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T. Shefer

Chapter 5

Lacan, the meaning of the phallus and the 'sexed' subject

Derek Hook

The human in language: an unnatural fit

Having introduced the crucial components of a Freudian account of sexual difference in the previous chapter, we now turn our attention to Lacan. Lacan's reformulations of Freudian theory attempt to extricate psychoanalysis from the essentialism of biological/anatomical types of explanation. The discussion of Lacan's contributions in this regard is split into two parts. First, we need to introduce a series of concepts that are integral to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the notions of the Imaginary and the Symbolic orders, for example, along with a series of concepts drawn from the domain of structural linguistics (principally the idea of the 'signifier' and 'signified' as components of the sign and how Lacan applies these notions to psychoanalytic concerns.) Following this, we add an additional 'layer' to the Oedipus complex as it has been described above, emphasising how Lacan rethinks important aspects of this process. Both such levels of discussion will be necessary if we are to grasp what Lacan has in mind with his ideas of the phallic signifier, and how this particular element, once activated within the familial context, becomes the first point of social differentiation and hence also the first point of sexual difference and identity.

The role of language in all of this, we should emphasise, is pivotal; as Freudian psychoanalysis had initially borrowed notions from medicine and biology to strengthen its conceptual purchase on the human psyche and sexuality, so Lacanian psychoanalysis borrows from (and extends) the study of structural linguistics so as to further its engagement with the unconscious processes of subject formation. In investigating the structure and operations of language, Lacan is also intrigued more generally with the power and structuring principles



of the larger category of the *Symbolic*, which is the pre-existing domain of language and law, the social and cultural structure into which the child is born. So, importantly, for Lacan, masculinity and femininity are not biological essences but are instead *symbolic positions*. The assumption of one of these two positions is an obligatory component of human subjectivity. Each sex, furthermore, is defined separately with respect to a third term. In the words of Fink (1995: 105): 'Men and women are defined differently with respect to language, that is, with respect to the Symbolic order.'

The sexual position that the child will eventually take on is not thus a predisposed one, a simply 'natural' category. It is, by contrast, something that must be acquired. In the same way we should remain wary of too easily assuming a preordained fit between the neonate and the Symbolic world into which it is born. There is an entire 'world of language' which pre-exists the infant; it is into this world of symbolic exchanges and meaning that the 'human animal' of the infant is born. As Mitchell (1982: 5) states:

Language does not arise from within ... [it] always 'belongs' to another person. The human subject is created from a general law that comes to it from outside itself and through the speech of other people, though this speech in its turn must relate to the general law.

Being in the Imaginary

We can emphasise the 'unnaturalness' of language (along with the forced imposition of sexual identity to which it is related) with reference to the state of being which precedes the child's acquisition of language. This is where Lacan introduces his concept of the Imaginary. The Imaginary is an order of experience, a 'state of being' that characterises the infant's earliest pre-verbal and 'pre-social' interactions with the mother. Here no clear distinction exists between the 'self' and other, between internal and external worlds. There is no clearly defined 'I' at this point, rather a loosely bounded and undifferentiated mass of sensations in which the body, much like the emerging ego, has not taken on a coherent form. We have here a ceaseless exchange where the 'self' seems to pass into objects, and objects into it. (Lacan is suspicious of all conceptualisations of a 'self' that imply that there is in fact some substantive or cohesive entity underlying the sense we have of what we are. He hence avoids this term altogether, preferring the notion of the 'subject' who is always divided, split, or barred.)

The Imaginary is thus an order based on the incorporation of sameness; there is no separation or gap between the experience of the child and the world it inhabits, with which, as Minsky asserts, it is fused:

Objects in the Imaginary repeatedly reflect themselves in a kind of sealed unit where everything is an extension of the self which has been projected onto the external world so there are no apparent differences of divisions (Minsky 1996: 146).

This is the pre-Oedipal world of narcissistic identifications and mirror reflections. It is a world, as Wright (2000) explains, in which the child patterns its emerging ego on Imaginary counterparts that appear to offer the promise of unity, cohesion and integrity. It is also however a domain of rivalry and aggressivity. Not only does the child narcissistically identify with, fall in love with, its mirror image (or reflection in others), it also experiences conflict and hateful relations with these images, from which it is as yet not wholly differentiated.

What should be clear here is that the Imaginary is not a stage – although Imaginary experience does predominate at early periods of life – it is rather one of three orders of being. The two others are the Symbolic, which we have touched on briefly already, and explain in more detail as we continue, and the Real which designates that which cannot be signified, that which cannot be captured or reduced to symbolic expression. These three orders of being are ever-present and underscore all aspects of human experience.

The Imaginary is the domain of images and reflections, which the child will continually ‘take on’, identify with, as means of assuming an identity of sorts, an ego. This Imaginary is typically understood with reference to the mirror-stage, which is more a process than a stage, a process that enables us to build up an ego on the basis of the identification with images. It is in this way, for Lacan, that the human infant comes to consolidate a rudimentary sense of an ‘I’. Eagleton explains this well:

The image in the mirror both is and is not itself, a blurring of subject and object ... [which] begins the process of constructing a center of ‘self’. This ‘self’ ... is essentially narcissistic, we arrive at a sense of an ‘I’ by finding that ‘I’ reflected back to ourselves by some object or person in the world. This object is at once somehow part of ourselves – we identify with it – and yet not ourselves, something alien. The image which the small child sees in the mirror is in this sense an ‘alienated’ one: the child ‘misrecognizes’ itself in it, finds in the image a pleasing unity which it does not actually experience in its own body (1983: 164–165).

Not all the images that the child identifies with are literally mirror-images (although this provides Lacan with a paradigmatic example of what is happening at this point.) Children are equally able to identify with similar ‘reflections’ of themselves, the ‘images’ of other children, the ‘images’ of how they are reflected back to themselves by others they come into contact with. The mother is one such Imaginary counterpart; she provides a very basic means through which the child is reflected back to itself. The Imaginary relationship with the mother will have to be broken if the child is eventually to enter the world of the Symbolic. The ‘third term’ of the figure of the father will be responsible for breaking this relationship.

The impasse of the Imaginary

We cannot exist indefinitely in the Imaginary. The narcissistic nature of Imaginary relations represents an impasse for the subject; it is a duality of identifications, a locked binary, as Grosz (1990) puts it, in which each of the two partners defines the other in a kind of closed circuit. If the child is to attain a rudimentary sense of difference and distinctness, the Imaginary relationship with the mother must be broken; unless this occurs the child will remain in a deadlock of narcissistic relations with an other who is never fully separable from the ‘I’.

This is a dangerous situation: the infant here is in love with an image of itself, unable to discern between the image in the mirror and the set of subjective and bodily experience that this image reflects. (The mythical story of Narcissus who is hopelessly in love with his own image, unable to break away from it, ultimately dying as a result of this incapacitation, makes for a useful emblem here.) If it remains in the Imaginary, the child will never be able to enter the Symbolic, that pre-established world, in other words, of language, culture, law (and, indeed, *patriarchy*) into which it is born.

If the dyadic structure of the Imaginary is to give way to the plurality of the Symbolic order, the intervention of a 'third term' will be required. The 'third term' which arrives to separate this 'dual structure' of mother and child, as suggested above, is the figure of the father. One of the advantages of Lacan's account in this respect is the fact that the figure of the father in question is not necessarily the actual, literal father of the child. What is more important here is what the *father signifies*, the first imposition of law, the law, in short against incest, the prohibition that the mother is off bounds to the child as an object of desire.

