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What does woman want? Feminism and psychoanalysis

The relationship between feminism and psychoanalysis has been intimate, if troubled, since its very beginnings. The question of "what woman wants" was central to the inception of psychoanalytic thought, even before Freud entered the scene, as we saw in our Introduction, via the case of Anna O. Yet, depending on which feminist analysis one reads, this "woman question" has been either totally manhandled by psychoanalysis, or treated in a most ground-breaking way. We might say feminists' disagreements over psychoanalysis mirror contentions at the heart of feminism in general. Are women's social disadvantages engendered by their biological differences from men? Or is culture paramount over nature, and the body? Is there a distinction between sex and gender, or was Freud right that "anatomy is destiny"? Can bodies simply be set aside in order to attend to social disparities? Or are there already more primary inequalities perceived at the level of anatomy?

Psychoanalysis has unwittingly become one battleground where such larger disagreements between feminists have been played out, not least because of certain, rather inflammatory, claims made by Freud – centrally the idea that girls experience "penis-envy" as a key part of their maturation. As we shall see, feminist contentions about psychoanalysis turn particularly on whether Freud's account of femininity described a particular, predominantly social, circumstance for women – and is thus a measure of how ideology affects the way the body is lived and interpreted – or if this account was prescriptive of how women's lives should be lived, due to fixed, anatomical factors. As we shall see, the question of whether Freud's account of "woman" was descriptive or

prescriptive cannot be definitively answered, even through the kind of close reading of his texts offered by feminists such as Sarah Kofman, Luce Irigaray or Juliet Mitchell. Freud's own vacillations and ambivalences about "the woman question" ensure that his conclusions about femininity remain obscure and contested. Yet the answer to this question is crucial to how feminists are able to situate themselves in relation to psychoanalysis. For instance, what are we to make of the centrality of the penis to Freud's, or the "phallus" to Lacan's, accounts of childhood development? How should we evaluate Freud's implied equation of all women with the maternal, as either "mother" or "mother substitute"? And is it acceptable, in the final analysis, that "woman" can be reduced to the one who lacks, or has no sex, because her path to sexual maturation diverges from that of "man"?

Prescriptive or descriptive? Freud on femininity

Given feminism's fraught relation to psychoanalysis, it is perhaps surprising that many of the early adherents and practitioners of psychoanalysis were women. Women were the first objects of study for psychoanalysis – Lacan once called Anna O, Dora and the other women the young Freud analysed the "patron saints" of psychoanalysis. And the question "what does woman want?" was an enduring and seemingly insoluble problem throughout Freud's lectures and writings. Indeed, early psychoanalysis was primarily concerned with a condition (hysteria) arguably brought about by the excessive sociopolitical repression of women, over and above that required of men. Because women were socially designated as "passive", and because such passivity was supposed to characterize every arena of their lives – intellectual, emotional, physical and sexual – women at that time were subjected from infancy to the most thoroughgoing repression of their natural and cultural potentials.

Unsurprisingly, then, it was from the very social context Freud's early case studies, such as those of Anna O or Elizabeth von R, that the beginnings of a new feminism emerged, concerned with universal suffrage and the improvement of conditions for women within marriage, and regarding property rights. In connection with this burgeoning movement, many women were drawn to psychoanalysis because of the tools it promised to theorize, in Freud's own words, "how [a woman] comes into being, how a woman develops out of a child with a bisexual disposition" (F: 116).

The “question of woman” haunts Freud’s entire *oeuvre*. As Sarah Kofman has convincingly argued (see later in this chapter), Freud’s ambivalence about femininity can surely be understood in relation to his own anxieties about his masculinity, and also his relations to his mother. Freud’s early suggestion was that feminine identity and sexuality develop in a symmetrical manner to masculinity. Taking the Oedipus complex as the central apparatus for explaining the beginnings of sexuality, Freud first understood the little girl’s primary love-object to be her father, in an exactly equivalent manner to the boy’s attachment to the mother. This would explain not only the heterosexual imperative that appears to shape desire, but also the evident conflict that women in his clinic repeatedly avowed, in one way or another, towards their mothers. Just as at the height of his Oedipus complex, the boy’s attachment to his mother had led him to want to do away with his father, at the time of writing *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud hypothesized an equivalent rivalry between the little girl and her mother:

