

PERSONAL TURBULENCE, SEXUAL TROUBLES

It has been remarked that 'in all the voluminous literature on sex and sexuality, there is very little on male sexuality as such . . . It seems as if it's so much an accepted part of everyday life that it is invisible.'¹ An eccentric judgement, one might think, given the preoccupation of Freud, and many who came after him, with male sexual experience. Yet if understood, not in terms of sexual activity itself, but in relation to the sentiments and conflicts which sex arouses, the observation makes some sense.

Male sexuality appeared unproblematic in the context of the 'seperate and unequal' social circumstances that prevailed until recently. Its nature was concealed by a range of social influences, all of which have now been, or are being, undermined. They include the following: 1. the domination of men over the public sphere; 2. the double standard; 3. the associated schism of women into pure (marriageable) and impure (prostitutes, harlots, concubines, witches); 4. the understanding of sexual difference as given by God, nature or biology; 5. the problematising of women as opaque or irrational in their desires and actions; 6. the sexual division of labour.

The more these pre-existing social forms become dissolved – although all still have a hold – the more we should expect male sexuality to become troubled and, very often,

compulsive. Male sexual compulsiveness can be understood, as a previous chapter indicated, as an obsessive, but brittle, acting out of routines that have become detached from their erstwhile supports. It forms an 'odyssey' comparable to that of modernity itself, viewed at least from the domain of its public institutions – one which is concerned with control and emotional distance, but which is edged with potential violence.

Sexuality and psychoanalytic theory: preliminary comments

Freud's discovery of plastic sexuality – documented in his *Three Essays* – an extraordinary achievement, sits uneasily with his interpretation of male, as well as female, sexual development. For that development, as Freud describes it, is predicated upon a 'natural' sequence in which erotic energies are directed towards specific objects in the child's environment. If we place an emphasis upon plastic sexuality, and ask just why girls should be envious of boys, rather than taking for granted envy based upon a given physical quality, we can begin to reconstruct the origins of 'maleness' in a different way from Freud himself.

The Oedipal transition, the cornerstone of Freud's mature analysis of psychosexual development, does not appear in a significant way in *Three Essays*. When that work was written the theory of the Oedipus complex had only been formulated in a rudimentary fashion. Thus although Freud later modified the arguments of the *Three Essays* in the light of his subsequent views, the ideas that sexuality has no intrinsic object and that male and female sexuality are functionally equivalent ceded place to the assumption of maleness and male sexuality as the norm. Boys have the advantage that their genitals are visible and are more easily localised as the

source of erotic stimulation. Sexual development is a threatening affair for boys just as it is for girls: being visible, the penis is also vulnerable, and the rivalry of the boy with his father is the basis of an extremely tensionful mixture of loss and the achievement of autonomy. Yet the little girl is a deprived being in a more profound sense, for her visible inadequacy is intrinsic to her existence. She is dispossessed from the start, because she was born 'castrated'; her heterosexuality is gained only in a secondary way, as she learns she can never possess the mother since she lacks a penis. There is no direct route to femininity.

Given the prominence of his notion of penis envy, Freud's writings seem unpromising as a source of inspiration for feminist authors. In fact, the encounter between feminism and psychoanalysis has proved to be the source of important and original contributions to psychological and social theory.² A major division, however, has developed between the work of authors – Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and others – influenced by Jacques Lacan and by the philosophical perspective of post-structuralism, and those – such as Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein or Carol Gilligan – more under the sway of the object-relations school. The differences between these standpoints is in one sense profound, but in another sense can be exaggerated. The less important factor is that which seems on the face of things the most significant: the impact of post-structuralism.

I hope the reader unfamiliar with the debates on these matters will forgive a lapse into a rather more demanding vocabulary over the next two or three paragraphs than I have sought to use in the rest of the text. According to post-structuralist thought, nothing has an essence; everything is structured in the mobile play of signifiers. As refracted through the feminist debate with and use of Freud, this standpoint becomes expressed as a critique of 'essentialism'. If meanings are always defined negatively, through what they are not, then 'sexual identity', or 'self-identity' more

generally, are misnomers: they imply a spurious unity. Such a view finds further support in the Lacanian contention of the 'splitting': the subject only shows itself through misrecognition.