The child is hence disturbed in its libidinal relation with the mother and must now come 'to recognise in the figure of the father that a wider familial and social network exists of which it is only part' (Eagleton 1983: 165). Importantly, not only is it the case that the child is part of a wider familial and social network, it is also the case that the role that it must play is already, in a sense, predetermined, laid down for it by the practices of the society in which it has been born. The child, in other words, is being pushed out of the realm of the Imaginary into that of the Symbolic, into a system of social structure and meanings, of laws, language and regulations. The father is the first representative of this world. It is this world of the Symbolic more than the figure of the father himself that ensures the breaking of the Imaginary bond between mother and child. The castration thus involved is the castration implied by the arrival of the Symbolic; it is the castration of the entry of a third term into the Imaginary mother-child bond (as discussed earlier.) This is a symbolic form of castration that, as we shall see later, is enforced and extended by the castration implied by the use of language.

The role of the father, and the link that comes to exist between him and the phallic signifier, represents an important nodal point in Lacanian theory, to which we will shortly turn. First though, we need to introduce a series of basic concepts from the field of linguistics, notions of signifier, signified and sign as they pertain to the psychoanalytic project of understanding subject-formation. These concepts will help us understand how the child moves outside of an exclusively Imaginary state of being into the Symbolic order; a move that is, in a way, the resolution of the Oedipus complex itself. Lacan, indeed, is offering a structural equivalent of the basic operations of this complex as it is achieved by the child's insertion into language, its 'castration' by the Symbolic.

The role of the signifier

The small child in front of the mirror during the mirror-stage might be understood as a kind of signifier, suggests Eagleton (1983). A signifier, generally put, is a sound, an acoustic image, like the word 'bat' when spoken, or for that matter a letter on a page, like the word 'bat' when written. In both instances a signifier is essentially something *capable of bestowing meaning*. (Wright (2000) warns against reducing the idea of a signifier simply to the idea of a word, because any number of social gestures and expressions – like instances of sign language, for example – may work as signifiers.) A signified, on the other hand, is a given meaning – the concept or idea that comes to be attached to the signifier. When signifier and signified work together, we have a sign. (i.e. a signifier like 'bat' as it appears on the page, which is related to a particular concept (or signified) that you and I share, i.e. the idea of an instrument for hitting a ball.)

A sign may hence be represented as:



Figure 5.1 The Saussurean sign (Saussure 1977)

Both parts (signifier and signified) are necessary for signification to take place however; a concept in one's head without an attached signifier cannot be easily communicated (except, of course, with reference to a series of other signifiers). Similarly a signifier, 'arigato', without any attached signified, means nothing (*arigato* is a Japanese word; for Japanese speakers it is of course a signifier with an attached signified). It was for this reason that earlier theoreticians of language, such as Ferdinand de Saussure (1977), emphasised the interdependence of these two component parts, which, like opposite sides of a piece of paper, seemed to be practically inseparable from one another. (Hence the enclosing circle in the diagram.) Not only do both signifier and signified need to occur together if signification is to be successful, both parts need to be established in a particular bounded relation by convention.

However, importantly – and this is where things get interesting – the relation between signifier and signified, although thoroughly conventionalised, is nonetheless arbitrary. It is conventionalised in the sense that there is a kind of standard agreement amongst English-language speakers that 'bat' when written or spoken corresponds to a certain concept or idea – namely that of a club with a handle which one uses to strike a ball. This relationship is also arbitrary, though, because many other names – other signifiers – can be used to evoke this same object; we might refer to a club, a racquet, a stick, or names in any number of different languages to refer to the same thing. Although this relationship between signifier and signified is relatively stable, it is not absolutely fixed. In fact, to complicate things, a given sound or mark (i.e. signifier) can have more than one meaning: the signifier 'bat' can refer to an instrument for hitting a ball, or a creature with wings that hangs upside down in caves. Although generally a stable process, the process of signification certainly permits for the over-determination of meaning (signifiers meaning more than one thing), and for slippage (a less than absolutely fixed relation between signifier and signifier). Just as one signifier may evoke multiple signifieds, so many signifiers may stand for a basic signifier.

This proves particularly interesting for psychoanalysts who treat 'mistaken' forms of signification, slips-of-the-tongue, along with the ambiguity of jokes and the over-determined meaning of dreams, as a source from which they are able to read unconscious meanings. (The wrong impression should not be given here: it is not the case that some instances of signification are simply 'mistaken' and others are not. It is rather the case that forms of signification are always 'mistaken' in as much as they have the potential to carry multiple meanings.)

One way of understanding the traditional psychoanalytic notion of repression – i.e. the process whereby unacceptable ideas or impulses are rendered unconscious – is through the idea that particular signifieds have been split off from those signifiers that would bring them into consciousness. The dreamwork off dreams, then, is an alternative and disguised means of arranging signifieds with an unusual set of signifiers. This is why dreams must be interpreted, and cannot simply be read for literal meaning.

The unstable relationship between signified and signifier permits the 'constant sliding of the signifier over the signified', in Lacan's phrase. The possibility of such a slippage is for Lacan a *precondition for the functioning of the unconscious*. That signifiers can signify more than one thing or concept, that words and gestures may be over-determined, ambiguous (that they can 'hold' several different significations, in other words), is a condition of possibility for the fact that unconscious meanings and desires can and do erupt in everyday speech. (By the same token, the fact that signifieds – such as disturbing wishes, urges – can be split off from the signifiers that would bring them into conscious awareness is also a condition of possibility for repression.) Lacan in fact suggests that *it is the effects of the signifier on the subject that constitute the unconscious*. Lacan hence adapts Saussure's depiction of the sign in the following way:

Signifier

signified

Figure 5.2 The Lacanian sign

The order of priority is hence reversed: signifier comes to be emphasised as more important. This is a move befitting the psychoanalyst's concentration on the signifiers used by patients that may (and do) signify more than their intended meanings. It is in this respect that Lacan advances that the signifier in fact dominates the subject – a prioritisation on the signifier that will become increasingly important as we continue. This amendment of Saussure's diagram makes sense for anyone who is focused on engaging with the unconscious, for anyone who intends on grappling with how different and multiple signifieds emerge from the same signifier (as in the psychoanalytic practice of free association, in which the analysand or patient is asked to say whatever comes into their mind without any sense of inhibition).

Lacan also does away with the enclosing circle of Saussure's diagram, suggesting thus the absence of any fixed relationship between these two components. This difference between Lacan and Saussure becomes marked at this point: as this diagram suggests, Lacan understands language not as a set of signs, as does Saussure (1977), but as a set of *signifiers*. For Lacan, signifieds (concepts, meanings) are the result of the play of signifiers; our analytic focus should hence be on the latter, especially given that he maintains that the human subject itself – as a subject of the Symbolic order – is also constituted as secondary in relation to the signifier.

Returning now to the situation of the child in front of the mirror, just as the child in front of the image may be seen as a kind of signifier – something capable of bestowing meaning – so the image in the mirror (what the child sees when looking into the mirror) may be

understood as a kind of signified, a given meaning. Initially we have the case in which the image the child sees is somehow the ‘meaning’ of itself – here signifier and signified are harmoniously related, locked interdependently together like signifier and signified in Saussure’s circle diagram. This of course will not always be the case, because as we have seen, the relation between signified and signifier is not absolutely stable, and permits the ‘constant sliding of the signifier over the signified’. In the case of the preverbal, pre-Oedipal child in front of the mirror who has not yet advanced out of an exclusive existence in the Imaginary, this ‘sliding of signifier over signified’ has yet to happen. No gap has as yet opened up between signified and what they might signify; as such the child does not yet possess an unconscious. This apparent harmony, this lack of split between an unconscious unintended set of meanings and the conscious speaker, is, as Eagleton (1983) suggests, one way of describing the Imaginary order. As suggested above, a gap of sorts needs to be opened up here, a separation, or split. Why? Because without a gap of this sort the child will not be able to understand difference, distinction, or, for that matter, rules, the fact that things have names, that one thing (a word or signifier) can stand in for another (a concept); the child will instead remain forever in the ‘oneness’ of the Imaginary. Hence it will not gain access to subjectivity – remembering here that for Lacan one only properly becomes a subject after one acquires language.

