which epitomises the mother's desire.

### The 'no' of the father

This fantasy, of course, is not to be. This position of desire is prohibited. It is the figure of the father that brings to an end the possibility of this relationship with the mother, and it does so via the phallus. Having already established how important the phallus is to the child, we are able to understand that the most severe threat that can here be posed to them is that of removing the phallus, of taking it away, or alternatively, of being made to understand that one does not possess the phallus, that it resides elsewhere. Here things start to differ for the boy and the girl: the boy is threatened with loss, the girl is motivated to find and possess what she is said to lack. We are thus back to the castration complex. The threat that is mobilised here is one associated with the phallus. It is from this point that the dynamics of potential loss or lack (as described above) emerge.

We can thus understand how it might be that the castration complex brings to an end the Oedipus complex, at least for the boy child, and does so in dramatic fashion. The stakes in the rivalrous competition for the mother have now become too high; the loss of the phallus is too high a price to pay. The threat of castration may as such be said to 'shatter' the Oedipus complex. In a way, the opposite holds for the girl child: the emphasis placed on the phallus, along with the suggestion that she does not possess it, may be said, in contrast, to initiate the Oedipus complex in as much as she comes to hate and resent the mother for not having a phallus (and for not giving her one), directing her attentions to the closest possible owner of a phallus, the father.

More than this, though, as we have already suggested, the castration complex also 'gives the human meaning of the distinction between the sexes' (Mitchell 1982: 13). The intrusion of the prohibition of the father introduces the first fundamental law into the infant/child's world (the law against incest, you may not have/desire your mother), a law which brings with it the imposition of sexual difference. The enforcement of this law is contingent on the child's taking on of a relationship to the phallus – a relation to the phallus which is for psychoanalysis what sexual identity is all about. To reiterate: why does the relationship with the mother fail? Exactly on the basis of the phallus – either because if one has it, it will be taken away, or if one does not have it, one must eventually accept this fact or find a substitute for it. (Hence the unconscious symbolic equation of baby to phallus for Freud; the closest a woman can come to 'having a phallus' is by receiving the gift of the child from one who has a phallus.) Neither of these options presents itself as a smooth or unproblematic process;

neither boy nor girl child escapes unscathed. Either one does not have the phallus but will wish for a substitute for it, to offer an equivalent object (typically the feminine position) or one will attempt to *protect and represent it*, to show *one has it* (typically the masculine position). Importantly – and this is where Lacan’s re-definition of the ‘phallus’ will be so crucial – these positions should not necessarily correspond to biological ‘sex’, that is, to having the biological body of a girl or a boy; these positions should instead correspond to maintaining a fundamental unconscious relationship to the phallus.

### The making of a sexed subject

As is becoming evident then, Lacanian psychoanalysis may be characterised by its emphasis, as in Freud, on the role of the father. This is a point of focus that has been rejected by many other forms of psychoanalysis (object relations, ego-psychology, Kleinian psychoanalysis) that have chosen to focus predominantly on the formative nature of maternal relations. What is important about this focus – although it still requires some ‘filling out’, further description of what the ‘phallus’ is and how it articulates with human desire – is the fact that it offers an argument as to how human subjectivity comes to be structured. Lacan and Freud are united on this point, and we should not dilute their message in this respect: it is the castration complex and the meaning of the phallus which make up the bedrock of subjectivity itself and of the place of sexuality within it (Mitchell 1982). As we noted in the introduction, the constitution of the speaking human subject as a coherent social being and the question of sexual identity cannot be separated. As Rose (1982) affirms: it is the mark of the phallus around which subjectivity and sexuality alike are constructed. More to the point yet: ‘The castration complex is the instance of the humanization of the child in its sexual difference’ (Mitchell 1982: 7).

### Castration complex as institution of social law

To understand how human subjectivity is implicated, indeed somehow constituted in the castration complex, we need to appreciate that a number of interlinked processes are happening here. The child is not only undergoing the intense and formative emotional dynamics of desire, rivalry, prohibition, identification and so on in relation to its parental figures, it is also acquiring language. For Lacan, as we explain later, this is a crucial factor: at the same time the child is discovering sexual difference it is learning to make use of the signifying system of language. Language, like the Oedipus complex itself, involves understanding the operations of *substitution*, *difference* and *absence*. We discuss these parallels in more detail in the following chapter. For now, and at a more basic level, we should focus on the fact that as the child is getting to grips with its relation to the phallus it also has to come to terms with the arrival of a ‘third term’ that disturbs the bond it has with the figure of the mother. (This relation to the phallus, to reiterate, is that of a potential *lack* in the case of the little girl, and of a potential relation to loss in the little boy, both of which are experienced first as literal, and then at a broader symbolic level.) Put starkly, something external to the intense child-to-mother bond has invaded the serenity of this relationship and broken it apart. This external force, or threat – which is also the first encounter with social law – is the paternal threat of castration. We have here then the arrival of a very



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*In the Oedipus complex we are concerned with the arrival of a 'third term' that disturbs the intense child-to-mother bond. This external force or threat is the paternal threat of castration.*

fundamental prohibition that will change the child's world for good. It is crucial here that we grasp the role of castration as *the imposition of law*, as the intrusion of culture into what had otherwise been the self-contained world of infant and caregiver.

