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A Return to Freud's "Complete Oedipus Complex": Reclaiming the Negative

Criticism of psychoanalysis by feminists, queer theorists and others has long targeted Freud's Oedipus Complex. Writers from Luce Irigaray in *Speculum de L'autre Femme* (1978) to Carol Gilligan in *The Birth of Pleasure* (2004) have renounced Oedipal theory as not simply flawed but positively harmful—reproducing the culture of envy, violence, and heterocentrism it purports to describe.

The charge of heteronormativity, while not baseless, is actually more salient in post-Freudian perspectives (e.g., Bergler, 1956; Socarides, 1995; Khan, 1989) than in Freud. What the former hold in common is the belief that homosexuality is a bad outcome of Oedipal and/or pre-Oedipal exchanges. Analysis must discover what went wrong, not what went right.

Those who would do away with the complex entirely, however, tend to define it narrowly—ignoring Freud's most useful elaboration—thus reducing it to what I have called "Oedipus Simplex" (Luepnitz, 2019). For example, they sidestep his 1923 description of the "complete Oedipus Complex" with its "positive" and "negative" sides. I will summarize that Freudian paradigm and add Jacques Lacan's 1953 elaboration, before moving to contemporary examples.

One of the first references to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in Freud's writing comes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where, after summarizing the action of the play, he explains that: "[A] girl's first affection is for her father, and a boy's first childish desires are for his mother. Accordingly, the father becomes a disturbing rival for the boy and the mother to the girl" (1899, p. 257). However, 20 years on, Freud writes:

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> Closer study usually discloses the more complete Oedipus complex, which is twofold, positive and negative, and is due to the bisexuality originally present in children; that is to say that a boy has not merely an ambivalent attitude towards his father, and an affectionate object choice towards his mother, but at the same time he also behaves like a girl and displays an affectionate feminine attitude to his father and a corresponding jealousy and hostility towards his mother. (1923, p. 33)

Let's set aside for a moment the fact that Freud breaks open a gendered assumption here only to re-inscribe it. (Male children will form erotic attachments to male parents, but in so doing, they are acting like girls.) I wish to focus instead on the paradigm's expansion, which is hardly insignificant. Its roots go back to his 1899/1923 letter to Fliess: "Bisexuality! I am sure you are right about it. And I am accustoming myself to regarding every sexual act as an event between four individuals" (p. 33). And in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), he had written:

> All human beings are capable of making a homosexual object-choice, and have in fact done so in their unconscious [. . .] Thus [. . .] the exclusive sexual interest felt by men for women is also a problem that needs elucidating and not a self-evident fact. (p. 145)

Many psychotherapy colleagues over the years have told me they knew nothing of the negative Oedipus, or believed it was something Freud mentioned only in passing (Luepnitz, 2002). This is far from true, as illustrations of it run through his clinical histories. Recall that in the case of Little Hans, Freud reports that the child—on catching a glimpse of his father naked to the waist—says coyly: "Daddy you *are* lovely" (1909, p. 53). At the same time, Hans insists both he and his father will have babies. The father counters: "Boys don't have children. Only women—only Mummies have children." Hans is undeterred: "Oh yes, you'll have one all right. Just you wait." The father replies: "I shall have to wait a long time" (p. 87).

Further evidence of the importance of the negative Oedipus comes from Abram Kardiner's memoir, *My Analysis with Freud: Reminiscences* (1977), written when the author was 86. What stands out for him, more than 50 years after termination, is Freud's interest in his negative Oedipus complex. Kardiner, for some reason, calls this the "homosexuality complex" although Freud never used that term. Kardiner becomes obsessed with it, and apparently feared that Freud meant his fate was to love men, not women. He decided to talk with some of the other analysands at 19 Berggasse. Kardiner wrote: "In comparing notes with other students, I discovered that, as with the Oedipus complex, unconscious homosexuality was a part of everyone's analysis. It consumed a good part of the rest of *my* analysis" (1977, p. 61).