Language as a system of differences, substitutions, exclusions

We might make reference to another important lesson of language to drive this point home. The meaning of the signifier ‘bat’ does not come from any inherent link between it and what it signifies. In fact, a signifier like ‘bat’ comes to have a meaning only on the basis of a *system of differences*. The meaning of a signifier is dependent on the fact that this signifier is heard as being different from all other similar signifiers. The signifier ‘bat’ is only successful in conveying a meaning in reference to a system of difference where we know that ‘bat’ is different from ‘cat’, ‘hat’, ‘mat’ and other similar-sounding terms. We can put this in technical terms. For Saussure (1977) signifiers are fundamentally differential; there are ‘positive’ terms in language, only because of differences. Signifiers only take on value by virtue of their difference from the other elements in the system; they have no inherent or positive value in and of themselves. The fundamental law of the signifier (Saussure 1977) is that a signifier signifies something *only in relation to another signifier*.

In gaining access to language, then, the child comes to understand, although not in a fully conscious or rational way, that a signifier has meaning *only by virtue of its difference from other signifiers*. This is a necessary lesson to learn if we are to make language work: a child needs to use particular words to stand in for particular things. It will not be able to convey meaning if it uses the same basic noun to designate all objects. It will likewise prove unsuccessful in understanding the meaning of other speakers if the signifiers they use are interpreted too widely. In more concrete terms, by learning how to communicate effectively, the child comes to understand that particular words stand in for particular things, that a sign presupposes the absence of the object it signifies. The particular signifiers of a language ‘stand in’ for actual objects and events – this is part of the ‘magic’ of language and what it enables – and we can speak about things that are not in front of us and other people can understand what we mean. Likewise, we can talk about past events and circumstances that

no longer exist, and, once again, people are able to gain a sense of what happened. This substitutive function is absolutely vital. Indeed, we will not be able to express ourselves in language without this very fundamental understanding: words stand in for the object they represent; they come, in a sense, to replace the things to which they refer. Lacan describes this in a rather dramatic fashion: 'the symbol manifests itself first ... as the murder of the thing' (1977: 104).

The experience of lack

This idea of the replacement of the object by words can be argued on the basis of necessity: what really necessitates signification in the child – the use of language – is the need to restore something that is missing, to communicate that there is something that it wants. As Rose (1982: 31) argues: 'Symbolisation starts ... when the child gets its first sense that something could be missing'. Words stand for objects when those objects are experienced as lost. This relationship between experiencing lack and being pulled into the domain of the Symbolic should be stressed. As Fink (1995) insists, a lack or loss of something is required to set the Symbolic in motion:

Why would a child ever bother to learn to speak if all its needs were anticipated? ... If nourishment is never missing, if the desired warmth is never lacking, why would the child take the trouble to speak? (103).

Lack, for Lacan, forces us into the Symbolic. It is just such an opening up of a lack, a lack we incessantly try to fill – or, in different words, the identification of a 'lost object' that we are continually trying to 're-find' – that best describes the unending substitutions and replacements of the workings of human desire. A precondition for desire to work in this way is the unending substitutive operations of language itself. We enter language at the same time that the law, or, put differently, the 'name of the father', comes to be imposed on us. These two processes are intertwined. Both may be understood as a 'making of a lack' that the continual reference by one signifier to another will try to fill; both result in the installation of desire as the inescapable condition of the human subject.

Operations of subjectivity

The 'coming into being' within language is a structural analogue of sorts for the 'coming into being' as a sexually differentiated social subject within the Oedipus complex. It will hopefully become clear now why such a detour into the discussion of linguistic concepts is so crucial: this is a model of sorts for Lacanian psychoanalysis, one which gives us the basic procedures and operations necessary for the differentiation (or identification) of the sexed subject. We start here to get the gist of Lacan's meaning: sexual identity only comes about as a result of difference and distinction. The child's identity as a subject is constituted by relations of difference and similarity in relation to those around it, and by lessons of exclusion and absence. For the Oedipus complex to be resolved, we need to be able to differentiate ourselves from others, and, as importantly, we need to be able to differentiate between the particular sexed positions of the mother as opposed to that of the father. Furthermore, we will also need to make the pivotal substitutive step of understanding that although mother

is 'off limits', excluded, there might be another similar (substituted) object in the future who may conceivably take her place as the object of my desire. Similarly, I will, in a way, need to substitute myself; I cannot usurp my father's role in the family, rather (speaking from the position of the boy child) I will have to become a father (and husband) myself within a different familial context.

Here then we start to see structural parallels between the workings of language and the process of sexual identification. To reiterate: Lacanian psychoanalysis hopes to use the basic operations of language as a conceptual template of sorts, as a structural equivalent of the basic operations of sexual differentiation. Several basic operations (or kinds of relation) must therefore come to function as rules. (It is helpful here to bear each of these rules in mind as they relate to the resolution of the oedipus complex.)

- *A relation of difference*: the child must come to recognise that mother and father are different, that they are each (like signifiers in the system of language) constituted differently in their relation to another signifier (in this case that privileged signifier will be the phallus, as I will go on to explain).
- *A relation of substitution*: rather than attempt to be the object of the mother's desire, to possess the mother for itself, the child must learn, via the route of substitution, that it will have to be the object of someone else's desire, that it will have to be the lover and partner of some other person. (That one term can stand in for or replace another is a condition of possibility for language to work, and, in turn, for the social and familial structure to exist.)
- *A relation of absence*: the child must give up the bond it has with (and the wishes it has for) the mother's body. ('The word is the death of the thing': to enter the Symbolic is to incur a certain absence, the 'making of a lack' that is the result of the fact that the whole of my experience, or 'being', cannot be expressed within language.)
- *A relation of exclusion*: there is a role which for the child is prohibited: that of being the parent's lover. (One must forego exclusively Imaginary modes of identification and take up one's co-ordinates within the Symbolic.)

In short then, just as these operations of *difference*, *substitution*, *absence* and *exclusion* must be learnt within the domain of language if effective communication is to occur, so they must be learnt within the domain of subjectivity. In terms of the latter, the child must learn that these rules apply to *itself*, that it (like mother and father) may be substituted for another (it can one day become a mother, a father, a husband, a wife), that it is subject to a law of differentiation (it must take up a position on either side of the sexual divide, must identify as masculine, feminine in order to gain entry into the Symbolic order). As is the case in signification, so it is in the case of subjectivity: identities cannot ultimately come about as an unrelenting exchange of samenesses.

Inadequacy of the Symbolic: the castration of entry into language

We are now in a better position to understand how the entry into language is itself a form of castration. It is useful to reiterate that there is always an inadequacy of sorts in the Symbolic order. Entry into language is for Lacan a kind of *castration* by virtue of the fact that speaking of a thing is to impose a substitution, to make a word replace a thing. This

castration of the entry into language recalls the primal separation of the child from the mother, which, as we have seen, is only achieved by a movement into the Symbolic. It is for this reason that for Lacan the human subject is unavoidably split, or 'barred'. Unlike humanist conceptualisations of a 'self' which is autonomous, undivided, sovereign unto itself, the subject, for Lacan, is necessarily split as a result of her or his entry into language which:

produces the division between the subject of the unconscious which stumbles, and the conscious ego that considers itself as wholly invested in what it speaks ... what the subject says and what is said, the 'statement' and the enunciation, never match (Wright 2000: 74).

To the 'unknowability' of the subject to his- or herself (insisted upon by Freud by virtue of the existence of the unconscious), Lacan adds the unknowability of the subject's being within the structures of language. There is no sign that can sum up my entire being, says Minsky (1996), 'most of what I am can never be expressed in language. I cannot "mean" and "be" at the same time' (156). Leader (1995) makes the same point with a pertinent example: writing a 'small ad' with which one hopes to represent one's self. 'Single white female who enjoys walking dogs and reading': how can such a representation do justice to one's sense of who one is? Such an exercise must always remain unsatisfying or incomplete at some level. It is an exercise that cannot but mis-represent or *under*-represent me in the process, one that testifies to the fact that all of what we are cannot be put into language.