The castration complex introduces the child into the world of social rules, regulations and roles. For Freud, the traumatic event of the castration complex is what institutes the agency of the superego, the superego being the internalised agency of social law and prohibition we would recognise in commonsensical everyday terms as one's conscience. The castration complex initiates the equivalent of a 'domino-effect' of various rules, regulations and social differentiations beyond the first basic prohibition against incest that then transforms the human being into a properly enculturated *subject*. In a way, the castration complex is the gateway that allows the laws and order of the broader social domain into the pre-socialised dyad of mother and child. It becomes in effect the necessary entry-point to all other social meanings in so far as they are permeated with the rules and differentiations of the greater social structure. It is for this reason that Mitchell can say that the castration complex is the first point of the acquisition of culture, that the castration complex 'operates as a law whereby men and women assume their humanity' (Mitchell 1982: 13). Although at first this may seem a very large claim to make, it would ultimately appear to be justified, particularly once we understand that it is from the point of the castration complex that stem 'the beginnings of morality, conscience, law and all forms of social and religious authority' (Eagleton 1983: 165). The father's real or imagined prohibition of this relationship is symbolic of all higher authority to be later encountered. We arrive here at something of a nodal point for the account that Lacan will go on to develop. All of the above factors, the 'no' of the father to

the child's desires, the role of law, what he calls 'the Symbolic' and the advent of language – which may itself be seen as a kind of castration – will prove fundamental components of his understanding of sexual difference.

### The possibility of a trans-historical structure?

The Oedipus complex as Freud originally conceived it presents us with a useful array of concepts and explanations that deserve to be developed further. The idea of a pivotal structure established by the position of the father which problematises the child's desire, specifying legitimate from illegitimate objects of desire, inaugurating a 'cascade' of social prohibitions and regulations, seems crucial. This is not simply a historical or constructionist account. As Wright (1998) stresses, the figure of the father stands in the position of a third term that will break the dyadic relation of mother and child: whatever the biology of human beings might be in some far-flung future, their society will still demand a 'third term' of some kind or other, an equivalent of castration to break this relation. The third term here may not necessarily be the literal father, it may not even be embodied in a human figure. It may, seemingly, be carried out by an incursion of language, of the world of 'the Symbolic'. This is a crucial question we will bear in mind in turning to Lacan: how might we reformulate this role of the father in less literal terms, less reliant on a kind of anatomical threat? Furthermore, how might the role of the father be less than contingent on a cast of characters reducible to the individual's family? Furthermore, how may it be possible to claim that it will be the prohibition of the 'father' that alone represents the mark that distinguishes boys from girls?

Despite Freud's invaluable contributions in this direction, his account of the Oedipus complex nevertheless appears to lead us to an inevitable impasse. Without an ultimate reliance on what Mitchell (1982) refers to as 'a biologically induced identificatory premise' (18), such a position does not adequately account for the difference between the boy and the girl. The real conceptual challenge that Lacan has to meet here is not that of explaining why the effects of the castration complex may affect little boys and girls differently, but rather that of how the castration complex *makes a little girl a girl and a little boy a boy in the first place* (Mitchell 1982). These are not processes that are merely added to a subject who is simply 'topped up' as a gendered entity as a result. To understand Freud and Lacan in this way is to miss the radical nature of the claims they make.

To sketch the problem at stake here in more direct terms, many interpretations of the effects of the castration complex assume the presence of a little boy or girl *prior* to the effects thus explained. More simply put, the anatomical difference between 'boys' and 'girls' means that they will be differentially affected by castration. The problem with this is that there is something of an automatic disposition for anatomical girls to be affected by castration in a feminising way, and an automatic disposition for anatomical boys to be affected by castration in a masculinising way. We might attempt to defend Freud on this point: although anatomical distinctions do set up a platform for how castration will affect a given individual, sexual identity for him is definitely not ultimately reducible to anatomy. True as this might be, the challenge for Lacanian psychoanalysis is to develop an account of sexual identity that is not in any way reliant on a 'biologically induced identificatory premise', and that does not in any way risk assuming a 'girl' or a 'boy' exists before the event of castration.

## Conclusion

This chapter has introduced a series of important concepts from Freudian psychoanalysis as means of offering a different theoretical perspective on the question of sexual identification. We have argued here that the taking on of an identification as man or woman is, for psychoanalysis, always, crucially, an unconscious process, one that cannot be reduced to issues of social construction or biology alone. Although we should by no means remain uncritical of how Freud's concepts have been put to use – there is a significant period of feminist history dedicated to making critiques of just this sort (see Millet 1969) – we should not turn a blind eye to their explanatory power. In this respect, this chapter closes as it begins, by aligning itself with Mitchell's feminist psychoanalysis:

[A] rejection of psychoanalysis and of Freud's works is fatal for feminism. However it may have been used, psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society, but an analysis of one. If we are interested in understanding and challenging the oppression of women, we cannot afford to neglect it (1974: xiii).

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