The critique of 'essentialism', in my opinion at any rate, is based upon a misplaced theory of language.³ Meaning is defined through difference, certainly; not in an endless play of signifiers, but in pragmatic contexts of use. There is absolutely no reason why, on the level of logic, acknowledgement of the context-dependent nature of language dissolves continuity of identity. The question of 'essentialism' is a red herring, save as an empirical issue of how far self-identity is tenuous or fragmentary and of how far there are generic qualities which tend to distinguish men from women.

More consequential is the status of the Lacanian thesis, appropriated by at least some feminist authors, that women are specifically excluded from the domain of the symbolic, of language as such. For Irigaray, for example, whatever her other criticisms of Lacan, there is no signifying economy for the feminine: femininity is a 'hole' in a double sense. This position, however, is an artefact of the connection Lacan draws between the symbolic and the 'law of the father', which there seems no good reason to accept. More plausible to suggest, with Chodorow, that 'male language', in so far as it exists, tends to be more instrumental and theoretical than that of women – but that, in some key respects, 'male language' expresses deprivation just as much as dominance. In my discussion here, therefore, I shall draw upon the object-relations approach rather than the Lacanian one. Some of the emphases of Lacanian feminist theory, nevertheless, need to be borne in mind – particularly its insistence upon the fragmentary and contradictory character of sexual identity. Once the post-structuralist lens is cast aside, there is no reason why such emphases cannot be sustained in the context of an object-relations perspective.

Psychosocial development and male sexuality

Following Chodorow, one can affirm that, in the first years of life – particularly and perhaps *only* in contemporary society – the influence of the mother overrides that of the father and other caretakers.⁴ The early experience the child has of the mother is virtually the opposite of the image of a castrated and impotent individual; particularly on an unconscious level, the little boy, and girl, see the mother as all-powerful. An early sense of self-identity, then, together with the potential for intimacy, is first of all developed through identification with a pervasively important female figure. To achieve a consolidated sense of independence, all children must at some point begin to free themselves from the mother's influence and thus disengage from her love. It follows that it is the route to masculinity, rather than to femininity, which is a detour. The origins of male self-identity are bound up with a deep sense of insecurity, a sense of loss that haunts the individual's unconscious memories thereafter. Basic trust, the very source of ontological security, is intrinsically compromised, since the boy is abandoned to the world of men by the very person who was the main loved adult upon whom he could count.

From this point of view, for both sexes the phallus, that imaginary representation of the penis, derives its meaning from the fantasy of female dominance.⁵ It symbolises separation, but also revolt and freedom. In the phase before the Oedipal transition, phallic power comes more from the separation of the spheres of authority of the mother and father than from sheer male preeminence as such. The phallus represents freedom from overwhelming dependence upon the mother as well as the capacity to pull back from her love and attention; it is a key symbol in the child's early search for an independent self-identity. Penis envy, a real phenomenon, as Jessica Benjamin argues, represents

the wish of young children, boys and girls, to identify with the father, as the prime representative of the outside world.⁶ The Oedipal phase, when it arrives, confirms the boy's separation from the mother, but offers the reward of greater freedom – or rather, wilfulness, which is not exactly the same thing – in exchange. Masculinity is thus energetic and striving, yet the energy of the boy covers over a primal loss.

The more the transformation of intimacy proceeds, on an institutional level, the more the Oedipal transition tends to be connected to 'rapprochement': the ability of parents and children to interact on the basis of an understanding of the other's rights and the other's emotions. The question of the 'absent father', first brought up by the Frankfurt School and more recently by male activist groups, can here be seen in a positive rather than a negative light. Less a specifically disciplining figure, because much early discipline is in any case taken over by the mother, the father (or the idealised father figure) has become, in Hans Leowald's terms, more 'generous'.⁷ We find here an intrusion of shame into the development of the male psyche, although, compared with girls, guilt still has a prominent place. At stake is not so much identification with a distinctly punitive figure as a defensive repudiation of nurturance.