When Kardiner asks Freud what he is supposed to do about his erotic strivings for father and rivalry with mother, Freud replies that, just as with the positive Oedipus complex, "You come to terms with it. You reconcile yourself to it" (1977, p. 61).

Kardiner suspects that Freud is responding to the fact that at age 31, he was still single. He tells us:

> I had often thought of my bachelorhood as connected with the previous injuries inflicted on me by my mother's death [. . .] Freud, however, did not make much of my unwed state. He dismissed that matter with a hope that someday I would be lucky enough to make a good marriage. His choice of words surprised me. I inquired: "Does it require *luck* if you know so much about people?" He replied that it most certainly did, because how much can you really know about anyone until you have lived together, and furthermore it takes many years of living with someone to really get to know that person. (1977, p. 101)

I have quoted this at some length to counter the lingering view of psychoanalysis as a *discipline* in the Foucauldian sense, with Freud as the enforcer of heterosexuality and the small family. In his patients' memoirs, we see a very different picture.

Freud never took the step I suggest and posit that adult heterosexual identity reflects a dominance of the positive Oedipal complex, and homosexual identity a dominance of the negative, with bisexuality corresponding to a non-dominance of either side—but he did give us the means of coming to such a conclusion.

It could be argued that I am trying too hard to make Freud progressive. Sigmund Freud was not a feminist. In fact, what we find in Freud is a radical sensibility, continually undercut by a normative undertow. A good illustration is this oft-cited letter to a mother concerned about her bachelor son:

> Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation; it cannot be classified as an illness; we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function, produced by a certain arrest of sexual development. Many highly respectable individuals of ancient and modern times have been homosexual, several of the greatest men among them (Plato, Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, etc.). It is a great injustice to persecute homosexuality as a crime—and a cruelty, too [. . .] If he is unhappy, neurotic, torn by conflicts [. . .] psychoanalysis may bring him peace of mind, full efficiency [. . .] (1935/1960, p. 423)

Where some of us might see in the example of this young man a simple dominance of the same-sex over the cross-sex side of the Oedipus complex, Freud sees "arrested development" which sounds pathological. On the other hand, it's important to remember that Freud—who gave us the notion of "the psychopathology of everyday life"—privileged normality less than most theorists of modern times. If some of the "greatest men" of "ancient and modern times" have had arrested development, we are entitled to ask just how bad arrested development must be!

In "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" (1920), Freud made it clear that the 17-year-old in question was in no way "ill." She was simply in love with a woman—an older woman of ill repute at that—to the consternation of her parents. The poet H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) was an out lesbian mother analyzed by Freud in the 1920s. She clearly

felt deeply understood by Freud and her memoir of analysis with him contains no hint of his pathologizing her erotic life. H. D.'s partner, Annie Ellerman, was analyzed by Hans Sachs, who wrote, in a reassuring letter to her—very much in the Freudian spirit—"Respectability and ps.a. [sic] are not to be reconciled" (1930, as cited in Magee & Miller, 1999, p. 10). Sachs, in fact, encouraged Ellerman enthusiastically in her desire to train as an analyst.

Accentuate the Negative

As a clinician, I find it helpful to make interventions based on the assumption of a two-sided—even multi-faceted—Oedipus complex. We grow up not just in one or two, but in multiple psychosexual triangles.

Many gay and lesbian patients during their treatment, come to associate their choice of partners not—or not simply—with disinterest in the other sex, but with a fascination with the body of the same-sex parent and a desire to possess him or her exclusively. It can be helpful for a gay man to link his adult desires with memories of being carried in his father's strong arms, or admiring his agility, rather than to blame a "domineering mother" (Lewes, 1988). Many lesbians will connect the lust for beautiful women with the mother's soft skin, characteristic smell, musical laugh. It's important, however, that clinicians be attentive to both sides of the complex with *all* patients—not just those who identify as queer—as the Kardiner example illustrates so well.

