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16. The desire for Freud: Psychoanalysis and Feminism (1983)

Stevi Jackson

It is no longer possible for those of us who reject psychoanalysis to ignore it. In the early days of the Women's Liberation Movement Freud's theories were rejected, but today new 'readings' of his work have gained many feminist adherents. I remain sceptical: I want to show that, despite the great claims made for it, the new brand of psychoanalysis has nothing to offer feminists.

The new readings are said to be 'anti-essentialist'; that is, to make no assumptions about biological differences between the sexes or biologically-based sexual drives. This is important, since an essentialist approach effectively denies the possibility of change. However, I argue that the new readings *are* essentialist, just as the old readings were. It is always important for feminists to understand ideas that seek to explain female subordination as 'natural', unchanging and unchangeable. That is why I ask you to bear with me as we pick our way through what may seem nonsensical rubbish.

Deferring to Freud

In debates around sexuality, psychoanalysis is often treated as if it were the only possible way of explaining things. Even those who are critical of psychoanalysis frequently display considerable deference towards it. There is a tendency to assume that any aspect of women's experience, especially sexual experience, that is not immediately explicable by any other means must come within the realm of psychoanalysis.

Michèle Barrett, for instance, makes some telling criticisms of psychoanalysis, but falls back on it as soon as she encounters an aspect of women's subjective experience which she believes not to coincide with objective fact. Discussing Masters and Johnson's insistence that all female orgasms are clitorally centred, she says that this 'did not tally with many women's lived experience of intercourse'. She goes on: 'It is at this point that Freud's account may be useful, precisely in demarcating the psychic processes that underlie the pleasure of this experience'. Even supposing she is right in saying that what women feel does not match with the known facts — which I would dispute — why should she suggest, even tentatively,

that Freudianism can explain it? Why is this the *only* possible explanation she considers? I would agree with her that we need 'an understanding of sexuality in terms of meanings, definitions, the discourse of pleasure in relation to our knowledge of the technical processes involved in sexual activity'. But this is precisely what psychoanalysis does *not* provide.

The original feminist gut-reaction against Freud was, I believe, justified. I do not accept that we read his work incorrectly or misunderstood and misrepresented him. It is sheer arrogance to suggest, as Juliet Mitchell does, that we could only come to this negative conclusion on the basis of second-hand, popularized versions of Freud, or because we only read the bits on femininity without understanding their place in psychoanalytic theory, or simply because we thought penis envy was a silly idea.

We are now told that new 'readings' of Freud, specifically those deriving from the work of Jacques Lacan, have purged his work of all the elements which feminists found unsavoury. The new readings say that we are not born feminine or masculine, but are constructed as 'sexed subjects' through our acquisition of language. Language structures both consciousness and the unconscious. It is also at this 'moment' of our 'entry into language and culture' (as they put it) that 'desire' is constituted, i.e. that we become sexual. Nor need we worry about penis envy any more, because it's all symbolic and has nothing to do with that organ being intrinsically 'better' than anything women are endowed with. To quote Rosalind Coward, who comes closer than most to expressing these ideas in plain English:

All reference to the anatomical superiority of the penis is removed. The phallus is the symbolic representation of the penis, not the actual organ. This is because of its role in the symbolic, the pre-existent linguistic and cultural order.

The role of this symbolic phallus is crucial for that all-important entry into language and culture. In Lacanian theory it is the 'privileged signifier' around which all 'difference' — which is taken to be the basis of language and culture — is organized. The meaning of the penis/phallus therefore has nothing to do with the physical difference between the sexes as such, but with the cultural significance which the phallus is given. In short, psychoanalysis is phallogocentric only because it is analysing a phallogocentric, patriarchal culture. We can forgive Freud his occasional misogynist lapses, since basically, it is claimed, he was right.

I remain unconvinced. One problem concerns the status of this reading of Freud. Lacan's obscure writings are seen as revealing what Freud really meant, and therefore

anyone who reads Freud literally has got it all wrong. It seems to me, however, that Freud said what he meant and meant what he said. I hold the unfashionable view that the literal reading of Freud is the correct one, and that the insights claimed for Freud by the Lacanians are often little more than wishful thinking.