We get a sense here of how the first instance of signification, of language, of the use of symbols, is a kind of 'cut' into the Imaginary experience of plenitude and fullness. Castration, at its most basic, is the recognition by the subject of a kind of lack. Thus, women, no less than men, must undergo castration. Here we cannot reduce castration simply to a kind of bodily loss. 'For Lacan', writes feminist scholar Deborah Luepnitz (2002), 'there is nothing missing from the real of the female body. Lack is something that exists in the Imaginary register; [castration] is operative for everyone' (227).

Language itself, in this sense, presents a form of castration, for it introduces a troubling absence into the life of the subject. There is thus a kind of alienation in language just as there was in the image. Rose (1982) is succinct in this respect, noting that there is loss and difficulty in the symbol, just as there was division in the image. Wright (2000) makes much the same point in offering that: 'The subject is bound to the Symbolic order, while the ego cannot escape its Imaginary origin' (74). The Lacanian subject is as such doubly divided – alienated by taking on an image as the basis of its identifications which is never itself, and 'castrated' by the entry into language such that there is an ever-present gap between what we intend to say, and what actually is said.

The assumption of language does not of course simply represent a relation of loss; there is an important gain here also. Language, after all, is our principle means of communicating; it is by virtue of language that we are able to connect to a network of social meanings. Language, furthermore, is the means through which we create social bonds. In addition to this, language is also of course the 'operating system' of the unconscious and of desire, both of which come into existence at the same time. Minsky (1996) expresses this adeptly:

While language, unlike the Imaginary, cuts us off from the objects of our desire (our mother and our substitutes for her) at the same time, it returns desire to us as we move, with a new sense of identity as a human subject, from one meaning to the next in a lifelong search for a perfect fit between language and our fantasy of plenitude (148).

The question of the mother's desire

We return now to the Oedipus complex, to add an additional explanatory layer to those initially proffered by Freud. True to Freud's understanding, Lacan emphasised that the infant is a totally dependent being at the beginning of its life. Its physical and psychological needs are clearly centred on the primary caregiver (typically, but not always, the figure of the mother). As such the infant enters the Oedipus complex intensely bound to the mother, a bond that is shared, in most instances, by the mother herself, who is typically focused on providing the infant with the care.

The child is initially unable to understand the rationales of the caregiver's behaviour, despite that it is of vital importance to the gratification of its needs. In Lacan's conceptualisation there is one recurring question that poses itself for the child repeatedly, in an endless variety of ways: what does it want? This question preoccupies the child, and is posed in relation to virtually all facets of its activity. Whether it is the issue of why it is being fed at a certain time, the question as to where the mother is going, of *why she does what she does*: the common-denominator, in each such questioning instance is the question of what the mother actually desires.

It would be a mistake to understand this question, at so early a moment in the infant's life, as coherently or rationally formulated; this questioning occurs before the infant has entered the Symbolic, the world of language, as discussed above. This questioning finds form rather as an emotional expression or concern, an ongoing awareness of the mother's desire. Importantly, the answers the child poses to this question, and the position it eventually takes up in relation to (what it takes to be) the mother's desire, form an integral part of the Oedipus complex. What is being evoked here, to frame this issue in a different way, are early experiences of absence or lack. As Leader (1995) puts it: 'The child is confronted with a series of questions about the mother's movements and whims ... there is an operation which will link all these enigmas about the mother to a precise signification, that of the phallus' (92).

The absent object

Despite the intensity of the mother–child bond, it is never an exclusively dyadic relationship; there is always, insists Lacan, a third term present, something beyond the child to which the mother's desire is aimed: *the phallus*. To be clear: the child is situated within the 'field' of the mother's desire – the infant does, after all, represent a nodal point of love, investment and care (at least for most mothers) – but it does not *exhaust* this desire. We are in a position now to offer a first tentative definition of what Lacan might mean by his understanding of the *phallus*: the phallus is the Imaginary object of the mother's desire which remains outside of the child's reach, something it can neither grasp nor bring into being, something quite 'other' than it.

This Imaginary object of the phallus remains enigmatic, the child does not know what it is; it is, however, considered to be what the mother most intensely desires, that which represents an intense concentration of pleasure, be it the relationship with the father (or an erstwhile stand-in, a lover, a romantic partner, perhaps). This object (or relationship) of desire is one that the child cannot compete with; indeed, the resultant comparison is one which humbles the child, be it on the abstract level of its ability to be the phallus, or on the more concrete level of the child's own sexual organs.

As viable as such a symbolic equation of father's penis-phallus may seem, we must not make any such equation permanent, or reduce it too eagerly to the level of literal comparison. The Imaginary object of the phallus – as that to which the mother's desire is directed – remains always somewhat enigmatic, undefined and 'veiled'.

Being the phallus

The child then must realise that, as important as it may be to the mother, it will never be the exclusive object of her desire. It experiences itself as marked by a lack by virtue of the fact that it does not possess the phallus. It is, in other words, not able to fully satisfy her desire. The mother, however, is also marked by lack; she is incomplete because she does not possess the phallus she desires. Indeed, she must be incomplete: why else does she desire? Both mother and child are hence bound to the phallus; as Benvenuto and Kennedy (1986) emphasise: 'the infant is bound to the mother, who is herself bound to the phallus in so far as she does not have it' (131).

We now begin to understand something of the quandary in which the child finds itself. It is situated within the field of the mother's desire, but is not able to fulfil it. This attempt by the child to be the object it thinks the mother lacks/desires permits for an endless amount of variation; it takes no one form or given set of activities. What might the attempt 'to be' the phallus entail? Well, it is an Imaginary position that would permit for as much variety as there are different mothers and children; it seems to be the child's attempt to be everything for the mother. Leader (1996) gives some examples: it might mean to be a glowing, seductive child, or the effort to enchant or puzzle the mother, to impress or seduce the adults it comes into contact with – whatever form seems to interest the mother the most.

Phallus as signifier of lack

What we need to remain aware of here is the fact that, although the phallus is the signifier of the mother's desire, it is also always the signifier of lack. It helps here to reiterate that the phallus (for the child) is both *that which the mother desires*, and *that which she does not have*, both a signifier of desire and a signifier of lack. Adams (1992) and Luepnitz both comment on this paradoxical aspect of the phallus. On the one hand the term 'phallus' refers to our wish for completeness, 'the phallus is what no one can have but everyone wants: a belief in bodily unity, wholeness, perfect autonomy' (Luepnitz 2002: 226). The phallus, in this respect, is a wishful means of defending ourselves against castration. However, given that the phallus is the 'covering of lack par excellence' (Adams 1992: 77) it also becomes the signifier of lack, of the fact that *there is something that needs to be covered*. The paradox here is that the very thing that promises an Imaginary completeness



T. Shefer

The question of lack is of crucial importance to psychoanalysis, as Fink (1995) asks, “Why would a child ever bother to learn to speak if all its needs were anticipated?”

comes also to signify the very opposite of completion; it calls attention to the fact of a lack that needs to be attended to.

The phallus as it exists in the Imaginary and in the Symbolic

The phallus is not only an Imaginary object; it also exists in the domain of the Symbolic. The Symbolic of course is a very different order of existence. Unlike in the Imaginary, the phallus here is not an Imagined object locked into a succession of images with which the child is constantly attempting to identify itself. Here the phallus is a signifier of the mother's desire. A signifier, as discussed above, is something capable of conveying meaning – such as a sound, a mark, a letter, a gesture. In speaking of the phallus as it exists in the Symbolic *as a signifier*, we are reiterating the fact that there are a great many things that can stand in for ‘the mother's desire’. Just as any number of words can stand in for a given concept, an infinite number of activities and objects can stand in for ‘that which is worthy of mother/father's desire’.