The masculine sense of self-identity is thus forged in circumstances in which a drive to self-sufficiency is coupled with a potentially crippling emotional handicap. A narrative of self-identity has to be developed which writes out the pain of the deprivation of early mother-love. No doubt elements of all this are more or less universal, but what is important in the current context is the peculiarly tensionful outcome for male sexuality in a situation where mother-love – if indeed, it is received at all – is simultaneously all-important and forgone. The penis is the phallus, yes, but today in circumstances in which the sustaining of phallic power becomes increasingly focused upon the penis, or rather, genital sexuality, as its main expression.

Understanding masculinity, in modern societies, in this way helps illuminate the typical forms of male sexual compulsiveness. Many men are driven, by means of their scrutiny of women, to search for what is lacking in themselves – and this is a lack that can manifest itself in overt rage and violence. It has become a commonplace in the therapeutic literature to say that men tend to be 'unable to express feelings' or are 'out of touch' with their own emotions. But this is much too crude. Instead, we should say that many men are unable to construct a narrative of self that allows them to come to terms with an increasingly democratised and reordered sphere of personal life.

Male sexuality, compulsiveness, pornography

The frangible nature of male sexuality in modern social circumstances is well documented in contemporary therapeutic case-studies. Heather Formani remarks that 'whatever masculinity is, it is very damaging to men', and the case-study material she discusses provides ample justification for this observation.⁸ Compared with women, more men tend to be sexually restless; yet they also compartmentalise their sexual activity from the parts of their lives in which they are able to find stability and integrity of direction.⁹

The compulsive character of the drive towards episodic sexuality becomes greater in so far as women locate, and reject, their complicity with the hidden emotional dependence of the male. Romantic love, as I have tried to show, always carried within it a protest about such complicity, although in some ways it helped support it. The more women press towards an ethics of confluent love, the more male emotional dependence becomes untenable; but the more difficult it may be for many men to deal with the moral

nakedness which this implies. To the degree to which the phallus actually becomes the penis, male sexuality is liable to be torn between assertive sexual dominance, including the use of violence, on the one hand, and constant anxieties about potency on the other (which are likely to surface most often in relationships of some duration, where sexual performance cannot be isolated from emotional involvements of various kinds).

Male anxiety about sexuality was largely hidden from view so long as the various social conditions that protected it, noted above, were in place. If women's capacity and need for sexual expression were kept carefully under wraps until well into the twentieth century, so also was the concurrent traumatising of the male. Lesley Hall's analysis of letters written by men to Marie Stopes illustrates this vein of sexual inquietude and despair – which is as far from the image of the carefree lecher or impetuous, unbridled sexuality as one can get.¹⁰ Impotence, nocturnal emissions, premature ejaculation, worries about penis size and function – these and other anxieties occur again and again in the letters. Many of the men who contacted Stopes took good care to point out that they were not weaklings, but 'a big man and strong', 'above the average in physical fitness', 'well-built, athletic, physically very strong' and so forth.

Anxiety based on lack of knowledge about sex is a persistent theme, as are chronic sentiments of inferiority and personal confusion. Inability to generate sexual responsiveness in the partner is a common complaint, but so is lack of pleasure on the part of the man. 'Neither of us ever feels that satisfaction in the closest embrace which instinct and reason tell me should be the case', as one individual expressed it.¹¹ Most of the sexual worries Stopes's correspondents felt centred upon either sexual failure or worries about normality; failures in 'manhood' were experienced as threats to a valued relationship, rather than problems expressed in the abstract.

Although I make no pretence to discussing such issues in detail, the foregoing analysis helps make sense both of certain features of mass pornography and important aspects of male sexual violence. Pornography might be regarded as the commodifying of sex, but this would be a very partial view. The current explosion of pornographic material, much of which is primarily directed at men, and for the most part is exclusively consumed by them, closely parallels in form the prevalent concentration upon low emotion, high intensity sex. Heterosexual pornography displays an obsessive concern with standardised scenes and poses in which the complicity of women, substantially dissolved in the actual social world, is reiterated in an unambiguous way.¹² The images of women in soft pornographic magazines – normalised by their insertion in orthodox advertising, non-sexual stories and news items – are objects of desire, but never love. They excite and stimulate and, of course, they are quintessentially episodic.