We learn from [dreams of the death of parents] that a child’s sexual wishes – if in their embryonic stage they deserve to be so described – awaken very early, and 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 to the boy and the mother to the girl; and I have already shown . . . how easily such feelings can lead to a death wish. (ID: 257)

By the time Freud’s theory reaches its later maturity, however, he revises this thesis in ways that have profound consequences for how we might understand the relation between the sexes, and the relation between socialization and desire. In “Female Sexuality” (1931) and his lecture on “Femininity” (1932), Freud argues that, in contrast to his earlier ideas, girls’ first love-object is also the mother, and the later attachment to the father is a screen for this early, repressed wish for the mother. According to this scenario, girls start out life just like little boys, but must be socialized to renounce their primordial love for the mother, before being able to achieve femininity. The key points of Freud’s later position on femininity can thus be summarized.

KEY POINT (*The later*) Freud on what little girls want

- The little girl at first sees herself as a “little man”, with a “little penis”, the clitoris.
- Upon seeing the boy’s penis, the little girl inevitably develops a deep-seated feeling of inferiority. She recognizes her own lack in relation to the boy – the little girl’s “castration complex” thus in fact pre-dates her Oedipal phase, rather than dissolving it, as with Freud’s boys.
- This feeling of inferiority gives rise to “penis-envy”, and generates in her an ambivalence towards her mother, whom she blames for her own lack, but also identifies with.
- The girl seeks social value by attempting to acquire the “phallus” either through “masculine” projects or, if she is to achieve normalcy, by repressing her active desires and replacing them with more passive satisfactions – particularly vaginal pleasure instead of clitoral, and pregnancy (wherein the baby stands in for the phallus).

Accordingly, whilst for the little boy, the Oedipus complex and rivalry with the father resolves itself with the castration complex, for the little girl this is where her problems begin. Her “recognition” of her lack of a penis gives rise to “penis-envy”, given which she understands herself as inherently inferior. From here on, she will be driven by the need to create social value, approximating the penis with its symbolic substitutes (for instance, babies).

Understandably, this schema has divided feminists. It is time now to examine their responses directly.

Female psychoanalysts, and the desire of the mother

One common feature in the differing responses to Freud developed by figures such as Lou Andreas-Salomé, Helene Deutsch, Karen Horney, as well as Anna Freud and Melanie Klein, is the central place they allot to the mother instead of to the father. However, there are significant differences between their theories, which are reflected in how feminists have evaluated them in the later part of the twentieth century. Particularly Deutsch and Horney have received attention from feminist readers of psychoanalysis. Deutsch tends to be read as a “stooge” for Freud’s particular articulation of patriarchal ideology, while Horney is taken up as a voice of resistance against it.

Ambivalence about the feminine: Helene Deutsch

Helene Deutsch's theoretical position is subtler than her detractors suggest. But it is true that, like Freud, she emphasized "passivity" and "narcissism" as characteristically feminine traits, and saw motherhood as the pinnacle of female experience. Deutsch's emphasis upon motherhood and passivity certainly raises questions similar to those posed to Freud's own account of femininity. For instance, what are we to make of women with no desire to have babies, and who pursue "active" goals, such as intellectual, artistic or sporting endeavours? Do these proclivities necessarily render such women "masculine", and thus deviant? And what is the task of analysis in this context? Is it simply to "normalize" women, so they desire gender-appropriate goals that complement, rather than emulate, "masculinity"?

Deutsch does not question Freud's characterization of woman as passive and narcissistic, and declares no allegiance to feminism (through which, she holds, women depart from their "nature"). However, Deutsch does challenge Freud's explanation of feminine passivity in an interesting manner – particularly with regard to the nature/nurture debate central to feminist thought. The orthodox psychoanalytic view had been that women become passive, and then narcissistic, to compensate for a perceived genital mutilation ameliorated only by pregnancy and motherhood. Deutsch argues, on the contrary, that feminine narcissism is invoked as a defence against passivity; and she redefines passivity as an instance of masochism, whereby active instincts are turned inwards to attack the ego. In this manner, feminine narcissism becomes an active response for Deutsch to a situation in which a limit has been placed upon women's powers – in other words, as an environmentally conditioned response – rather than as indicative of innate passivity or weakness. And, as you can see, this presents a potential advance for feminism, in that the restrictive sociopolitical situation that produces feminine masochism might conceivably be altered.

