

THE DREAD OF WOMAN

OBSERVATIONS ON A SPECIFIC DIFFERENCE IN THE DREAD
FELT BY MEN AND BY WOMEN RESPECTIVELY FOR THE
OPPOSITE SEX.

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In his ballad of *The Diver* Schiller tells how a squire leaps into a dangerous whirlpool in order to win a woman—at first symbolized by a goblet. Horror-struck, he describes the perils of the deep by which he is doomed to be engulfed :

' Yet at length comes a lull o'er the mighty commotion,
As the whirlpool sucks into black smoothness the swell
Of the white-foaming breakers—and cleaves through the ocean
A path that seems winding in darkness to hell.
Round and round whirled the waves—deeper and deeper still driven,
Like a gorge through the mountainous main thunder-riven !

' Happy they whom the rose-hues of daylight rejoice,
The air and the sky that to mortals are given !
May the horror below never more find a voice—
Nor man stretch too far the wide mercy of Heaven !
Never more—never more may he lift from the sight
The veil which is woven with Terror and Night !

' Below at the foot of the precipice drear,
Spread the glowing, and purple, and pathless Obscure !
A silence of Horror that slept on the ear,
That the eye more appalled might the Horror endure !
Salamander—snake—dragon—vast reptiles that dwell
In the deep, coil'd about the grim jaws of their hell '.

The same idea is expressed, though far more pleasantly, in the Song of the Fisherboy in *Wilhelm Tell* :

' The clear smiling lake woo'd to bathe in its deep,
A boy on its green shore had laid him to sleep ;
Then heard he a melody
Flowing and soft,
And sweet as when angels are singing aloft.

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And as thrilling with pleasure he wakes from his rest,
The waters are murmuring over his breast ;
And a voice from the deep cries,
" With me thou must go, I charm the young shepherd,
I lure him below " ' .

(Translation by THEODORE MARTIN.)

Men have never tired of fashioning expressions for this experience : the violent force by which the man feels himself drawn to the woman, and, side by side with his longing, the dread lest through her he might die and be undone. I will mention particularly the moving expression of this dread in Heine's poem of the legendary Lorelei, who sits high on the bank of the Rhine and ensnares the boatman with her beauty.

Here once more it is water (representing, like the other ' elements ', the primal element ' woman ') that swallows up the man who succumbs to a woman's enchantment. Ulysses had to bid his seamen bind him to the mast in order to escape the allurements and the danger of the sirens. The riddle of the Sphinx can be solved by few, and most of those who attempt it forfeit their lives. The royal palace in fairy-tales is adorned with the heads of the suitors who have had the hardihood to try to solve the riddles of the king's beautiful daughter. The goddess

Kali¹ dances on the corpses of slain men. Samson, whom no man could conquer, is robbed of his strength by Delilah. Judith beheads Holofernes after giving herself to him. Salome carries the head of John the Baptist on a charger. Witches are burnt because male priests fear the work of the devil in them. Wedekind's 'Earth Spirit' destroys every man who succumbs to her charm, not because she is particularly evil, but simply because it is her nature to do so. The series of such instances is infinite: always, everywhere the man strives to rid himself of his dread of women by objectifying it: 'It is not', he says, 'that I dread her; it is that she herself is malignant, capable of any crime, a beast of prey, a vampire, a witch, insatiable in her desires. She is the very personification of what is sinister'. May not this be one of the principal roots of the whole masculine impulse to creative work—the never-ending conflict between the man's longing for the woman and his dread of her?²

¹ See Daly's account in his article: 'Hindumythologie und Kastrationskomplex', *Imago*, Bd. XIII, 1927.