Female complicity is portrayed in the stylised manner in which women are usually depicted. The 'respectability' of soft pornography is an important part of its appeal, carrying the implication as it does that women are the objects, but not the subjects, of sexual desire. In the visual content of pornographic magazines, female sexuality is neutralised, and the threat of intimacy dissolved. The gaze of the woman is normally directed at the reader: this is actually one of the strictest conventions observed in the presentation of the image. The male who locks on to this gaze must by definition dominate it; the penis here again becomes the phallus, the imperial power which men are able to exert over women. Some pornographic magazines carry columns in which readers' sexual problems are discussed and responded to. But the bulk of the letters in such periodicals are utterly different from those collected by Stopes. In contrast to the problem-oriented letters, they are concerned to document prowess; again, they recount discrete sexual episodes.

In these episodes, one motif is pervasive. It is sexual pleasure, not in fact of the male but of the female, and usually presented in a very particular way. These are tales of women ecstatic in their sexuality, but always under the sway of the phallus. Women whimper, pant and quiver, but the men are silent, orchestrating the events which come to pass. The expressions of female delight are detailed with an attention far in excess of whatever is offered of the male experience itself. The rapture of the women is never in doubt; yet the point of the stories is not to understand or empathise with the sources and nature of female sexual pleasure, rather to tame and isolate it.¹³ Events are described in terms of the reactions of the female, but in such a way as to make feminine desire just as episodic as that of the male. Men thus get to know what women want, and how to cope with female desire, on their own terms.

Pornography easily becomes addictive because of its substitutive character. Women's complicity is ensured, but pornographic representation cannot hold in check the contradictory elements of male sexuality. The sexual pleasure which the female demonstrates comes with a price tag attached – for the creature who can give evidence of such frenzy can also be seen as imposing demands that have to be fulfilled. Failure is not openly displayed, but lurks as the unstated presumption of desire; rage, blame and awe of women are unmistakably mixed with the devotion these stories also betray. The normalising effects of soft pornography probably explain its mass appeal, rather than the fact that more explicit pornographic material may not be as readily available commercially. Hard pornography, in some of its many versions at least, might be more threatening, even though its explicitness may seem to cater most fully to the male 'quest'. Power here is no longer limited by the 'consent of the governed' – the complicit gaze of the woman – but appears as much more open, direct and forcibly imposed. For some, of course, that precisely is its attraction.

Yet hard pornography also operates at the outer borderline of phallic sexuality, disclosing the threatening freedoms of plastic sexuality on the other side.

Male sexual violence

Force and violence are part of all orders of domination. In the orthodox domain of politics, the question arises of how far power is hegemonic, such that violence is resorted to only when the legitimate order breaks down, or how far, alternatively, violence expresses the real nature of state power. A similar debate crops up in the literature concerned with pornography and sexual violence. Some have argued that the growth of hard pornography, particularly where violence is directly represented, depicts the inner truth of male sexuality as a whole.¹⁴ It has further been suggested that violence against women, especially rape, is the main prop of men's control over them.¹⁵ Rape shows the reality of the rule of the phallus.

It seems clear that there is a continuum, not a sharp break, between male violence towards women and other forms of intimidation and harassment. Rape, battering and even the murder of women often contain the same core elements as non-violent heterosexual encounters, the subduing and conquest of the sexual object.¹⁶ Is pornography, then, the theory and rape the practice, as some have declared? In answering this question, it is important to determine if sexual violence is part of the long-standing male oppression of women, or whether it is related to the changes discussed in this book.

The impulse to subordinate and humiliate women, as the preceding discussion of masculine sexuality indicates, is probably a generic aspect of male psychology. Yet it is arguable (although certainly such a view is contentious) that male control of women in pre-modern cultures did not

depend primarily upon the practice of violence against them. It was ensured above all through the 'rights of ownership' over women that men characteristically held, coupled to the principle of separate spheres. Women were often exposed to male violence, particularly within the domestic setting; equally important, however, they were protected from the public arenas within which men subjected one another to violence. This is why, in the pre-modern development of Europe, rape flourished 'mainly on the margins; at the frontiers, in colonies, in states at war and in states of nature; amongst marauding, invading armies'.¹⁷

The list is a formidable one, and horrifying enough in its own way. Yet violence in these circumstances was rarely directed specifically at women: at these 'margins' violence in general was pronounced and rape was one activity among other forms of brutality and slaughter, primarily involving men as destroyers and destroyed. Characteristic of such marginal situations was the fact that women were not as separated from male domains as was normally the case; nor could men ensure their safety.