What Freud was concerned with was children's responses to their discovery of physical differences between the sexes. Briefly, he argues that a boy, seeing that girls lack a penis, thinks they have been castrated and fears that this will happen to him as punishment for desiring his mother and his rivalry with his father. This leads him to resolve his oedipal complex (his desire for his mother and hatred of his father) by giving up his desire for his mother. A girl on the other hand, seeing the penis, is overcome with envy, feels she is castrated, blames her mother for this condition and therefore turns away from her mother towards her father.

The tension between biological and cultural determination of human sexuality evident in Freud's writings is more often resolved in favour of the biological than his recent apologists seem willing to admit. There are, however, more fundamental problems which are not attributable to Freud's misogynist bias, but are intrinsic to psychoanalysis — its status as 'knowledge', its assumptions, its methodology. It is these problems which I wish to address.

The First Line of Defence: Discrediting the Opposition

The difficulty of modern psychoanalytic writings is widely acknowledged. The style is tortuous, the vocabulary esoteric and the concepts slippery. The unwillingness or inability of theorists to translate their ideas into terms which the uninitiated can comprehend has been rightly damned as elitist. It makes these writers relatively immune from criticism from outsiders: how can we presume to criticise something we don't understand?

Those working within this framework can smugly reassure themselves that if the rest of us have doubts it is only because of our ignorance. Juliet Mitchell's work, being less directly influenced by Lacan, is more comprehensible than most. But she makes up for this by constantly implying that if we reject Freud it is because we are too stupid to see the Great Truths he has uncovered. The whole tone of *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* is arrogant and condescending. But I believe we must resist being cowed into silence by elitist mystifications. This is all the more important since what psychoanalysis purports to offer us is an explanation of our 'lived experience' as women. We need, therefore, to challenge the strategies which prevent us from testing it against that experience.

The Second Line of Defence: the Mysteries of the Unconscious

Any criticism of psychoanalysis we might offer, on the basis of any data or experience, is subject to the instant rebuttal: 'Ah, but in the unconscious ...'. Juliet Mitchell repeatedly asserts that we must understand the nature of the unconscious, for without that understanding Freud makes no sense. She constantly chastises his critics for claiming to dispute specific points when in reality they are rejecting the whole idea of the unconscious. She makes that rejection sound like a neurosis. I am willing to admit, quite openly, that I suffer from this sickness. I cannot be convinced that we are dealing with a body of irrefutable fact concerning the unconscious. Whatever Mitchell says to the contrary, I submit that we are merely being asked to have faith.

I am not denying the existence of any psychic processes beyond our consciousness. What I *do* contest is that the non-conscious mind is knowable in the systematic fashion claimed by psychoanalysis, and that everyone's unconscious is subject to similar processes and contains similar repressed wishes or drives. By definition the unconscious is not knowable by the conscious mind: it is claimed that it can only be made available through analysis (that is, Freudian therapy), through

the piecing together of dreams, slips of the tongue and so on. But analysis is a highly intuitive process, and the results of such intuition can hardly be taken as objective fact. And in any case, much psychoanalytic theorizing seems to be based on pure speculation, with no reference even to the dubious evidence of analysis.

Not only am I unconvinced as to the 'scientific' status of this enterprise, I fail to see why you need to believe in the unconscious to see that our 'subjectivity', our sense of ourselves, is built up through a particular language and culture, in relation to specific social relations. These general conclusions could be arrived at without any preconceptions as to the nature of the unconscious, and the same is true of many more specific conclusions yielded by psychoanalytic theory. For example, Toril Moi, in a paper on sexual jealousy, after meandering through the usual Freudian arguments that jealous women are normally depressive, concludes:

Feelings of loss and wounded self-esteem are conducive to depression. In order to be respected and esteemed, women in patriarchal society must demonstrate that they can catch and keep a man. To lose one's lover/husband is interpreted as a blow to the woman's worth as a human being. It is easy to understand why depression should be a widespread reaction in women who discover they have a rival.