² Sachs explains the impulse to artistic creation as the search for companions in guilt. In this, I think, he is right, but he does not seem to me to go deeply enough into the question, since his explanation is one-sided

To primitive sensibilities the woman becomes doubly sinister in the presence of the bloody manifestations of her womanhood. Contact with her during menstruation is fatal³: men lose their strength, the pastures wither away, the fisherman and the huntsman take nothing. Defloration involves the utmost danger to the man. As Freud shows in 'The Taboo of Virginity',⁴ it is the husband in particular who dreads this act. In this work Freud too objectifies this anxiety, contenting himself with a reference to the castration-impulses which do actually occur in women. There are two reasons why this is not an

adequate explanation of the phenomenon of the taboo itself. In the first place, women do not so universally react to defloration with castration-impulses recognizable as such : these impulses are probably confined to women with a strongly developed masculine attitude. And, secondly, even if defloration invariably aroused destructive impulses in the woman, we should still have to lay bare (as we should do in every individual analysis) the urgent impulses within the man himself which make him view the first—forcible—penetration of the vagina as so perilous an undertaking ; so perilous, indeed, that it can be performed with impunity only by a man of might or by a stranger who chooses to risk his life or his manhood for a recompense.

Is it not really remarkable (we ask ourselves in amazement), when one considers the overwhelming mass of this transparent material, that so little recognition and attention are paid to the fact of men's secret dread of women ? It is almost more remarkable that women themselves have so long been able to overlook it ; I will discuss in detail elsewhere the reasons for their attitude in this connection (i.e. their own anxiety and the impairment of their self-respect). The man on his side has in the first place very obvious strategic reasons for keeping his dread quiet. But he also tries by every means to deny it even to himself. This is the purpose of the efforts to which we have alluded, to 'objectify' it in artistic and scientific creative work. We may conjecture that even his glorification of women has its source not only in the cravings of love, but also in his desire to give the lie to his dread.

and takes into account only part of the whole personality, namely, the super-ego. (Sachs: *Gemeinsame Tagträume*, Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag.)

* Cf. Daly : 'Der Menstruationscomplex', *Imago*, Bd. XIV, 1928 ; and Winterstein : 'Die Pubertätsriten der Mädchen und ihre Spuren im Märchen', *Imago*, Bd. XIV, 1928.

† Freud : 'The Taboo of Virginity' (1918), *Collected Papers*, Vol. IV.

A similar relief is, however, also sought and found in the disparagement of women which men often display ostentatiously in all their attitude. The attitude of love and adoration signifies: 'There is no need for me to dread a being so wonderful, so beautiful, nay, so saintly'; that of disparagement implies: 'It would be too ridiculous to dread a creature who, if you take her all round, is such a poor thing'.⁵ This last way of allaying his anxiety has a special advantage for the man: it helps to support his masculine self-respect. The latter seems to feel itself far worse threatened—far more threatened at its very core—by the admission of a dread of women than by the admission of dread of a man (the father). The reason why the self-feeling of men is so peculiarly sensitive just in relation to women can only be understood by reference to their early development, to which I shall return later.

In analysis this dread of women is revealed quite clearly. Male homosexuality has for its basis, in common indeed with all the other perversions, the desire to escape from the female genital, or to deny its very existence. Freud has shewn that this is a fundamental trait in fetishism,⁶ in particular; he believes it, however, to be based not on anxiety, but on a feeling of abhorrence due to the absence of the penis in women. I think, however, that even from his account we are absolutely forced to the conclusion that there is anxiety at work as well. What we actually see is dread of the vagina, thinly disguised under the abhorrence. Only *anxiety* is a strong enough motive to hold back from his goal a man whose libido is assuredly urging him on to union with the woman. But Freud's account fails to explain this anxiety. A boy's castration-anxiety in relation to his father is not an adequate reason for his dread of a being whom this punishment has already overtaken. Besides the dread of the father there must be a further dread, the object of which is the woman or the female genital. Now this dread of the vagina itself appears unmistakably not only in

homosexuals and perverts, but also in the dreams of every male analysand. All analysts are familiar with dreams of this sort and I need only give the merest outline of them: e.g. a motor-car is rushing

⁵ I well remember how surprised I was myself the first time I heard the above ideas asserted—by a man—in the shape of a universal proposition. The speaker was Groddeck, who obviously felt that he was stating something quite self-evident when he remarked in conversation: 'Of course men are afraid of women'. In his writings Groddeck has repeatedly emphasized this fear.