In modern societies, things are very different. Women live and work in anonymous public settings far more often than they ever did before and the 'separate and unequal' divisions which insulated the sexes have substantially crumbled. It makes more sense in current times than it did previously to suppose that male sexual violence has become a basis of sexual control. In other words, a large amount of male sexual violence now stems from insecurity and inadequacy rather than from a seamless continuation of patriarchal dominance. Violence is a destructive reaction to the waning of female complicity.

Save in conditions of war, men are perhaps today more violent towards women than they are towards one another. There are many types of male sexual violence against women, but at least some have the consequence noted

before: they keep sexuality episodic. This might be the principal – although certainly not the only – trait which links such violence to pornography. If such is the case, it follows that pornographic literature, or a good deal of it, is part of the hegemonic system of domination, with sexual violence being a secondary support rather than an exemplar of phallic power.

Of course, it would be absurd to claim that there is a unitary norm of masculinity, and it would be false to suppose that all men are reluctant to embrace change. Moreover, sexual violence is not confined to the activities of men. Women are quite often physically violent towards men in domestic settings; violence seems a not uncommon feature of lesbian relationships, at least in some contexts. Studies of female sexual violence in the US describe cases of lesbian rape, physical battering and assault with guns, knives and other lethal weapons.¹⁸ Most of the men who wrote to Marie Stopes were concerned to solve their sexual problems in order to increase the satisfaction of their female partners. Many men who regularly visit prostitutes wish to assume a passive, not an active role, whether or not this involves actual masochistic practices. Some gay men find their greatest pleasure in being submissive, but many are also able to switch roles. They have been more successful than most heterosexuals in isolating differential power and confining it to the arena of sexuality as such. 'There are fantasies', as one gay man expresses it, 'that trap us and fantasies that free us . . . Sexual fantasies, when consciously employed, can create a counter-order, a kind of subversion, and a little space into which we can escape, especially when they scramble all those neat and oppressive distinctions between active and passive, masculine and feminine, dominant and submissive.'¹⁹

Female sexuality: the problem of complementarity

If we accepted the principle that each sex is what the other is not, there would be a simple meshing between male and female sexuality. Things are not so clear-cut, because all children share similarities in psychosexual evolution, particularly in the early part of their lives. Whatever the limitations of his ideas when viewed from the perspective of today, Freud was the first to make this apparent. Little girls have a similar erotic history to boys – although for Freud the reason is that their early sexuality, as he put it, 'is of a wholly masculine character'.²⁰ Difference intrudes when both sexes realise that the little girl has something missing; each thinks she has been castrated.

In Freud's view, psychologically speaking there is only one genital organ, that of the male. Although the genitals of the girl are at first a matter of indifference to the boy – until the threat of castration is fantasised – she quickly sees what she lacks is a penis, and wants to have it. Even at the stage of the Oedipus complex the experience of the girl is not directly complementary to that of the boy. For, as Freud puts it, 'it is only in male children that there occurs a fateful simultaneous conjunction of love for one parent and hatred of the other as a rival'.²¹ The girl turns away from the mother, and blames her for her lack of a penis, although she cannot in the same way identify with the father or displace her aggression on to him.

In their 'reversal' of Freud, Chodorow and authors writing from a similar viewpoint introduce greater complementarity than was presumed in the original Freudian account. According to them, the girl preserves those features of psychosexual development which the boy has forgone; the boy develops traits, an instrumental attitude towards the world and so forth, which the girl does not possess, or which are only weakly elaborated. From the beginning, the

mother's relation to a boy is different from that she takes towards a girl. She treats him as more of a distinct being than the girl, who is loved in a more 'narcissistic' fashion.²² Each sex gains, and each loses, although boys lose more. Girls have a stronger sense of gender identity, but a weaker sense of their autonomy and individuality; boys are more capable of independent action, although the emotional price to be paid for this capacity is high.