Deutsch's own account of how women's active instincts come to be inverted, however, is subject to some confusion between what she considers as natural or essential to woman, and what may be attributed to social conditioning. On one hand, Deutsch holds that, just like the little boy, the little girl identifies with her father rather than her mother. The father represents the outside world – the "environment" or "culture" – and thus a turn away from the mother and the inner life of simple nourishment. The trouble begins when the father discourages

this identification, thus inhibiting her active drives and forcing the little girl to divert them inward. Deutsch seems, with this argument, to suggest that the impetus for what ultimately is to become feminine narcissism is cultural or social. Yet on the other hand, she admixes the social and biological in this account, writing that the function of the father is to provide "an inhibiting influence on the woman's activity and drive her back into her *constitutionally predetermined* passive role" (Deutsch 1944: 252, emphasis added). Deutsch thus regards the social pressure that the father provides as a mere trigger to a more primary, biologically determined situation.

Likewise, Deutsch's focus upon motherhood can be read as simultaneously advancing and working against the interests of feminism. On the one hand, her account of motherhood repudiates Freud's emphasis upon penis-envy, or feminine lack. She emphasizes a positive connection to one's own mother as galvanizing the desire for motherhood. For Deutsch, a woman's strong identification with her mother in fantasy can never entirely be broken, and corresponds to a wish to bring forth one's essence through "motherliness". Freud's stress upon feminine passivity and lack as catalysts for woman's desire for a child is in this sense moderated by Deutsch's account, in the importance she gives to women's identification with the image of the active mother of early childhood. On the other hand, Deutsch characterizes motherliness as a narcissistic activity, wherein love for the self as object is diverted to the baby, conceived as only a piece of the self. In this context, Deutsch's contention that woman's greater purpose lies in "motherhood" loses any feminist edge it might have had were motherhood conceived less ambiguously, as promoting a positive identification between generations of women.

In general, feminists have good reason for discomfort concerning Deutsch's emphasis upon the biological register of motherhood and gender: for instance, her suggestion that motherhood behaviours are instinctual remnants of our primeval past. Like the great French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Deutsch suggests that problems encountered in mothering (and female sexuality) arise primarily because women come to be alienated from their nature by culture. Likewise, feminism itself falls within the scope of this criticism, as an unnatural deviation from woman's biological destiny. Yet other elements of Deutsch's naturalization of female sexuality might just as easily be turned towards, rather than against, feminism. For instance, she sexualizes her account of motherhood, in counterpoint to Freud's sexualization of infancy, and thus shifts the balance of subjectivity from

the little boy of Freud's account to the mother. In this way, the mother becomes an active participant in her own sexuality, with a libido and fantasy life distinct from that of men. With her various case studies of nurses, childcare workers, prostitutes and women found in literature, Deutsch was able to trace a connection between sexuality and a woman's relation to her feelings about motherhood and her own mother, rather than to the father. Such a focus paved the way for later feminist approaches to understanding female psychology in terms of women's intergenerational relations to one another, or maternal lineages rather than the patrilineage that has tended to dominate Freudian psychoanalysis.

Karen Horney: a holistic approach to feminine sexuality

Karen Horney was far more open in her opposition to Freud's perceived sexism than Deutsch, and so has been easier for later feminists to embrace as a precursor and example. Horney adopted what might be called a "holistic" attitude to the study of female sexuality, explicitly rejecting the biological focus championed by Deutsch and other Freudians, instead unambiguously emphasizing environmental and social influences. Horney criticized Freud's scientific methodology, arguing that Freud was too general in applying his findings to all women, given the clinical setting in which his observations were made (since all the women he analysed were neurotic). For Horney, psychoanalysis's "truths" are shaped primarily by the observer's gender, rather than the true nature of what Freud and other male psychoanalysts observed. Horney highlights this charge of masculine bias in psychoanalytic theory by directly and compellingly comparing the infantile theories of little boys about little girls to mature psychoanalytic theory's observations about femininity. For instance, the little boy's "naïve assumption that girls as well as boys possess a penis" is mirrored by the psychoanalyst's belief that "for both sexes it is only the male genital which plays any part" (Horney 1967: 57).