In Lacan's reading of the Oedipus complex during the 1950s, the child comes gradually to recognise (not in a conscious way) that it cannot somehow ‘incarnate’ the phallus for the mother. It comes to understand this because the phallus is not an attribute of an individual, but instead a signifier of sorts. Indeed, the attempt to be the Imaginary object of the phallus gives way to the realisation that there are many, many different possible things, activities,

relationships that seem to hold the desire and fascination of the parents. It is at this point when the child understands the phallus in a Symbolic capacity. Luepnitz (2002) is helpful here when she asserts that the phallus is here not so much a *thing as a position* through which different objects circulate:

Adults can use wealth, accomplishments, or their own children as phallic objects. In this way, the 'objects' are desired for their representative value, their capacity to make the subject feel complete [for how it places them in the eyes of others] (226).

Here are the basic co-ordinates then of what the phallus means for Lacan: initially an Imaginary object that the child wishes to be, so as to secure the desire of the parents, to be that desire, yet, eventually, the phallus takes on a Symbolic significance as a signifier of what the mother or father desires, a token of what the child does not have. As such it is equally a signifier of lack. The phallus can thus be understood – in the dimension of the Symbolic – as a 'signifier of desire', a 'signifier of the other's desire', a signifier of overwhelming importance to the child.

It is crucial we grasp the difference between these two different versions of the phallus: the *Imaginary phallus* is perceived by the child in the pre-Oedipal phase as the object of the mother's desire, 'as that which she desires beyond the child; the child thus seeks to identify with this object' (Evans 1996: 142). The Symbolic phallus is, by contrast, the signifier of the other's desire. So, whereas the castration complex and the Oedipus complex revolve around the Imaginary phallus, the question of sexual difference revolves around the Symbolic phallus (Evans 1996). This is explained in more detail as we continue.

It should be becoming clear that Lacan's conceptualisation of the phallus means it never has to be identified with a physical aspect of the body, or, indeed, with the penis. As an Imaginary object, the phallus is always something the child cannot reach, something it does not have, something it understands as lacking. As a Symbolic element, as the signifier of the other's desire, the phallus could potentially be an infinite number of possible things.

From Imaginary object to signifier of lack: giving up the phallus

If the Oedipus complex is resolved, then the child's attempt to be the phallus must be given up. This is a gradual process, which never happens easily or without conflict. Many of the key concerns of Freud's formative description of the Oedipus complex are hence played out in this 'giving up on the dream of being the Imaginary phallus', issues of rivalry, fear, the prospect of humiliation, and so on, are all present here.

It is not the function of the father alone that forces the child to give up on this dream. There is a pronounced element of frustration or inability that characterises the child's progress through the complex. At some point it has to acknowledge that the Imaginary pretence of attempting to incarnate the phallus will not succeed. After all, ultimately the child must have something real to show; it needs to present the mother with some evidence of this supposed or potential possession of the phallus. There is of course a decreasing likeliness of this happening, given the degree to which the figure of the father (or whoever or whatever else the focus of the mother's desire might be) is *imagined* to really possess this object of desire.

The child experiences an anxiety-provoking sense of inadequacy and/or impotence



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What might the attempt 'to be' the phallus entail? It is an Imaginary position permitting as much variety as there are different mothers and children. It is the child's attempt to be everything for the mother.

before the prospect of an overwhelming maternal desire that it cannot hope to adequately satisfy. This desire of the mother increasingly comes to be experienced only with reference to a rival object/person or incarnation of the mother's desire. Also of significance at this point is the fact the mother makes for an omnipotent figure whose whims and interests are of fundamental concern to the child. At this point in the infant's life – although this is soon to be changed – the *mother's desire* is the principal 'law' according to which it lives its life. (The term 'law' is used advisedly here, because prior to the entry into the Symbolic no binding condition of social law has as yet been imposed.)

The Oedipus complex is only finally dissolved when the equivalent of castration has been completed. The father intervenes, either directly, or through the mother's discourse – through her references and deference to the law thus embodied – and now becomes, instead of the mother, the omnipotent figure, and more than that, a prohibiting figure who strictly forbids the desire of the mother. He lays down the law, permitting identification with him as the one who possesses the phallus, saying in effect to the child, as Benvenuto and Kennedy (1986) state: 'No, you won't sleep with your mother', and to the mother, 'No, the child is not your phallus. I have it' (134). Interestingly, the law imposed by the father at this point is not aimed simply at the child, but also at the mother, and, more accurately yet, at *her desire*. One of the functions of the father, it seems, is to enforce a certain distance between the mother and the phallic object, keeping her 'in the lack' as it were, retaining the phallus as his own specific privilege.

Resolving the Oedipus complex

It is worth reiterating at this point that the Oedipus complex is for Lacan a means of explaining the child's passage from the narcissism of the pre-verbal, erotic and symbiotic (i.e. Imaginary) relationship with the mother into a properly social existence defined by the structures of language and social law (i.e. the *Symbolic*.) This requires a repudiation of the mother as a love object, and the submission of the child's desire to law, as it is represented in the figure of the father. It is at this point that the child grasps the fundamental operations of language. The castration of Imaginary 'being' (relative to the legislated existence of the Symbolic) occurs at the same time as the castration by the father of the child's wish and attempt to be the phallus (as Imaginary object) for the mother. The father makes this hopeful dream of being the phallus for the mother ever more remote. The function of the father – who need not be the actual father, or, for that matter, even a flesh and blood human being – is essentially just this: of separating the child from the dream of somehow incarnating itself as the object of the mother's desire. The phallus as an Imaginary object hence recedes ever further from possibility, becoming lost, inaccessible, an impossibility. The closest the child can come to the phallus thus is as a signifier, as something that stands in for something else. The Symbolic phallus thus comes into operation.

There is no use in competing with the father, as Evans paraphrases Lacan, because the father always wins. 'The subject is hence freed from the impossible and anxiety-provoking task of having to be the phallus by realising that the father *has* it' (Evans 1992: 129). A distance is hence opened up between the subject and the phallus. This is a distinction worth emphasising: rather than the wish of being one-and-the-same as the (Imaginary) phallus, or the hope of being everything it is and nothing else, the subject is now distanced from the phallus, and can do no more than take up a potential relation to it (the phallus that is, as signifier.) With entrance into the world of language and with the resolution of the Oedipus complex comes the realisation that no one has privileged access to or possession of the phallus. 'It exists only through the mediation of the other and the Symbolic order' as Grosz (1992: 321) points out. The subject comes to realise that there is some difference between itself and the phallus – a difference that is not properly registered in the Imaginary. The realisation then is that *the phallus is not to be directly reached; one cannot consummate it within one's self*. One's access to it is always mediated; the closest one can get is to be fixed into a potential relation to it. It is for this reason that the subject's access to the phallus after entry into the world of the Symbolic is always moderated, modified by the provisos of *being something like*, or *having something like*. It is for this reason, the fact that the phallus only exists through the mediation of the other, that Lacan argues that the relations of the sexes to the phallus are regulated by the verbs *being* and *having* (Grosz 1992).

We might relate this realisation to the child's entry into the world of language, to the understanding that the word (or signifier) one uses to refer to something is not in fact that thing in and of itself, but rather a way of indicating the actual thing in question, a relation to it. Just as the child comes to understand that the symbol is the death of the thing itself, so it comes to realise that there is no hope in being the phallus itself, only in being in a relation to the *phallic signifier*.

Adams (1992) is insistent on this point: no one definitively has the phallus or is the phallus; then again these are nevertheless 'categories of experience within which humans represent themselves to themselves' (76). This distance between subject and phallus, which

is opened by entry into the Symbolic, is a point of absolute necessity. If this distance is not attained, then one could never aspire to be like one's father, for example, or to desire someone *like* one's mother; one would be stuck in the attempt to be that father, in desiring only that mother, as dictated by the directive to 'literalise' the phallus.

The Lacanian Oedipus complex in brief

Lacan divides the Oedipus complex into three 'times'. We should however note that the sequence is one of logical rather than chronological order, as Evans (1992) points out.