What about the terms "positive" and "negative"? The connotations of good and bad are strong enough to make some readers reject the construct from the start. Davies (2006) affirms the value of the two-sided Oedipus but prefers the terms "primary" and "secondary." This solves one problem but creates another, i.e., how to describe those who remain bisexual. I prefer "same-sex" and "cross-sex" for the two sides of the complex, but instead of a phobic rejection of the original terms, some reflection on them is in order. The positive and negative ends of a battery are not good and bad; they are equally important to the making of a complete battery. A photographic negative

can be more precious than the positive, as it can generate multiple images. "Negative capability"—Keats' term for the ability to hold on to doubt instead of leaping to judgment—is something for which all reflective persons strive.

In philosophical terms, negativity typically opposes empiricism. For example, it stands in contrast to logical positivism which maintains that if something exists, it exists in quantity, and that whatever exists in quantity can be measured. Note all that positivism can exclude from the realm of inquiry: the unconscious, the spiritual, even the phenomenological.

When Jacqueline Rose wrote "Negativity in the Work of Melanie Klein" (1983), she was lauding not only Klein's insistence on the destructive drives, but also on an under-appreciated aspect of Kleinian theory—a theory often criticized as reductionist. That aspect has to do with the role of *object loss* in the emergence of the ego. Similarly, when André Green (2000) wrote about "negativity" in the work of Donald Winnicott, he was paying the latter a huge compliment, putting him on an intellectual par with Jacques Lacan.

Lacan and Oedipus

One of Lacan's best-known concepts is "*le nom du père*"—the father's "name" or "no" needed to interrupt the child's original jouissance with the mother. It's a useful concept which makes clear that in order for the child to move towards subjectivity, neither a biological nor adoptive father is *sine que non*. The necessary interdiction can be delivered by another adult, or even through the mother's own speech. What Lacan saw as crucial was that the mother be able to *desire* something other than her child; it can be the child's father, her wife, lover, God—or her work. It's clear why some consider Lacan to be the "Anti-Winnicott" (Cf. Luepnitz, 2009). That is: Winnicott famously described the ideal mother-baby state as one of "primary maternal preoccupation," whereas Lacan felt that the *worst* thing a mother could do would be to make the child her whole world. Lacan understood very well the important place that flesh and blood fathers hold in many families. He was not gainsaying that importance, but instead insisting on the more elemental mat-

ter of the child's entry into the Symbolic register. In so doing, Lacan helps us account for the innumerable normal/neurotic adults of every historical period, racial group and class position who grew up with a single parent (Luepnitz, 2003).

This does pose a challenge for theory, however, for what does it mean to imply that fathers are both *crucial* and *non-essential*?

Consider the example of a middle-aged patient who was referred for anxiety. "Michael" had been raised by a single mother as a young boy and by mother plus stepfather as an adolescent. He was African-American and very conscious of the cultural bias against Black families. He imagined that I would see his family as defective, although he had clearly felt safe, loved, and valued by them. His own reflection at the end of treatment bears repeating: "*Not* having a father is not as bad as *having* a father is good!" One might add: As having a *good-enough* father—a "decent Daddy," as Elijah Anderson (1999) puts it—is good.

"Go to your poets!" said Freud famously on the topic of feminine sexuality. I don't mean to romanticize single mothers or underestimate the Oedipal dilemmas of poor parents and their children. An exquisite description of family dynamics emerges in Maya Angelou's poetic memoir, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (1969), about growing up in the small town of Stamps, Arkansas. She describes as follows the relationship between her mother and beloved older brother:

> Mother and Bailey were entangled in the Oedipal skein. Neither could do without or do with the other; yet the constrictions of conscience and society, morality and ethos dictated a separation. On some flimsy excuse, Mother ordered Bailey out of the house. On an equally flimsy excuse, he complied. Bailey was sixteen, small for his age, bright for any and hopelessly in love with Mother Dear. Her heroes were her friends, and her friends were big men in the rackets. They wore two-hundred-dollar Chesterfield coats [. . .] How could a sixteen-year-old boy hope to compete with such overshadowing rivals? [. . .] I had been left out of their power/love struggles. (pp. 218–219)

There is plenty of evidence that young Maya, too, is hopelessly in love with Mother Dear. She never stops describing the latter's beauty, and in this infatuation, experiences her brother as a rival. As she goes on to reveal fears about lesbianism, the reader senses a link with her feelings for mother—even though she doesn't use the term "negative Oedipus."