Horney argued that what Freud had called "penis-envy" is truly a specific form of a more general envy evident in boys as well as girls. Particularly, she set penis-envy against a backdrop of the envy the little boy exhibits in relation to the mother, and those activities associated with motherhood: childbirth, the sucking of babies, and pregnancy. Boys' "breast-envy" and "womb-envy" is not only as psychologically significant for boys as penis-envy is for girls. It also explains men's investment in the denigration of female experience. That women's

creative and nurturing bodies are so clearly enviable, according to Horney, gives rise to a "reaction formation" in men. Their envy of the female body is repressed, emerging instead as disgust and a conviction in their own biological superiority. In this vein, Horney issues a challenge to Freud's account of the origins of culture in "Civilization and Its Discontents" (wherein culture is the effect of the sublimation of sexual energy; see Chapter 7). Horney argues that culture and civilization emerge as a means for men to compensate themselves for being unable to create life, and thus for their own lack in relation to the female body. This critique of masculine culture prefigures other feminist attempts to construct alternative myths about the origins of civilization, such as those found in Irigaray's "Women, the Sacred, and Money" (1986).

"Second-wave" feminism, and the sins of psychoanalysis

Simone de Beauvoir, her progeny, and Dora

A second wave of feminist responses to psychoanalysis was precipitated by Simone de Beauvoir in 1953, with the translation into English of *The Second Sex*. In this text, de Beauvoir addressed to the philosophers her own question: "Why is woman the *Other*?" Or: why is man so widely considered the prototype of humanity, while woman is reduced to her sex? Psychoanalysis figures as one object of criticism for de Beauvoir's programme, because – as Horney emphasized – Freud's model of human sexuality took the little boy to occupy the "normal" position, from which the little girl must deviate in order to become a woman. By defining woman precisely as she who lacks man's essential organ, psychoanalysis became exemplary of the masculine position, which relegated woman to its *Other*, the sole purpose of whom is to reflect back to man his subjectivity and transcendence. Thus, while *The Second Sex* attempts to describe the lived experience of being a woman, in relation to the different registers through which femininity is evaluated (social and biological, as well as age, economy, race and class), Freud describes womanhood as the experience of not being a man. In doing so, moreover, Freud makes reference to a biological model of femininity that, arguably, is already inflected with these other registers.

De Beauvoir's refrain "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 1972: 296) set feminism alight in the 1960s and 1970s. Feminists' primary concern became to separate one's socially prescribed identity (or "gender") from a perceived given essence (or

"sex"). Many also uncritically adopted de Beauvoir's negative assessment of psychoanalysis, presenting it as one more central pillar of patriarchal ideology. These feminists (including such luminaries as Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Germaine Greer, Shulamith Firestone and Eva Figs) emphasized the repressive and sexist times to which Freud belonged, and his complicity in the subjugation of women in "Victorian" Vienna. This contention might be best highlighted by examining another of Freud's great case studies – his first, and arguably least convincing – the case of Dora, frequently cited by feminists as an allegory for the failure of Freud's theory to understand femininity.

KEY POINT Freud's "Dora" case study

The facts of the case

- Freud analysed the eighteen-year-old "Dora" for three months in 1899, after which she ended the analysis, unsatisfied with Freud's treatment of her.
- Dora suffered from a "*petite hystérie*". Her symptoms included a persistent, unexplainable cough, a phantom appendicitis, a sore and paralysed ankle, and, recurrently, aphonia or the complete loss of her voice. She had also had what Freud regarded as a history of hysteria since childhood.
- The particular crisis that prompted the analysis concerned her avoidance of her family's friends Herr and Frau K, the former of whom Dora accused of trying to seduce her, and the latter of having an affair with her father.