- In the first 'time', the child comes to recognise that the mother's desire surpasses it, that there is something beyond it – the object of the Imaginary phallus – that the mother desires. As a result, the child attempts to embody the phallus of the mother's desire.
- In the second 'time', the presence of the father is felt. Part of the father's role is to establish the incest taboo, to set up a prohibition against the child's attempts to incarnate the object of the mother's desire. His intervention results in depriving the mother of her object of desire, it keeps her distanced from the phallus.
- The third 'time' of the complex sees Lacan's equivalent of the imposition of the castration complex. The child comes to realise the father 'has' the phallus, that he possesses the phallic signifier. The Oedipus complex is dissolved at the point that the child realises it can no longer directly materialise the phallus for the mother; it must now give up the idea of the phallus as an Imaginary object and position itself in a relation to the phallus in its Symbolic dimension as the phallic signifier that will determine sexual identity.

(For a clear and succinct overview of Lacan's reformulation of the Oedipus complex, see Evans 1992: 127–130.)

The Name-of-the-Father

To backtrack a little: if the child successfully renounces all attempts to be the Imaginary phallus, then the phallus will be less an Imaginary object than a *signifier of what is missing*. This will be a momentous step in the life of the child. It will open a sense of lack in what had until this point been experienced by the child as a world of fullness and wholeness. This is a lack that, as we have seen, is further imposed and reiterated by the subject's acquisition of language.

To give up the Imaginary phallus and to take up a relation to the phallic signifier – which is also a taking up of a position in relation to the Symbolic authority of the figure of the father – is what will result in the constitution of sexual identity. The phallus thus becomes a Symbolic function, no longer exclusively an instrument of Imaginary kinds of identification, and rather a way of *putting the subject in touch with the realm of the Symbolic*. Perhaps the easiest way of expressing this is to say that the child will need to substitute the 'desire of the mother' for the 'name of the father'; a substitution which Lacan describes as the '*paternal metaphor*'. This operation of substitution is crucial, but it is linked to another operation, as discussed earlier, the operation of prohibition. This imperative is what Lacan has in mind with his idea of the 'Name-of-the-Father'.

What the *Name-of-the-Father* does is to force the child into the realm of the Symbolic, into a network of relationships and rules, a series of familial and social structures, in which

it will have to find its feet as a speaking subject. For Lacan, this agent need not be the actual father, or even a physical person or 'embodied actor'; the kind of castration we have in mind here is not literal, but rather symbolic in nature. Wright is useful in this respect, emphasising that for Lacan 'the symbolic order ... [is] upheld by a "Symbolic father" (the Name-of-the-Father) which is a metaphor for that which imposes the castration of language and stands for the ideal exigency of the law' (70). This is a crucial element of the psychoanalytic explanation we are attempting to flesh out, for, as Grosz emphasises, 'Lacan's understanding of the Name-of-the-Father, on which the child's entry into the Symbolic order depends, is a reading and rewriting of Freud's oedipal model in linguistic and socio-cultural terms' (51).

After this symbolic castration, the 'emergence into language', the child, who now becomes a social subject, is qualitatively different to what it was before, 'reconfigured' we might say in relation to its desire. In the words of Benvenuto and Kennedy:

Once the child has acquired language, however rudimentary it may be, then all the pre-verbal structures are radically altered to fit in with the language system ... once the child has the capacity for language, there is a qualitative change in his [or her] psychical structure – [they] ... become a subject (1986: 131).

In speaking of the Name-of-the-Father, we are referring both to the 'no' of the father, the factor of law and prohibition that this figure introduces into the child's life, and to the more abstract status of paternity in patriarchy. We mean also to invoke here a sense of the weight of paternity, the taking on of the father's name – for we all take on our father's names in patriarchal contexts – the overarching symbolic authority of the father and the patrilineal tradition in patriarchal societies. (The French *nom-du-père*, a pun intentionally utilised by Lacan, may be read equally as 'the father's name' or 'the father's no'.) As Lacan puts it: 'It is in the *name-of-the-father* that we must recognise the support of the Symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of law' (1977: 67). To be as straightforward as possible: the Name-of-the-Father is the structural Symbolic element that serves to separate the mother and the child. It designates the father in his capacity as a 'third term', 'as a figure who comes between the child and the mother, and frustrates the child's desire to be all-in-all to the latter' (Silverman 1992: 101). It is via this link – that of the Name-of-the-Father – that the symbolic operation of the phallus is linked to the father.

The abstract and symbolic quality of this function is made clear by the fact that the discourse of the mother – or further yet, her relationship to her own Symbolic father – may be enough to institute this function. As Leader (1995) points out, what matters is not so much the presence of an actual father or man, but how the figure of the mother manages to indicate implicitly to the child the existence of a Symbolic network to which they are both linked, a network which is beyond the Imaginary relation of the two of them (105).

The paternal metaphor

The Symbolic authority of the Name-of-the-Father must be cemented with a substitution. This is crucial to the operation of the Oedipus complex: a fundamental substitution must take place, a substitution that Lacan understands as that of one signifier for another, namely that of the 'name of the father' for the desire of the mother. The metaphorical or substitutive

character of the Oedipus complex itself is highlighted in speaking of the paternal metaphor, as Evans (1992) notes. This metaphor – the substitution of the ‘law’ of the desire of the mother by the law of the Name-of-the-Father – is for Lacan the fundamental metaphor on which all signification depends.

In speaking of the ‘paternal metaphor’ and focusing on the crucial substitutive process that lies at the heart of the Oedipus complex, Lacan is giving us a process of subjectification which cannot be reduced to questions of the absence or presence of the actual, literal father. Lacan is very clear on this point: ‘We know today that an Oedipus complex can be constituted perfectly well today even if the father is not there, while originally it was the excessive presence of the father which was held responsible for all dramas’ (cited in Rose 1982: 39). By thinking of the father as the function of imposing law, and the process of the Oedipus complex as a substitution of signifiers, we can see that Lacan is doing his best to

Two kinds of phallus in the Oedipus complex

It is worth reiterating that in the movement through the Oedipus complex we see two different types of phallus that we should be careful to distinguish between. The phallus is initially an Imaginary object that the child wishes to incarnate within itself. It is later a signifier, a signifier of desire towards which we must take up a position of attempting to have something like or attempting to be something like. As Grosz (1992) points out, although originally ‘an Imaginary (detachable, present or absent) object, possessed by some, desired by others ... after oedipalization [the phallus] functions as a Symbolic term (an object of union and/or exchange) between the sexes’ (322). We are not only dealing with ego-level functioning here, with the question of primary Imaginary identification, but also with identification at the level of the Symbolic, with the constitution of a subject. The impact of the phallus is thus a question of both Imaginary and Symbolic positioning.

In as much as the phallus operates as a phallic signifier, as a privileged signifier tied into the functioning of the Symbolic, then the phallus comes to work as an anchoring-point of Symbolic constitution. It is in this capacity, as a Symbolic entity – as a question of how one’s subjectivity is marked by law – that the phallus marks the first moment of sexual difference. Here it benefits us to recall that sexual identity works as an imposition, a ‘legislated’ law, an injunction of the Symbolic in addition to being an Imaginary relation to an object of desire.

Of course we do not simply move beyond the Imaginary into the Symbolic as if these were merely successive stages of life, one of which could be left totally behind. As socialised human subjects who make identifications and make use of Symbolic structures, we exist always in both Imaginary and Symbolic registers. So while it is true that after Oedipalisation our relationship to the phallus changes – it is lost to us, we come to understand that the attempt to directly incarnate it is futile – this does not mean we do not continue to take up a series of Imaginary identifications that would put us into a potential relation with the phallus. As noted above, just because no one can simply ‘have’ or ‘be’ the phallus, does not prevent humans from representing themselves to themselves within such categories of experience. Whether I attempt to ‘have’ something like or ‘be’ something like the phallus indicates two modes of identification. As Wright (1998) puts it: ‘The being/having dichotomy gives us two Imaginary modes of identification, two modes of being in relation to desire, both of which provide a means of attempting to ward off the threat of castration’ (176).