Pursuing the themes introduced earlier, let me modify and historicise this interpretation, and try to show why an undue emphasis upon complementarity should be avoided. The invention of motherhood creates a situation in which, in the eyes of both the little girl and little boy, the mother is perceived as more all-powerful, as well as all-loving, than was the case in earlier generations. That power and love, however, are also associated with greater respect for the autonomy of the child, even very early on in life, than was previously typical (although there are many empirical instances in which such respect is largely withheld).

The break with the mother on the part of the boy has the consequence that his dependence upon women becomes masked and, on an unconscious and often on a conscious level, denied; it is difficult in later life to integrate sexuality into a reflexive narrative of self. What men tend to repress, to repeat, is not the capability to love, but the emotional autonomy important for the sustaining of intimacy. Girls have a greater chance of achieving such autonomy, which depends more upon communication rather than the propensity to express emotions as such. Communicative resourcefulness of this sort should be regarded as a matter of competence just as much as that 'instrumental competence' which males are prone to develop.

The reliance of men upon women for doing the work of intimacy is expressed, not only in the domain of sexuality, but in friendship also. There are organisations, like clubs or sports teams, which, because of their all-male character,

provide situations in which male fraternity can be developed and consolidated. Yet fraternity – bonds that come from shared, and exclusive, male experience – is not the same as friendship, considered from the point of view of the characteristics of the pure relationship. An in-depth study of two hundred men and women in the US showed that two-thirds of the men interviewed could not name a close friend. Of those who could, the friend was most likely to be a woman. Three-quarters of the women in the research could easily mention one or more close friends, and for them it was virtually always a woman. Married as well as single women named other women as their best friends.²³

For girls and boys it is a shock to acknowledge the power of the phallus – for the very competence they have developed is threatened, if not even completely overturned by this discovery. In the case of the boy, in the area of sexuality, the phallus becomes a signifier of an ambivalent capacity to dominate women. The more the phallus becomes the penis, however, the more it has to be 'tested out' in episodic encounters which combine risk and pleasure. Rather than complementarity, the situation here is one of mutual dislocation and involves contradictory elements in the case of girls as well as boys. The frustration of the girl's wish to be like the father is acute, although it does not necessarily compartmentalise the personality in the manner characteristic of boys. It can be seen why despair at men, alternating with an idealising of them, should become so mixed up in the mind of the girl. The father symbolises separation and 'acting on' the world; yet he is also unattainable. The capacity of the girl to love becomes fused with an overwhelming desire to be loved and cared for.

Is there any sense in which submissiveness is a peculiar feature of feminine psychosexual development, as the stereotype might have it? I do not think that there is. For boys and girls alike impulses towards submissiveness and mastery become interconnected, and the wish to be dominated

is a powerful residue of the repressed awareness of the mother's early influence. Both sexes develop the capacity for caring, although this characteristically takes divergent forms. Unless a boy becomes completely alienated psychologically from his mother during or after infancy, he retains the capability and desire to care for the other; but such caring normally takes on an 'instrumental' character. Nurture, in the sense of emotional support, corresponds much more to the capabilities developed by the little girl. Even here, however, it would be a mistake to suppose that the abilities of the one sex merely complement those of the other, for each develops in contradiction.

The 'absent father', the father who has only a shadowy existence during the early period of the upbringing of the child, has a particular significance for the little girl. He can be idealised because of his remoteness, but he also appears as dangerous – this air of menace often becomes part of his very attractiveness. Being less at the centre of the child's life than the mother, he is also less susceptible to her communicative skills. He must be 'converted', won over, yet he is also distant and, as it seems on the level of the unconscious, unattainable. His refractory qualities must be brought under control if autonomy is to be achieved; the paradox is that if he were fully to be won over, the little girl would know that something had gone wrong; for he wins her respect not as the sexual possessor of the mother, but because of the very maintenance of his 'separateness'.

Anger, as well as the desire for love, fuels the episodic sexuality of men; quite often, it is the basis of masochism and the desire to submit, a syndrome connected to shame. Anger and shame, however, also form characteristics of the upbringing of women. The little girl loves her mother, but resents her as well: in distancing herself from her, via identification with the father, she transfers her resentment to him. Idealised though he might be, he cannot make up for what she has to sacrifice in seeking to win him over. His

very remoteness, compared with the proximity to her mother the child has enjoyed, further promotes such ambivalence. Men cannot be trusted; they will always let you down.