Freud's interpretation

Freud's conclusion is drawn from the analysis of Dora's symptoms, her own narration of the events, and his interpretation of two dreams she brings to him. Freud suggested that:

- Dora was attracted to Herr K, but wants him to prove to her that his intentions are honourable: thus she deflects his advances – obscuring this attraction even from herself – such that he will be pushed to take her more seriously than if she were only a maid or governess.
- Freud speculates that Dora identifies Herr K with her father, and admonishes himself in a "postscript" for failing to notice during the analysis the "transference" of her affections for Herr K and her father on to himself (see Chapter 8).

Freud's Dora case is particularly instructive about the sexual politics of late-nineteenth-century Vienna – the relations between bourgeois men, their wives and female servants – and the difficulty for a young woman to negotiate her way in this social world. Interestingly, from a

psychoanalytic perspective, Freud's text shows signs of an awareness of its own "failure" – or that alternative interpretations of the situation were possible – especially in what might be called the "unconscious" of the text.

- In the footnotes to Freud's case study, Freud entertains an alternative interpretation of Dora's case, in which her homosexual love for Frau K emerges based on an inherent bisexual tendency in hysterics, as well as Dora's possible identification with her father rather than her mother.
- Moreover, Freud momentarily acknowledges Dora's own, quite plausible, interpretation of the situation, which she states in economic terms: that her father had turned a blind eye to Herr K's advances toward her, in exchange for Herr K's tolerance of the father's affair with his wife.

From a feminist perspective, then, Dora's hysteria can be understood less as a wholly irrational mental illness than as a curious manner of "protest" against her part in the commerce of women tolerated within Victorian society, the best manner available then to a girl of her age.

Following de Beauvoir, Friedan *et al.* criticize Freud's biological determinism to explain what are in fact socially decided phenomena, like Dora's terrible social plight. Moreover, they stress the effects of Freudianism upon contemporary women who, coming across psychoanalysis in the course of their studies, might take to heart his recommendations regarding normal femininity. They feared psychoanalysis's potential to return women to the home and to patriarchal dependence. Arguably the most thorough representative of this particular response to Freudian psychoanalysis is Kate Millett.

Kate Millett: forget Freud's feminine fantasy!

Like de Beauvoir, Millett sets out to show that Freud consistently misrecognized the effects of social conditioning and disparity, entrenched only through their historical repetition, for predetermined and necessary biological differences. By insisting that anatomical difference bears an intrinsic cultural significance, Freud naturalizes (and thereby justifies) the prejudice he pretends only to describe. Freud represents for Millett a chief protagonist in what she calls the "counterrevolution" against the "sexual revolution" – which Millett dates from 1830 to 1930 (Millett 1971: 63) – contributing to a general reaction against the

success of the early women's rights movement, and a reassertion of patriarchal ideology. In this light, according to Millett's analysis, the primary purpose of Freud's account of femininity was to return women to a position of sexual subordination to men: "the effect of Freud's work... was to rationalize the invidious relationship between the sexes, to ratify traditional roles, and to validate temperamental differences" (*ibid.*: 178).

Notably, Millett brings to her analysis of Freud a very rigid understanding of the relations between the body and culture, sex and gender, where the former represents that which is fixed and inevitable, and the latter is conceived as mutable, or subject to change through a conscious alteration of behavioural patterns. In doing this, Millett arguably fails to grasp the subtler nuances of the psychoanalytic account of femininity, and what it has to say about a body that is already cultural, viewed subjectively by the child, through the veils of fantasy. The incompatibility between Millett's understanding of the relation of the body to society and Freud's can be brought out within her analysis of penis-envy, where she states as an aside:

(It is interesting that Freud should imagine the young female's fears centre about castration rather than rape – a phenomenon which girls are in fact, and with reason, in dread of, since it happens to them and castration does not.)