Angelou mentions being beset at a certain age by a fear that there was something wrong with her vagina, and that whatever it was, it meant she was a lesbian. Teenage Maya nervously puts the question to her mother one day while they are relaxing in bed together. Mother Dear listens and reassures, without judgment. Maya nonetheless feels compelled to have sex with a boy as soon as possible and winds up pregnant. She reasons: "[I]f I could have a baby, I obviously wasn't a lesbian" (1969, p. 241). Clinician readers might suspect that a bit of help normalizing her negative Oedipal strivings could have lowered anxiety and led to a different outcome.

Jacques Lacan has something important to offer this discussion, because as early as 1953, he was claiming: "The whole Oedipal schema needs to be re-examined." He reminds us that even in the cases of Oedipus and Hamlet—the two most widely discussed "patients" in the canon—we find more than a simple set of parents (Lacan, 1979, p. 422). He prefers to think of Oedipal structure in terms of a quartet. Lacan writes: "All of that results in the mythic quartet [. . .] What is the fourth element? Its name is death" (p. 424).

And as early as *Seminar II* (1954–1955/1988), Lacan pointed to *Oedipus at Colonus* as a story more crucial than *Oedipus Rex* for clinical practice. *Colonus* begins with Oedipus blinded and in self-exile from Thebes. Its main theme—the subject's relation to death and loss—goes to the heart of analytic treatment. While *Oedipus Rex* ends with the protagonist in a paroxysm of self-hatred, *Colonus* ends with self-examination and with what one might call redemption. He says to King Theseus: "I come to give you something/ and the gift is my own beaten self; no feast for the eyes; Yet in me is a more lasting grace than beauty" (Sophocles, lines 576–579).

Thinking with Lacan, we might conclude that, whether the subject is straight, gay, bisexual, intersex, transgender, she-male,

gender-queer, two-spirit, logosexual, quasbian, non-binary or robosexual—wherever one stands in what I call the sexual diaspora—we, as speaking beings, divided subjects, are embarked, like Oedipus, on a journey involving mistaken identity. Analysis sets the stage for such investigation to begin. It must always go beyond "mommy, daddy, and me" to include step-parents, siblings, nannies and—very importantly—to generations preceding the subject's birth. In his work on Sophocles' *Antigone,* Lacan gives us the concept of the family *atè*—the family madness or curse—passed down to each person openly and via the unconscious.

It's true that the "inter-generational transmission of trauma" has become a catchphrase in contemporary therapies—those that claim psychoanalytic origins, and those that don't. I simply want to make the historical point that as early as the 1950s, Lacan was insisting that no suffering subject could be understood without recourse to at least two generations. In this, he may have been reacting against the habit of Winnicott and the British Middle Group to focus squarely on the parents—and especially the mother.

Nowhere in the brilliant and flinty oeuvre of Donald Winnicott do we find a reference to grandparents. My interviews with people analyzed by Winnicott himself revealed that this gap was reflected in his practice (Luepnitz, 2009; 2017). Freud's references to Sophocles' *Oedipus* unfortunately did not delve into the history of Laius' relationship with his own father, Labdacus. But in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud did introduce us to what we now call "the intergenerational transmission of pathology":

> The experiences of the ego seem at first to be lost for inheritance; but when they have been repeated often enough and with sufficient strength in many individuals in successive generations, they transform themselves, so to say, into experiences of the id, the impressions of which are preserved by heredity. Thus in the id, which is capable of being inherited, are harbored residues of the existence of countless egos [. . .] (p. 28)

Is the Oedipus complex—even in its less shrunken, more complete forms—worth saving? Critics are right to point to changes in family structure since Freud, and to ask, furthermore, how one even speaks of "same-sex" or "cross sex" attractions with people who refuse normative signifiers of gender? One has only to think of Ned Beatty—a trans man who decided to use his still functional uterus to bear a child with his female partner. He said that after childbirth, he intended to live as the baby's father, while his wife would be the mother. Perhaps little Hans was right all along when he said that fathers, too, can have babies. (Hans: "You'll have one all right; just you wait.")