⁶ Freud: 'Fetishism', this JOURNAL, Vol. IX, 1928.

along and suddenly falls into a pit and is dashed to pieces; or a boat is sailing in a narrow channel and is suddenly sucked into a whirlpool; there is a cellar with uncanny, blood-stained plants and animals, or one is climbing a chimney and is in danger of falling and being killed.

Dr. Baumeyer, of Dresden,⁷ allows me to cite a series of experiments which arose out of a chance observation and which illustrate this dread of the vagina. The physician was playing ball with the children at a treatment-centre and, after a time, shewed them that the ball had a slit in it. She pulled the edges of the slit apart and put her finger in, so that it was held fast by the ball. Of 28 boys whom she asked to do the same, only 6 did it without fear and 8 could not be induced to do it at all. Of 19 girls 9 put their fingers in without a trace of fear; the rest showed a slight uneasiness but none of them serious anxiety.

No doubt the dread of the vagina often conceals itself behind the dread of the father, which is also present; or, in the language of the unconscious, behind the dread of the penis in the woman's vagina.⁸

There are two reasons for this: in the first place, as I have already said, masculine self-regard suffers less in this way, and, secondly, the dread of the father is more actual and tangible, less uncanny in quality.

We might compare the difference to that between the fear of a real enemy and of a ghost. The prominence given to the anxiety relating to the castrating father is therefore tendentious, as Groddeck has shewn, for example, in his analysis of the thumb-sucker in *Struwwelpeter*: it is a man who cuts off the thumb, but it is the mother who utters the threat, and the instrument with which it is carried out—the scissors—is a female symbol.

From all this I think it probable that the masculine dread of the woman (the mother) or of the female genital is more deep-seated, weighs more heavily and is usually more energetically repressed than the dread of the man (father), and that the endeavour to find the penis

⁷ The experiments were conducted by Frä. Dr. Hartung at a children's clinic in Dresden.

⁸ Boehm: 'Beiträge zur Psychologie der Homosexualität', *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse*, XI, 1925. Melanie Klein: 'Early Stages of the Œdipus Conflict', this JOURNAL, Vol. IX, 1928; 'The Importance of Symbol-Formation in the Development of the Ego', this JOURNAL, Vol. XI, 1930; 'Infantile Anxiety-Situations reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse', this JOURNAL, 1929, Vol. X, p. 436.

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in women represents first and foremost a convulsive attempt to deny the existence of the sinister female genital.

Is there any ontogenetic explanation of this anxiety? Or is it not rather (in human beings) an integral part of masculine existence and behaviour? Is any light shed upon it by the state of lethargy—even the death—after mating which occurs frequently in male animals? ⁹ Are love and death more closely bound up with one another for the male than for the female, in whom sexual union potentially produces a new life? Does the man feel side by side with his desire to conquer

new life? Does the man feel, side by side with his desire to conquer, a secret longing for extinction in the act of reunion with the woman (mother)? Is it perhaps this longing which underlies the 'death-instinct'? And is it his will to live which reacts to it with anxiety?

If we endeavour to understand this anxiety in psychological and ontogenetic terms, we find ourselves rather at a loss if we take our stand on Freud's notion that what distinguishes infantile from adult sexuality is precisely that the vagina remains 'undiscovered' for the child. According to that view, we cannot properly speak of a genital primacy: we must rather term it a primacy of the phallus. Hence it would be better to describe the period of infantile genital organization as the 'phallic phase'.¹⁰ The many recorded remarks of boys at that period of life leave no doubt of the correctness of the observations on which Freud's theory is based. But if we look more closely at the essential characteristics of this phase, we cannot help asking whether his description really sums up infantile genitality as such, in its specific manifestation, or applies only to a relatively later phase of it. Freud states that it is characteristic that the boy's interest is concentrated in a markedly narcissistic manner on his own penis: 'The driving force which this male portion of his body will generate later at puberty expresses itself in childhood essentially as an impulsion to inquire into things—as sexual curiosity'. A very important part is played by questions as to the existence and size of the phallus in other living beings.