This seems a reasonable, common-sense explanation. But why did Moi have to jump through Freudian hoops, demonstrating that female jealousy is somehow 'pre-oedipal', to arrive at a conclusion that most of us could have reached without the benefit of the 'insights' of psychoanalysis?

When psychoanalytic accounts yield reasonable conclusions it is in spite of, rather than because of, their assumptions about the unconscious. But these assumptions can lead to very dubious arguments, especially those based on the notion of 'repression' — the idea that certain drives or needs are denied expression and therefore repressed. It is this which undermines the claims of many writers that they are dealing with the cultural construction of subjectivity, for it assumes the existence of 'drives' which exist *outside* culture — which are presumably innate, and which reside in the unconscious.

An example of what I find dubious is the explanation of our 'amnesia' about infantile sexuality as the result of repressing wishes which our culture does not allow to be fulfilled. Along with other psychoanalysts, Mitchell seems to assume that this amnesia validates the claims made about repression and the unconscious. I am sceptical of this for two reasons. Firstly, it presupposes that certain infantile

experiences are essentially, in themselves, sexual, independent of any such meaning being applied to them (except by psychoanalysts). This assertion seems to have no foundation beyond the fact that Freud said so. I would argue that nothing is sexual unless it is subjectively defined as such—a point I will return to later.

Secondly, most of us remember little or nothing about our earliest years. Are we to believe that *all* of this experience was repressed, that everything which happened in that phase of life comes under the heading of ‘what our culture does not permit’? There is a perfectly simple explanation for the loss of these early memories, one which does not require any assumptions about repression or the unconscious: that we lacked the language with which to represent our experiences to ourselves.

Language, the Phallus and the production of sexed subjects

The process of acquiring language has become central to psychoanalysis. It is through this process that we become social beings, that we enter culture and culture enters us, constructing us as ‘sexed subjects’. This I do not see as particularly contentious: I am quite prepared to accept that language structures experience. Language is not merely a tool with which we express ideas. It shapes how we think, indeed what it is possible to think about, and therefore orders the way we make sense of our experience. Psychoanalysis is far from being the only theoretical framework which makes this point.

What is more problematic is the idea of the oedipal situation and the role of the phallus as ‘primary signifier’. The notion of penis envy as such is still very much there in Mitchell’s work, albeit reconceived as envy of what the penis represents rather than of the physical organ. Coward and her associates place more emphasis on the importance of recognizing the phallus as the symbol around which entry into language and culture is ordered. What this apparently means is that the child cannot place herself in the world, specifically as a sexed subject, without having taken note of the crucial difference between having/not having the phallus; without this she cannot, therefore, become a fully social language-using human being. But while male children make a positive entry into the symbolic, girls enter in a negative relation, one of lacking, of not possessing the phallus, the mark of difference.

One aspect of this formulation which I find confusing is the exact relation between the constitution of the sexed subject and the learning of language—a confusion heightened by terminological obscurity. If writers meant merely that learning language involves being aware that one’s position in the world is as a boy or a girl, then this would not be too problematic. Girls *do* enter into culture in a negative

relation, being defined in relation to the male, as not-male. What is problematic is the notion that the child cannot enter culture as a sexed subject and cannot speak until she has negotiated the castration complex.

While these explanations of our construction as sexed subjects rest on the symbolic function of the phallus rather than on envy of the penis itself, they nonetheless seem to assume an awareness of, a representation of, real physical difference. Yet it is surely quite possible for a girl to remain unaware of the existence of penises until well after she is fluent in language and has identified and placed herself as a little girl. More conventional studies of socialization have revealed that the processes contributing to the construction of gender and sexuality are many, varied and complex. I see no reason to discount these findings, or to dismiss them as superficial and inconsequential. At least they refer to real children, whereas psychoanalytic explanations seem to rest on a theoretical construct called 'the child'.