(Millett 1971: 184)

We can see here that for Millett what is significant is the world of actual things and events. Accordingly, the little girl's "fantasy life" can only plausibly pertain to what realistically can occur, not to cultural prejudice. The distinction between body (unchangeable fact) and culture (imaginary and arbitrary) is crudely maintained, in comparison with a figure such as Melanie Klein, for example. It is inconceivable for Millett that a little girl might fear the loss of an organ she never had in the first place. For Freud, as for Klein, though, the "real" body apart from its social significance had no role in his explanation of feminine subjectivity – however otherwise contentious their accounts. The little girl's experience of her own body is already mediated by culture, through fantasy: neither purely bodily nor simply social, but rather the nexus of their intertwining.

Feminist recuperations of psychoanalysis

The Anglo-American reconnaissance: Juliet Mitchell

Within the Anglo-American feminist movement, there are some who have understood Freud's account of sexuality and gender identity differently from the feminists we have looked at so far. For them, Freud's account of sexuality is not primarily another biological description of how a girl "inevitably" becomes a woman. It is also an account of how the body comes to be invested with social significance through fantasy. For instance, within her own reinterpretation of Freud for feminism, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Juliet Mitchell objects to Millett's criticisms of Freud on grounds similar to those outlined above. According to Mitchell, whilst Millett presents a more rigorous analysis of psychoanalysis than Friedan, Firestone or Figses, her position still exemplifies the kind of error that follows when Freud's work on femininity is read in isolation from his broader psychoanalytic theory. Mitchell contends that although ostensibly these feminists each object to what Freud had to say about women, what actually offends them is his theory of infantile sexuality and the unconscious. This is perhaps partly due to the influence of de Beauvoir's existentialism – particularly her existential objection to psychoanalysis from a concern to preserve free choice from past determinations. According to Mitchell, Millett's and her contemporaries' political project also informs their discomfort about the existence of irrational influences – such as unconscious fantasy. The reason is that these threaten to obscure and complicate the separation between nature and culture they believe must remain clear if feminist social reform is to be successfully advocated. There is no room for the unconscious if one wants only rational feminist agents, ready to transcend their bodily immutability to enact social change. For Mitchell, by contrast, "Freud was trying to explain what feminine 'fantasy' did with social facts and cultural demands, and how a child reasoned" (Mitchell 1975: 354): a process that it is incumbent upon feminists to understand, if social change is to be possible at all.

For Mitchell, the status Freud accords the body is not as unequivocal as earlier feminists had suggested. Mitchell correctly understood that Freud had already effectively posed de Beauvoir's dictum, "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman", albeit through the rubric of psychoanalytic theory, rather than existentialism. By means of an amalgamation of Freud and the anthropological structuralism of Lévi-Strauss (reminiscent of Lacan's reworking of Freud through Saussure, Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss (see Chapter 5)), Mitchell sees the Oedipus complex

less as a biological mandate than as the culturally genetic element of a more or less universal social repression of femininity. For Mitchell, Oedipus represents at a mythic level the kinship relations that enable society to operate as such. More precisely, the Oedipus complex dramatizes within "fantasy" the social imperative to exchange women, and the equally necessary injunction against incest. Drawing upon Lévi-Strauss, Mitchell clarifies that the incest taboo is not grounded in biology – for instance, the avoidance of congenital weakness – but rather is a purely social measure to ensure the growth of society through marriage alliances.

Likewise, for Mitchell, the fact that it is women who have been circumscribed between kinship groups, rather than men, in most societies is not biologically determined. Instead it is explicable in terms of a "phylogenetic" (or prehistoric) heritage relayed to each of us through the cultural imagination or fantasy. This cultural memory, represented by the Oedipal complex, provides the impetus for children to make their way into social roles accorded to them through a bodily elaboration of social meaning. Mitchell is careful to state, against the sex/gender distinction, that bodies are never "simply" bodies: that from the beginning biology is already "transformed" by the structures into which individual girls and boys are born (Mitchell 1975: 407). Freud declares Oedipus to be "universal", she argues, but not in the same sense that the body is thought to be universal by the sociological feminists. Rather, Oedipus is a fantasy structure remnant of generations of accretion of social practices, which can then take any number of concrete cultural-historical manifestations. And for Mitchell this is the *coup de grâce* against those feminist critics that her interpretation of Freud counters. For the Oedipus complex – and its corollaries of penis-envy and feminine narcissism – are not only applicable to the specific situation of "Victorian" Vienna. It is recapitulated even in the contemporary Western, late-capitalist context, where "fathers" ("patriarchy") being the rule of fathers, not "men" (*per se*) still have power in so far as they represent the law in terms of which each individual's social and sexual identities are organized. "Mothers", at the same level, represent the underside or repressed of that law: that is, the "natural" family, which, somewhat paradoxically, the law allocates the place of its own excess (Mitchell 1975: 405).