Finally, on the side of retaining the complex, I want to mention a play titled *Oedipus at Palm Springs* (2010) written and performed by a group called "The Five Lesbian Brothers." The play revolves around two contemporary lesbian couples who enact the Oedipal drama: the first struggles with the triangle of two parents plus young child and the second couple with the horror of uncovering a story of mistaken family identity. The dialogue is written to echo Sophocles'. In the climactic scene, the women's white tennis dresses become Athenian togas, and their cries and reproaches are mournful as those of the ancient chorus.

Why would this talented lesbian theater company—who could have chosen any conceit for their play—not pick a different myth? Why Oedipus? As the poet Robert Perelman says wryly, "If only the story would leave us alone" (1999, p. 31).[1]

Perhaps we should try harder to shake off this gruesome tale and start over. But starting over is often confused with starting from scratch—as though we could write outside the limits of language with its historical, mythic freight. Such wishful thinking might be called the myth of mythlessness.

I would add, moreover, that not everyone who is eager to get rid of Oedipal theory is progressive. On the contrary, as Elizabeth Danto reminds us in *Freud's Free Clinics* (2005), the Nazis, who deplored Freud's "Jewish science," were not against psychology per se. When, in 1936, they took over the free clinic in Berlin, they "Aryanized" the treatment. Classical constructs "[. . .] were replaced with desexualized, pre-Freudian words: *Oedipal* conflicts were changed to *family* conflicts and the term 'psychoanalysis' itself became *developmental psychology*" (p. 301;

emphasis in original). Under the Reich, free treatment was stopped. Treatments were shorter, and the new motto was "healing and extermination" (p. 281).

Some of us love the word "psychoanalysis." It derives from the Greek noun—*psyche,* meaning soul or mind, and the verb *analyein,* meaning to loosen or untie. In psychoanalysis we loosen the knots of the psyche. This recalls Maya Angelou's reference to "the Oedipal *skein*," meaning loops of yarn. A *yarn*, of course, is also a *story,* and the Oedipal yarn—notoriously binding.[2] On the one hand, we must not get so tied up in the familial that we lose sight of the social. On the other hand, if it is the case that the story of Oedipus could speak to ordinary Athenians in the 5th century BCE, and to Freud, and to Lacan, and to our beloved poet from Stamps, Arkansas, and to the Five Lesbian Brothers, it may be spacious enough to remain useful. But in its fullest forms, please: Sophoclean, Freudian, Lacanian, Lesbian, and more. Always accentuating the negative with the positive.

Notes

1. The Oedipus story won't even leave *The Simpsons* alone. There are multiple allusions in the series to the cross-sex Oedipus, e.g., the episode titled: "Homer's Oedipus Nightmare" wherein Bart beheads Homer and marries Marge, to reign as King and Queen. Fans have long puzzled over the erotically tinged devotion of Waylon Smithers, Jr., to his boss, the cruel Mr. Burns. The backstory explains that Mr. Burns once had enough heart to care briefly for Smithers as a young child when his biological father died (Season 13, Episode 5). The latter perished heroically, attempting to save his son and the entire town of Springfield from a nuclear reactor accident. The fact that Burns served as the only father figure young Smithers knew might account for the latter's intense attachment, and Freud's same-sex Oedipus complex could explain the erotic tinge. (Smithers uses a naked picture of Mr. Burns as his screensaver.) Smithers is always coded gay, and officially comes out in Season 27, Episode 17.
2. The word "complex" comes from the Latin "plectere" meaning to braid or weave. Angelou's substitution of "skein" for "complex" is thus uncannily apt.

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