To understand more fully the relation between shame and psychosexual development, we can go back to Freud's interpretation of femininity, where it is linked closely with narcissism. According to Freud, women have a narcissistic investment in their bodies which men largely lack, a result of the girl's reaction to the fact of her 'castration'. The little girl abandons masturbation and gives up interest in the clitoris, which is so manifestly inadequate. Her eroticism becomes diffuse, rather than concentrated upon a prime pleasure-giving organ. She sees herself only in the reflection of male desire. Hence the woman's need does not, in Freud's words, 'lie in the direction of loving' but more in that of 'being loved'; 'the man who fulfils this condition is the one who finds favour' with her.²⁴ Women need not just to be admired, but told that they are appreciated and valued. Deprived of narcissistic confirmation in their early lives, women thereafter only find security in the mirror of love provided by the adoring other. Needless to say, men are as ill-equipped to meet this requirement as they are to respond to female eroticism. Hence the oft-heard complaint of women that their male partners are clumsy, have no real understanding of what brings them satisfaction and so on.²⁵

The conclusions Freud draws are surely in some part correct, but not the arguments deployed to reach them. Two separate issues are raised by these arguments: female sexuality and the eroticising of the body, on the one hand, and the wish for reassurance about being loved on the other. We may suppose that both sexes, in fact, once the break with the mother is made, need reassurance that they are still loved. The need of the boy for love, however, contrary to Freud's view, is greater or more urgent than that of the girl, largely because it tends to be more deeply buried. The boy's

reassurance comes from the rule of the phallus (the assertion of social status and power) and, in the area of sexual behaviour itself, from episodic sexuality. Such sexuality denies the very emotional dependence that fuels it.

Freud's interpretation of female sexuality made a lasting impression upon the later psychoanalytic literature. Women's sexuality was seen as essentially passive, a view which reinforced the current stereotypes. In the light of current changes in sexual behaviour, it has become apparent that, to the degree that such a portrayal corresponded to reality, it was the result of social constraints placed upon women rather than enduring psychosexual characteristics. The image of the sexually voracious woman, of course, has long existed alongside that of female passivity; Freud's account emphasised one picture at the expense of the other.

The diffuse eroticism of which Freud spoke should properly be regarded as potentially subversive rather than a negative reaction to a situation of 'loss'. The clitoris is not the functional equivalent of the penis, nor is female sexual pleasure defined by a failure to match up to the standard set by the male. It can be presumed that both sexes, as infants, retain the capacity to eroticise the body. The boy tends to give this up in favour of a more genitally focused regime, as part of the Oedipal transition. Girls, on the other hand, are more able to sustain it, and therefore also more able to integrate specifically genital sensations with other experiences and attachments – in fact, they are liable to find sexual activity shorn of these wider connections unrewarding.²⁶

Gender, intimacy and care

Let me sum up the implications of the preceding discussion. While it is possible, as Freud believed, and even very likely, that there are more or less universal features of sexual

psychology, I put that question largely to one side. A distinctive feature of socialisation in the recent period, characteristic of most strata in modern societies, has been the prominent role of the mother in early child care. Mother-infant relations are influenced by the 'invention of motherhood' as well as reflecting other changes which distinguish modern from pre-modern institutions. The dominance of the mother has profound psychological consequences for both sexes, and is at the origin of some of the most pervasive aspects of gender difference today.

Men have problems with intimacy: this assertion we hear again and again in the therapeutic literature as well as elsewhere. But what does it mean? If the analysis I have suggested is valid, we cannot simply say that women tend to be more capable of developing emotional sympathy with others than are most men. Nor, to repeat a banality, can we accept that women are in touch with their feelings in a way that men typically are not. Intimacy is above all a matter of emotional communication, with others and with the self, in a context of interpersonal equality. Women have prepared the way for an expansion of the domain of intimacy in their role as the emotional revolutionaries of modernity. Certain psychological dispositions have been the condition and outcome of this process, as have also the material changes which have allowed women to stake a claim to equality. On the psychological level, male difficulties with intimacy are above all the result of two things: a schismatic view of women that can be traced to an unconscious reverence for the mother, and a lapsed emotional narrative of self. In social circumstances in which women are no longer complicit with the role of the phallus, the traumatic elements of maleness are thus exposed more plainly to view.