But surely the essence of the phallic impulses proper, starting as they do from organ sensations, is a desire to *penetrate*. That these impulses do exist can hardly be doubted: they manifest themselves too plainly in children's games and in the analysis of little children.

⁹ Bergmann: *Muttergeist und Erkenntnisgeist*.

¹⁰ Freud: 'The Infantile Genital Organization of the Libido' (1923), *Collected Papers*, Vol. II.

Again, it would be difficult to say what the boy's sexual wishes in relation to his mother really consisted in if not in these very impulses ; or why the object of his masturbation-anxiety should be the father as the castrator, were it not that masturbation was largely the autoerotic expression of heterosexual phallic impulses.

In the ' phallic phase ' the boy's psychic orientation is predominantly narcissistic : hence the period in which his genital impulses are directed towards an object must be an earlier one. The possibility that they are not directed towards a female genital, of which he instinctively divines the existence, must certainly be considered. In dreams, both of earlier and later life, as well as in symptoms and particular modes of behaviour, we find, it is true, representations of coitus which are oral, anal, or sadistic without specific localization. But we cannot take this as a proof of the primacy of corresponding impulses, for we are uncertain whether, or how far, these phenomena already express a displacement from the genital goal proper. At bottom all that they amount to is to shew that a given individual is influenced by specific oral, anal or sadistic trends. Their evidential value is the less because these representations are always associated with certain affects directed against women, so that we cannot tell whether they may not be essentially the product or the expression of these affects. For instance, the tendency to debase women may express itself in anal representations of the female genital, while oral representations may express anxiety.

But, besides all this, there are various reasons why it seems to me improbable that the existence of a specific female opening should remain ' undiscovered '. On the one hand, of course, a boy will automatically conclude that everyone else is made like himself ; but on the other hand his phallic impulses surely bid him instinctively to search for the appropriate opening in the female body — an opening,

moreover, which he himself lacks, for the one sex always seeks in the other that which is complementary to it or of a nature different from its own. If we seriously accept Freud's dictum that the sexual theories formed by children are modelled on their own sexual constitution, it must surely mean in the present connection that the boy, urged on by his impulses to penetrate, pictures in phantasy a complementary female organ. And this is just what we should infer from all the material I quoted at the outset in connection with the masculine dread of the female genital.

It is not at all probable that this anxiety dates only from puberty.

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At the beginning of that period the anxiety manifests itself quite clearly, if we look behind the often very exiguous façade of boyish pride which conceals it. At puberty a boy's task is obviously not merely to free himself from his incestuous attachment to his mother, but, more generally, to master his dread of the whole female sex. His success is as a rule only gradual: first of all he turns his back on girls altogether, and only when his masculinity is fully awakened does it drive him over the threshold of anxiety. But we know that as a rule the conflicts of puberty do but revive, *mutatis mutandis*, conflicts belonging to the early ripening of infantile sexuality and that the course they take is often essentially a faithful copy of a series of earlier experiences. Moreover, the grotesque character of the anxiety, as we meet with it in the symbolism of dreams and literary productions, points unmistakably to the period of early infantile phantasy.

At puberty a normal boy has already acquired a conscious knowledge of the vagina, but what he fears in women is something uncanny, unfamiliar and mysterious. If the grown man continues to regard woman as the great mystery, in whom is a secret he cannot divine, this feeling of his can only relate ultimately to one thing in her: the

mystery of motherhood. Everything else is merely the residue of his dread of this.

What is the origin of this anxiety? What are its characteristics? And what are the factors which cloud the boy's early relations with his mother?

In an article on female sexuality¹¹ Freud has pointed out the most obvious of these factors: it is the mother who first forbids instinctual activities, because it is she who tends the child in its babyhood. Secondly, the child evidently experiences sadistic impulses against its mother's body,¹² presumably connected with the rage evoked by her prohibitions, and according to the talion principle this anger has left behind a residue of anxiety. Finally—and this is perhaps the principal point—the specific fate of the genital impulses itself constitutes another such factor. The anatomical differences between the sexes lead to a totally different situation in girls and in boys, and really to understand both their anxiety and the diversity of their anxiety we must take into account first of all *the children's real situation* in the period of their

¹¹ This JOURNAL, *ante*, p. 281.

