

## SIGMUND FREUD "THE DISSOLUTION OF THE OEDIPAL COMPLEX" (1924)

Freud, Sigmund. "The Dissolution of the Oedipal Complex." *On Sexuality*. Vol. 7 of *Penguin Freud Library*. Trans. James Strachey. Ed. Angela Richards. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976. 313-322.

The child's sexual development advances to a certain phase in which the genital organs take over the leading role: this genital, however, is the male one, however, while the female one remains undiscovered. This phallic phase is contemporaneous with the Oedipal complex. The male child's attention turns to his genitals: he manipulates them in a way that elicits parental disapproval. "More or less plainly, more or less brutally, a threat is pronounced that this part which he values so highly will be taken away from him" (316). The threat usually emanates from women, often with reference to the father who, they claim, will carry out the punishment. Sometimes, the boy is threatened with castration because of bed-wetting which, Freud suggests, is "proof of his being unduly concerned with his penis" (317) in that it is the "expression of the same excitation of the genitals which has impelled the child to masturbate at this period" (317).

What brings about the destruction of this phallic genital organisation of the child's sexual drives is the threat of castration. They are prepared for such a loss by the loss of two other important "parts of the body" (317): the mother's breast (at first intermittently and then for good) and the enforced expulsion of the faeces. What ultimately enforces the threat of castration is the "sight of the female genitals" (318). "Sooner or later the child, who is so proud of his possession of a penis, has a view of the genital region of a little girl, and cannot help being convinced of the absence of a penis in a creature so like himself. With this, the loss of his penis becomes imaginable and the threat of castration takes its deferred effect" (318).

At this stage, the child stands in an Oedipal attitude to his parents and his masturbation is "only a genital discharge of the sexual excitation belonging to the complex" (318). The child may have "only very vague notions as to what constitutes a satisfying erotic intercourse; but certainly the penis must play a part in it, for the sensations in his organ were evidence of that" (318). At this stage, the child is faced with two "possibilities of satisfaction" (318), by assuming either the active masculine role of the father having intercourse with the mother (the father thus becomes a hindrance to be removed) or the passive feminine role of the mother (whence the superfluous role of the mother). Up to this point, the child has been convinced that women are castrated, but now his acceptance of the personal possibility of castration makes an "end of both possible ways of obtaining satisfaction from the Oedipus complex" (318). Both possibilities entail the loss of the penis: the masculine role involves castration as punishment, the feminine one castration as a precondition: as Freud puts it, if the "satisfaction of love in the field of the Oedipal complex is to cost the child his penis, a conflict is bound to arise between his narcissistic interest in that part of his body and the libidinal cathexis of his parental objects" (318). The first triumphs and the child's ego turns away from the Oedipal complex.

At this point, the object-cathexes are given up and replaced by identifications, the authority of the father or the parents being introjected into ego to form the nucleus of the superego which "takes over the severity of the father and perpetuates his prohibition against incest, and so secures the ego from the return of the libidinal object-cathexis" (319). The libidinal impulses are desexualised and sublimated and transformed into impulses of affection. This ushers in the "latency period, which now interrupts the child's sexual development" (319). Because what should occur here is something more akin to a

"destruction and an abolition" (319), rather than a mere "repression" (319), there is, Freud suggests, a thin line between the normal and the pathological: if the "ego has not achieved much more than a repression of the complex, the latter persists in an unconscious state in the id and will later manifest its pathogenic effect" (319).

Although he admits that "in general our insight into these developmental processes in girls is unsatisfactory, incomplete and vague" (321), Freud now turns his attention to the psychic maturation of the female and her acquisition of a sense of her femininity. (Freud, of course, was one of the first to draw a distinction between anatomical sex and gender [a social construction].) Little girls, he contends, pass through the same stages as little boys: the oral, the anal and the phallic stages, an Oedipus complex, and a castration complex during which the unconscious and the superego are formed. The results, however, are different precisely because the physical anatomy of boys and girls is different. As Freud puts it, it is because "Anatomy is Destiny" (320) that the "morphological distinction is bound to find expression in differences of psychological development" (320). The main consequence, Freud argues, is that the "girl accepts castration as an accomplished fact, whereas the boy fears the possibility of its occurrence" (321). As a result, he contends much to the ire of Feminists, when the little girl compares herself with a little boy, "she perceives that she has 'come off badly' and she feels this as a wrong done to her and as a ground for inferiority" (320). Women realise, in other words, that they lack the all-important penis (as a result of which they come to conceive of their identity in terms of lack, or a deficiency) and experience what he called 'penis-envy.' Freud's definition of femininity in this manner has been, to say the least, controversial. Subsequently, Freud proceeds to argue, the female comes to desire nothing more than to take her mother's place and adopts all the conventional attributes of femininity evinced by her mother. One factor which assists the female to renounce her penis-envy is the desire to have a baby for her father which is substituted for the penis she can never have. Freud puts it this way: she "slips along the line of a symbolic equation . . . from the penis to a baby. Her Oedipal complex culminates in a desire, which is long retained, to receive a baby from her father as a gift--to bear him a child" (321). These two wishes, to have a penis and to bear her father a baby, "remain strongly cathected in the unconscious" (321) of the female, profoundly shaping her femininity. In other words, every woman really envies the penis and all that it symbolises in patriarchal culture at the same time that every male with whom she has a relationship is a reflection of her father. Freud makes another controversial assertion: once the fear of castration is not applicable to the little girl, according to Freud, a "powerful motive also drops out for the setting up of a super-ego" (321). That is, because the horror of castration does not apply in the case of the female (as a result of which she does not 'benefit' from the process of repression), the super-ego is less or even undeveloped in the female, making for a less moral human being.

Freud ends by warning that, although what he describes here is typical, variations in the "chronological order and in the linking up of these events are bound to have a very important bearing on the development of the individual" (322).