All psychodynamic mechanisms, in the individual case, are complex and there is not a straightforward complementarity between male and femal psychology. Thus a generalisation about either 'men' or 'women' as a whole, even

leaving aside the diversity of pre-modern or non-modern cultures, has to be qualified. As in other parts of this book, whenever I speak of 'women' or 'men' without qualification, there is always an implicit parenthesis which adds 'in many instances'. Episodic sexuality, for example, as was stressed previously, is not confined to men; it is a mechanism of power, and its defensive attributes have some usefulness for women also. The idea that 'men can't love' is plainly false, and should not – again for reasons mentioned before – be equated directly with men's difficulties with intimacy. Much male sexuality is energised by a frustrated search for love, which, however, is feared as well as desired. Many men are not capable of loving others as equals, in circumstances of intimacy, but they are well able to offer love and care to those inferior in power (women, children) or with whom they share an unstated rapport (buddies, members of a fraternity).

Nor are difficulties with intimacy confined to men. Women's relation to male power is ambivalent. The demand for equality may jostle psychologically with the search for a male figure who is emotionally remote and authoritative. The development of respect based upon the equal and independent capabilities of the other thus poses problems for both sexes, something which no doubt seeps over into homosexual relationships too. The communication of feelings, moreover, is not in and of itself enough for intimacy. In so far as such communication is bound up with narcissism, it is a bid for power rather than providing for the development of confluent love.

Masculinity as loss: is this theme consistent with the reality of the persistence of patriarchal domination? For the sexual division of labour remains substantially intact; at home and at work, in most contexts of modern societies, men are largely unwilling to release their grip upon the reins of power. Power is harnessed to interests and obviously there are sheerly material considerations which

help explain why this is so. However, in so far as male power is based on the compliance of women, and the economic and emotional services which women provide, it is under threat.

NOTES

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- 4 Nancy Chodorow: *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.
- 5 Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel: 'Freud and female sexuality', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 57, 1976.
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- 7 Hans Leowald: 'Waning of the Oedipus complex', in *Papers on Psychoanalysis*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.
- 8 Heather Formani: *Men. The Darker Continent*, London: Mandarin, 1991, p. 13.
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- 10 Lesley A. Hall: *Hidden Anxieties. Male Sexuality, 1900-1950*, Cambridge: Polity, 1991.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- 12 Andy Moyer: 'Pornography', in Metcalf and Humphries, *The Sexuality of Men*.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 68-9.
- 14 Andrea Dworkin: *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, London: Women's Press, 1981.
- 15 Susan Griffin: 'Rape, the all-American crime', *Ramparts*, vol. 10, 1973; Susan Brownmiller: *Against Our Will*, London: Penguin, 1977.
- 16 Liz Kelly: *Surviving Sexual Violence*, Cambridge: Polity, 1988.

- 17 Roy Porter: 'Does rape have an historical meaning?', in Sylvania Tomaselli and Roy Porter: *Rape*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1986, p. 235.
- 18 Karay Lobel: *Naming the Violence*, Seattle: Seal, 1986.
- 19 Quoted in Lynne Segal: *Slow Motion*, London: Virago, 1990, p. 262.
- 20 Sigmund Freud: *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, Standard Edition*, London: Hogarth, 1953.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 George Stambolian: *Male Fantasies/Gay Realities*, New York: Sea Horse, 1984, pp. 159-60.
- 23 Lillian Rubin: *Intimate Strangers*, New York: Harper and Row, 1983. See also Stuart Miller: *Men and Friendship*, London: Gateway, 1983.
- 24 Sigmund Freud: 'On narcissism', *Standard Edition*, vol. 14, p. 89.
- 25 Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel: *Female Sexuality*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970, pp. 76-83.
- 26 Shere Hite: *Women and Love*, London: Viking, 1988.