¹² Cf. the work of Melanie Klein, quoted above, to which I think insufficient attention has been paid.

early sexuality. The girl's nature as biologically conditioned gives her the desire to receive, to take into herself;¹³ she feels or knows that her genital is too small for her father's penis and this makes her react to her own genital wishes with direct anxiety: she dreads that if her wishes were fulfilled, she herself or her genital would be destroyed.¹⁴

The boy, on the other hand, feels or instinctively judges that his penis is much too small for his mother's genital and reacts with the dread of his own inadequacy, of being rejected and derided. Thus he

experiences anxiety which is located in quite a different quarter from the girl's : his original dread of women is not castration-anxiety at all, but a reaction to the menace to his self-respect.¹⁵

In order that there may be no misunderstanding let me emphasize that I believe these processes to take place purely instinctively on a basis of organ sensations and the tensions of organic needs ; in other words, I hold that these reactions would occur even if the girl had never seen her father's penis or the boy his mother's genital, and neither had any sort of intellectual knowledge of the existence of these genitalia.

Because of this reaction on the part of the boy, he is affected in another way and more severely by his frustration at the hands of his mother than is the girl by her experience with her father. A blow is struck at the libidinal impulses in either case. But the girl has a certain consolation in her frustration : she preserves her physical integrity ; whereas the boy is hit in a second sensitive spot—his sense of genital inadequacy, which has presumably accompanied his libidinal desires from the beginning. If we assume that the most general reason for violent anger is the foiling of impulses which at the moment are of vital importance, it follows that the boy's frustration by his mother must arouse a twofold fury in him : first through the thrusting back of his libido upon itself and, secondly, through the wounding of his masculine self-regard. At the same time old resentment springing from pregenital frustrations is probably also made to flare up again. The result is that his phallic impulses to penetrate merge with his anger at frustration, and the impulses take on a sadistic tinge.

Here let me emphasize a point which is often insufficiently brought out in psycho-analytical literature, namely, that we have no reason to

¹³ This is not to be equated with passivity.

¹⁴ In another paper I will discuss the girl's situation more fully.

¹⁵ I would refer here also to the points I raised in a paper entitled ' Das Misstrauen zwischen den Geschlechtern ', *Die psychoanalytische Bewegung*, 1930.

assume that these phallic impulses are naturally sadistic and that therefore it is inadmissible, in the absence of specific evidence in each case, to equate 'male' with 'sadistic', and on similar lines 'female' with 'masochistic'. If the admixture of destructive impulses is really considerable, the mother's genital must, according to the talion principle, become an object of direct anxiety. Thus, if it is first made distasteful to him by its association with wounded self-regard, it will by a secondary process (by way of frustration-anger) become an object of castration-anxiety. And probably this is very generally reinforced when the boy observes traces of menstruation.

Very often this latter anxiety in its turn leaves a lasting mark on the man's attitude to women, as we learn from the examples already given at random from very different periods and races. But I do not think that it occurs regularly in all men in any considerable degree, and certainly it is not a *distinctive* characteristic of the man's relation to the other sex. Anxiety of this sort strongly resembles, *mutatis mutandis*, anxiety which we meet with in women. When in analysis we find it occurring in any noteworthy intensity, the subject is invariably a man whose whole attitude towards women has a markedly neurotic twist.

On the other hand I think that the anxiety connected with his self-respect leaves more or less distinct traces in every man and gives to his general attitude to women a particular stamp which either does not exist in women's attitude to men or, if it does, is acquired secondarily. In other words, it is no integral part of their feminine nature.

We can only grasp the general significance of this male attitude if we study more closely the development of the boy's infantile anxiety, his efforts to overcome it and the ways in which it manifests itself.

According to my experience the dread of being rejected and derided is a typical ingredient in the analysis of every man, no matter what his mentality or the structure of his neurosis. The analytic situation and the constant reserve of the woman against him set this anxiety and