It is characteristic of Lacanian psychoanalysis that we characterise an object differently according to how it is approached in the Imaginary, Symbolic or Real. Although often confusing at first, this adds to the complexity of his account, as in the case of the phallus, which gives us two sets of co-ordinates, one Imaginary and one Symbolic.

remove this conceptualisation from the essentialisms of anatomy towards something that we only really need the structure of language to explain (albeit, admittedly, within a patriarchal social order).

The result of the operation of the paternal metaphor is a signification that the phallus is lost or negated. The movement from phallus as Imaginary object to Symbolic entity as signifier of desire/lack is thus ensured and the individual is 'subjectified' and sexed according to the relation she or he subsequently takes up to this signifier of lack.

To (try) to be or to have

We have seen then that the phallus is the primary signifier that is imposed by the Name-of-the-Father and then secured in the substitute process of the paternal metaphor. It is on this basis, as Minsky (1996) points out, that the Name-of-the-Father sets in motion the endless signifying chain that makes the Symbolic and subjectivity possible. To take up a relation to the phallic signifier thus instituted is what results in the constitution of sexual identity, in becoming a 'sexed subject'.

Up until this point, children have not taken on an unconscious relation to the phallic signifier, and have not as such assumed a sexed position. Lacan argues that both boys and girls alike must assume their castration at this point. Castration here, used in a somewhat different way to the usual Freudian deployment of the term, refers to the influence of the father, to the fact that he makes it impossible for the child *to identify directly with the Imaginary phallus*, to attempt to consummate it within themselves.

Castration here refers to the renunciation of the child's sustained attempt to be the phallus for the mother, something that the child will never easily forego. Moreover, as Leader (1995) underlines, this renunciation occurs not simply because the child realises that it is powerless to incarnate the phallus, but also because it has come to understand that this is in fact impossible to do. It is impossible, because after the operation of the paternal metaphor, the phallus is understood to be irretrievably lost. (This understanding of castration is enforced and supported by the castration of the entry into language discussed above.)

Two different positions hence present themselves regarding this missing phallus, which is now, to be doubly sure, not an organ, but rather a *Symbolic function, a signifier*. So, confronted with the irretrievable loss of the Imaginary phallus, the child takes up a relationship to potentially *having*, or to potentially *being* the phallic signifier (the Symbolic phallus, in other words.) One can never quite succeed at either of these objectives; we should not see either of these positions as particularly stable. They are not positions that may be simply secured or 'completed' – such is the precarious nature of sexual identification for Lacan. As noted above, no one can ever themselves be said to simply have or be the phallus. It is only through a relation of desire that one can approach a mediated relation of *having* or *being* the phallic signifier. This may occur either through another's desire for a phallic quality one is thought to *have* (such as possessing a desirable phallic object of sorts, as in the position of masculine sexuality) or through another's desire for a phallic quality one is thought to *be* (such as when one's body is desired, in the position of feminine sexuality.) Both of these positions, to reiterate, are somewhat virtual; they are relations to a phallic signifier, and more than that, *relations to the other's desire*. This is worth stressing: given that the phallus only exists through the mediation of another party (our desire for the other's

desire), and in reference to the Symbolic order (as an Imaginary object it is irretrievably lost), the relation that we may attain to the phallus is always only potential, and always only a relation to the phallus as *signifier of lack*.

To risk two rather crude formulations here so as to provide a concrete illustration of Lacan's very abstract point: what is it that men 'want', i.e. that which is both the thing they desire and how they would like to be seen by others (the thing that makes them desirable for others)? They would like to be seen as 'having it', to be perceived as possessing phallic signifiers of various sorts; that is, signifiers of phallic endowment, be it of money, power, wealth, accomplishment. What, on the other hand, is it that women, or *those who identify as women*, 'want'? They would like to be seen as 'being it', as being or enacting those signifiers of that which is most cherished or desired.

We should not forget how crucial the question of desire is to psychoanalysis. The issue of one's unconscious desire lies at the very heart of one's being, despite that it is not directly knowable to the conscious subject. Questions of one's desire are always, as suggested above, also questions of lack, of what one seeks to be fulfilled. This illusion of being fulfilled by the 'missing object' that one desires is what makes desire so compelling; it is for this reason that the phallus works as both signifier of desire and of lack. It is also here worth reiterating the fact that for Lacan desire is always the desire of the other, that is, *a desire for the other's desire for us*. As such the taking on of a relation to desire is always *the taking on of how one will be desired by an other*. (This is a situation which means that our own desire is also, oddly, the desire of the other; we take on the desire of others, i.e. we desire what our mother desired, through us.)

The question of the other's desire and how we try to be that other's desire is exactly, to reiterate, what underlines how we come to identify sexually as men or as women. The 'how one will be desired' is crucially different for those subjects who identify themselves as women as opposed to those who identify themselves as men; this is the factor that differentiates the relation of *being* versus *having* the phallic signifier (bearing in mind of course that one's biological body may not be the same as one's chosen sexuality). It is as if the taking on of a position of masculinity or femininity, for Lacanian psychoanalysis, is the result of an unconscious commitment made to the mother (the template for the desiring other to come): *'I will come to have it for you'* (made by the child who will become a boy, a masculine subject), or *'I will come to be it for you'* (made by the child who will become a girl, a feminine subject). This is an unconscious commitment that lives on, and that correlates to a positioning of the subject in the Symbolic (a positioning that occurs in relation to the phallic signifier). It is a commitment that is a 'taking on' of a position relative to the Symbolic authority of the father, the taking on of a location relative to one's Symbolic castration. It is a commitment to 'falling in' on either side of the division between the sexes – a relationship to the phallus as primary signifier of difference – and a 'taking on' of a desiring relation to a prospective partner.

Different versions of castration; different relations to lack

We understand then that the position we take with respect to the phallic signifier is one of how to be desired. We understand also that desire and lack occur always together. Each such position may also be defined by how it is lacking. Or, to put it somewhat differently, each 'sexed' position correlates to a different kind of castration that corresponds to the

two unconscious commitments I have mentioned above. The masculine commitment 'I will come to have it for you' (as directed toward a desired other) contains within it the admission that 'I do not at the moment have it; someone else does, but I may eventually come to have it'. As Leader (1995) states: '[The male child's] use of the sexual organ must be based on the acceptance of the fact that there is a Symbolic phallus always behind him which he does not have but may one day receive in the future' (101). Although the masculine subject is situated in a potential relation of possession to the phallic signifier – he may one day become a husband, a father, an inheritor of the Name-of-the-Father – this assumption of the Symbolic phallus is only possible on the basis of the prior assumption of his own castration (Evans 1992).

We see a different relationship to the phallic signifier and a different type of castration in the feminine position. The feminine commitment, 'I will come to be like the phallus',

Two relations to desire

If all of this sounds hopelessly abstract, then it helps to provide a few examples of potentially 'being' or 'having' the phallic signifier. How do we respond to castration, to the fact that the phallus is lost to us, to the fact that we have a lack at the centre of our being that needs to be covered over? We do this by taking on one of two possible relations of potentiality to the phallus; or put differently, by being positioned in a particular relation to our desire. Leader (1996) provides some interesting examples in this regard. A man is sitting at a café and sees a couple walk past. He finds the female attractive and watches her. What is the typical masculine relation to desire we see epitomised here? He fixes his interest on her and wants to 'have' her. A woman in the same situation may well do something different, observes Leader. She may be attracted to the man, but will nonetheless spend more time looking at the woman who is with him. Why so? Her relation to desire is different; it is not the wish simply to possess the desired object, but of wanting to know what makes this woman desirable for the man. Her relation to desire is about being like a signifier of his desire, of enacting this signifier of his desire in this way. Another example can be drawn from children's games within a day-care centre:

Sue decides that she wants a toy that Mary is currently guarding for herself. But rather than directly stating her desire, she tells Mary she has come to fetch it for another little girl, Lisa, who desires it. Later three boys are playing in the same area. When Nick sees that Kevin has the toy, he demands it for himself ... Rather than appealing to the supposed desire of [another child], he simply tries to ... gain possession of the object (Leader 1996: 5).