Psychoanalysis is also very bad news for anyone attempting to rear children so that they do not grow up to be walking feminine or masculine stereotypes. We know it is difficult, but the formulations of psychoanalysis suggest that it is impossible, that the processes involved are way beyond our control. So we may as well encourage girls to be vulnerable, narcissistic and masochistic, because that is how they will end up anyway.

The category 'woman' is taken to be virtually universal, applying to all (patriarchal) societies. Obviously, people are constructed as 'sexed subjects' in all cultures, but I doubt this happens in exactly the same way in all contexts. Mitchell maintains that while there may be variations in 'the expression of femininity', this does not fundamentally alter what it is to be a woman, the basic functioning of women's psyches. Patriarchal societies may be subject to variation, but since the significance of the phallus remains constant, so does female (and male) psychology. It is not clear, however, how Mitchell distinguishes between expressions of femininity and the fundamentals of feminine psychology. This looks like a form of words to avoid taking seriously any anthropological evidence which might otherwise contradict psychoanalysis. The assumption that evidence drawn from psychoanalysing women in Western societies can be applied to all other cultures is in any case clearly untenable.

The problem of sexuality

There are major problems with psychoanalytic ideas about sexuality itself. Just as Mitchell insists that we must accept the existence of the unconscious, so

we must take as indisputable fact Freud's 'discovery' of infantile sexuality. Other psychoanalytic analyses concentrate on the constitution of 'desire' when we enter into language and culture, but still retain some notion of drives which exist before this time. It is claimed that this is not an essentialist position: a drive is not the same thing as an instinct in that it has no 'object'; it is not oriented towards any particular outlet, any specific category of person. Sexuality is not seen as something we are born with, but is constructed in particular ways through our entry into patriarchal culture. Yet it still seems to be assumed that certain infantile experiences are intrinsically, *essentially* sexual.

Not only is this contradictory, the whole notion of sexual 'drives' is rather dubious. A drive is an inborn urge towards physical gratification. While the satisfaction of hunger, for example, can be seen in this way (since it is necessary for physical survival) other forms of sensual pleasure do not so easily fit this model. Obviously infants do experience sensual pleasure, but this does not mean either that this experience involves the gratification of a drive, or that it is specifically sexual. To think of sexuality in terms of drives is to see it as something we are impelled towards by inner urges beyond our control and beyond the reach of social forces. To see any form of sensual pleasure as sexual *in itself* is to view sexuality as a natural biological endowment rather than something which is learnt. Both these assumptions are essentialist. Both imply that sexuality is unchanging and unchangeable. The notion of sexual drives is also dangerous, as it implies an aggressive, male-defined view of sexuality; and the idea that children are intrinsically sexual can be used to justify sexual abuse of them.

In order to escape essentialism, sexuality must be seen as something which is socially defined rather than as something which exists independently of our definitions of it. Nothing, no act, no sensation, is sexual in itself. What is sexual depends on culturally defined and socially learnt meanings. We are born with a broad sensual potential, an ability to gain pleasure from certain sensations, but which of these become part of our sexuality depends on what we learn to define as sexual. An infant gaining pleasure from her own body cannot be said to be behaving sexually, even if she is doing something that an adult would define as sexual. She has not yet learnt language, and so does not yet have access to the concepts which would endow certain pleasures with erotic meaning. It is nonsense, therefore, to talk of 'infantile sexuality'.

Similar problems arise concerning the nature of the 'desire' supposedly constituted at the 'oedipal moment' when children become oriented towards the appropriate heterosexual 'object'. In what sense can a child be said to have desire

when the concept of desire, and indeed all knowledge through which she could make sense of her experiences as sexual, is not available to her? We are left not knowing what 'desire' is supposed to mean. In some contexts writers clearly are referring to sexual desire. At other times, however, they seem to be talking about something more nebulous: a desire to be completed by and to complete someone else, some sort of yearning after a 'wholeness' which is disrupted by the linguistic capacity to categorize and differentiate experience. I suspect the term 'desire' is favoured precisely because it is so ambiguous.

There are further difficulties with this slippery concept. It seems to me that the processes whereby we are conditioned towards genital, reproductive sexuality are far more continuous throughout childhood and adolescence than the psychoanalytic account allows for. I cannot accept that it all depends on what happens at the 'oedipal moment', which in any case seems to be more of an abstract, mythical 'moment' than a real event in time. *Most* of our learning experiences define sex for us in genital reproductive terms. Moreover, a full account of the social construction of sexuality needs to explain more than merely why most of us become heterosexual. If what we define as sexual involves selecting from a very broad sensual potential, then there are many possible forms of eroticism consistent with heterosexuality. Does heterosexuality have to involve passive femininity and active masculinity? Does it have to be genitally and reproductively focussed, involving the goal of orgasm as its end point? Psychoanalytic explanations of 'desire' imply that all this is essential to heterosexuality, that heterosexuality is fixed and unchangeable.

Nor can the existence of desire itself explain all facets of our sexuality. Both women and men may engage in acts conventionally defined as sexual without desire being their primary motive. What are we to make of acts such as rape, which may be motivated more by a wish to punish and humiliate than by sexual desires? Presumably psychoanalysis would conceptualise such wishes as sexual, but this merely confuses the issue.

A central difficulty here lies in the conflation of gender and sexuality. In psychoanalytic accounts the term 'sexuality' is often taken as synonymous with gender, or at least as subsuming it. I would argue that while gender and (erotic) sexuality are obviously linked, we should not confuse them; we should investigate the links rather than prejudging them. In psychoanalytic theory, however, both gender and sexuality appear to be constituted simultaneously at the oedipal moment. It is with the formation of desire, in taking the appropriate object, that we become sexed subjects.

It is this conflation which I think accounts for the failure of psychoanalysis, noted recently by Elizabeth Wilson, to confront the issue of lesbianism and homosexuality.

For if our desire is directed towards an object disallowed by our culture, how can we be fully sexed subjects? If gender and sexuality are one and the same, what gender has a lesbian or homosexual? The only way of resolving these questions within the psychoanalytic framework would seem to lead us back to the realms of limp-wristed men and Amazonian women.

Feminism and psychoanalysis: why the attraction?

I have argued that psychoanalysis, built on a dubious methodology, unfounded assumptions about the unconscious, and containing within it a residual essentialism, does not offer us a very fruitful means of analysing sexuality. As an explanation for the persistence of patriarchy and its effects on our consciousness it is an extremely depressing doctrine, for it offers us little chance of changing the situation. We are trapped in a vicious circle. Why is the phallus the privileged signifier? Because we live in a patriarchal culture. Why is our culture patriarchal? Because the phallus is the privileged signifier.

Why, then, should psychoanalysis appeal to feminists? Various reasons have been suggested: the most important of these is that psychoanalysis offers an analysis of patriarchy as a structure in its own right, and rests on a universalism that stresses the commonality of women's oppression. This being the case, it might be expected to appeal to radical feminists. But it is Marxist feminists who have adopted it. Elizabeth Wilson sees in this a potential retreat from Marxism, but I disagree. There are very good reasons for its appeal to Marxist feminists: it helps them to deal with theoretical difficulties which radical feminists do not have to face.

Psychoanalysis has been appropriated by Marxists to account for aspects of lived experience to which conventional Marxist categories are inapplicable. But it has a more specific appeal to Marxist feminists, because it creates a space for theorizing gender relations and sexuality without challenging pre-existing Marxist concepts and categories. By placing this theorization in the realm of the ideological, they avoid the problems of trying to relate women's subordination to specific modes of production.

The appropriation of psychoanalysis also serves to perpetuate another common omission in Marxist thought: its unwillingness to confront the issue of male power, and its preference for considering women's oppression solely in terms of structures (whether economic or symbolic) rather than analysing the ways in which real men exercise and benefit from power over women. Radical feminists have never doubted that patriarchy is worthy of consideration in its own right, have never been afraid of

confronting the day-to-day realities of male dominance, and are not trapped within the confines of any existing body of theory. For them, psychoanalysis can have little appeal.

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