In this example, Nick asserts his own desire (to have the desired thing) whereas Sue appeals to the desire of someone else. The boy wants to win the prized object; the girl aims less at the object than at being the other girl's desire, enacting it. 'What a woman searches for in the world around her is not an object – female collectors after all, are extremely rare – but [to be] another's desire' (Leader 1996: 6). A woman's interest is not simply in having one man or woman (in possessing a phallic signifier), but rather in understanding a desiring relation, in being able to enact something desired in being a phallic signifier; this is her route to desire. While this may sound uncomfortably generalising, and a rather essentialist way of distinguishing between men and women, it is worth pointing out that what is being described here are two structured relations to desire. Not all subjects who 'fit the bill' anatomically speaking, as women, may desire in the way outlined above. However, if Lacan is right, all people who take up a sexed position as feminine, who sexually identify as women – a group which of course may include those who anatomically we would identify as men – take on such a structured relation to desire.

contains within it the admission that 'I am not it', that 'I lack it', that, as it were, 'although I do not and will not be able to possess it, I will be able to be a version of it'. There is clearly a different order of castration here: whereas the masculine subject remains in a relationship of potential possession (he may one day come to possess phallic signifiers), the feminine subject is barred even this potential possession. The only alternative left to her is to come as close to 'being' this signifier as is possible, to *make herself into the phallic signifier of desire*. Importantly though, this attempt to incarnate the desire of the other is no longer the attempt to identify with the object of the mother's desire – the paternal metaphor has long since done away with this wish – it is Symbolic rather than an Imaginary positioning, a taking up of a relation to the phallic signifier.

We may now appreciate the importance of the notion of the phallus in Lacanian theory. It is the first signifier of sexual difference, a Symbolic function that pins us to either side of the division between the sexes. It is exactly this taking on of a relation to the phallic signifier – a signifier that orients us with regard to the questions of lack and the other's desire for us – that determines sexual difference. The phallus is not an object, nor is it a reality. It is certainly not the actual male organ. Rather it is an empty marker of difference, a sign of what divides us from the Imaginary and inserts us into our predestined place within the Symbolic order. It is a means of positioning us relative to the Symbolic. For Lacan, sexuality operates as a law of sorts, something that is 'enjoined' on the subject. Individuals *must* take a choice that follows the lines of a fundamental opposition: having or not having the 'phallus'. This as has been suggested, is a problematic, if not in fact impossible process, and Lacan is at pains to emphasise to us the constant and ongoing difficulties of this process which makes sexuality never pre-determined, never finalised. Psychoanalysis and feminism might be said to come together in their interests in the difficulties of this process, and in the attempts to further the explanatory and critical value of this concept.

Conclusion

Lacanian psychoanalysis provides us with an impressive array of concepts with which we may attempt to understand the process of subject-formation and the taking on of sexual identity. Lacan is successful in reformulating many of Freud's contributions to the question of sexual identity outside of the limitations of constant recourse to anatomy or biology. By further involving concepts of language and signification, by centralising the importance of the Symbolic, the Lacanian account of sexual difference is able to distance itself to a certain degree from the literal familial dynamics and anatomical grounds of reference required by Freud.

Perhaps Lacan's major achievement in this respect is in offering an approach to understanding sexual identification which is reducible neither to discourse and the world of social construction, on the one hand, nor to naturalist understandings which remain preoccupied with bodily or biological attributes as means of understanding sexuality. He offers a theoretical account which emphasises the precarious and unfinished nature of sexual identity in each human subject, but which is appreciative nonetheless of how sexual identity is legislated within each speaking being, imposed like a law of desire and prohibition, which requires us to take up a 'sexed' position within the Symbolic.

The question of course remains as to whether the many complex and obscure

theoretical formulations that Lacan offers us are the best co-ordinates within which to understand the conceptual and political challenges of sexual identity within patriarchal contexts. Do we necessarily want to inherit Freud's framework of ideas, to apply, albeit in a more sophisticated manner, the polarity of possessing or lacking the phallus (in Freud), or potentially having or potentially *being* the phallic signifier (in Lacan) as means of understanding sexual difference? The notion of the phallic signifier has, without doubt, been a profound and challenging theoretical contribution of Lacanian psychoanalysis. It has been one that a number of feminists have been at the forefront of advancing as a means of understanding sexual difference in symbolic and non-biological terms, apart from the dubious trappings of the idea of 'penis envy' (Mitchell 1974; Mitchell & Rose 1982; Ragland-Sullivan 1986). Other feminists who have explored Lacanian theory are less enthusiastic. Grosz (1990, 1992) is concerned that by elevating the phallus to the privileged position that Lacan accords it, the patriarchal gestures of Freud have simply been repeated at a higher level, that a sign of masculine privilege has come to be over-valued such that male dominance is implicitly naturalised.

We may offer a more pragmatic problem with the concept of the phallic signifier: we have here an esoteric, often opaque and typically jargon-riddled idea that would seem extremely difficult to apply in practice. Additionally, one often gets the feeling that aspects of Lacanian theory are still in the process of construction, that they are as yet unfinished, in need of further refinement or, perhaps more pressingly, simplification. (Note that this chapter focuses on Lacan's writings on sexual difference from the 1950s; his later formulations of what he comes to call 'sexuation', as advanced in the 1970s, add a significant level of theory to these ideas, attempting to formalise his theory of sexual difference with reference to the formulae of symbolic logic.) This issue aside, it seems important to note that the complexity of a set of ideas is itself not reason enough to cast them away. There is no reason why the political task of developing robust and counter-intuitive conceptualisations of sexuality and gender, as is part of the overarching agenda of this book, should necessarily be straightforward; practicality and immediacy of application are not the only bases upon which we should judge critical thought.

A contention here is that the concept of the phallus seems rather overworked: not only is the phallus an Imaginary object of desire, it is also a signifier of lack, a signifier of desire, the first signifier of sexual difference. It seems an overdetermined concept – although then again perhaps this is precisely the point of a concept that Lacan describes as 'a signifier without a signified' (Evans 1992). Lacan does, however, make very large claims on the basis of this concept. Not only is the phallus the key signifier that governs access to the Symbolic, and language, not only is it the privileged signifier which determines sexual difference, it also plays its part, as operationalised in castration anxiety, in founding the human order itself (as in Mitchell 1982).

More problematic yet perhaps is the inconsistency with which Lacan himself understands the phallus as a signifier privileged above all others (remember, it is the signifier which heralds the arrival of social law, the first 'primal' signifier which makes basic social differentiations possible). Derrida (1975), for one, argues that this is an untenable theorisation in as much as it contradicts the fundamental law of the signifier, as set up in Saussure's (1977) original structural linguistic theory that suggests that signifiers only acquire value and meaning because they are different to other signifiers. Of course this is a valid

contention: it makes no sense to speak of a 'privileged signifier' within the context of formal linguistics; then again, perhaps Lacan's theoretical project is exactly to try and conceptualise how such a privileged signifier might exist, and what it might be. We might argue here that the validity of psychoanalytic concepts should not be seen as contingent on formal linguistics – this is not their ultimate level of justification.

However we may feel about Lacan's theoretical system and that of psychoanalysis more broadly, and wherever we take up a position regarding the debate as to whether psychoanalysis simply extends patriarchy or whether it diagnoses and explains it, it is hard to deny the fact that the discourse of psychoanalysis offers us, as a set of conceptual resources, a number of prospective critical instruments. Neither they, nor it, can simply be ignored.