Perhaps most interesting in Mitchell's account is her analysis of the role of Oedipus and the nuclear family within late-capitalist societies. Employing a logic influenced by Hegel and Marx, she locates the family as the point of inner contradiction through which capitalism comes

into its own. The family keeps the desultory tendencies of capitalism in check. Yet capitalism places the family under great strain by alienating all labour equally. Furthermore, under capitalism there is no longer a need for the exchange of women, as capitalist society is supported instead by the exchange of commodities and capital. In fact, Oedipus becomes most visible and pertinent in Freud's Vienna precisely at a time when it verged upon social redundancy. As an example of this irrelevance of the family, Mitchell cites Britain during World War II, where women were expediently sent into the workplace, men into combat, and children into the countryside, away from their families in London. Yet at the same time, at either extreme of the debate, the capitalists and socialists each expressed concern for the demise of the "traditional" nuclear family. This is because, according to Mitchell, the family recapitulates those very internal contradictions that Marx had hoped might blow capitalism apart: "[t]he ban on incest and the demand for exogamy howl so loudly in the contemporary Oedipus complex because they are reinforced precisely when they are no longer needed" (Mitchell 1975: 410). In this sense, the family itself has become a "fetish", standing in for a presumed unity (or "big Other") that the system now lacks: "Capitalist society establishes the family in the context of its redundancy" (*ibid.*: 411).

Mitchell's hope for feminism is that the current of contradictions within patriarchal capitalism will catalyse the unravelling of Oedipus: or a "cultural revolution" of a different, but related, kind to that envisaged by Marx. "Femininity", as described by Freud, designates the psychology of repression through which women live the ideology of patriarchy. Thus, according to Mitchell, the transformation of this ideology, as well as the material conditions of women, depends upon such analysis. From this point of view, social change is not only a matter of altering gender roles and the partition of work, as was argued by Millet *et al.* It also depends upon the transformation of psychology and ideology (or cultural memory), and through these even our biology. Mitchell presses for radical change through a thorough reconception of the sex/gender relation, arguing that psychoanalysis offers the best tools to enact such change.

The French resistance to psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis has been critical to informing the development of theoretical feminism even more in France than in Britain or America.

Resistance to psychoanalytic assumptions of patriarchy has shaped the French articulation of feminism, so French feminist thought emerges through a conflicted engagement with Freud and Lacan. In this respect, theorists such as Kristeva, Irigaray, Cixous and Kofman have developed an ambivalent, yet integral, relation to psychoanalytic theory. Perhaps reflecting a wider "cultural difference", English-speaking feminists have accused them of various crimes against feminism: from "biological essentialism" (Irigaray; Cixous); to an over-reliance on the "word" of Herr Professor Freud (Kofman); to outright prejudice against their own sex (Kristeva). Here we shall look at but three proponents of this rich seam of thought within feminism: Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Sarah Kofman.

Julia Kristeva: powers of horror and desire in language

Given that she has distanced herself from the feminist movement (Oliver 1993), Julia Kristeva might seem an unlikely inclusion here. However, a current of feminism runs through her philosophy, quite inseparable from her concern for psychoanalysis. Kristeva is best known for her work on "abjection", contained in her book *Powers of Horror* (1982). Influenced by Klein, Mary Douglas and perhaps also Lou Andreas-Salomé (Markotic 2001), Kristeva engages with the question of how the ego is formed, arguing that the infant must be able to draw a boundary between itself and its waste products before being capable of recognizing itself as a separate entity. Such waste products comprise the "object"; neither "subject" nor "object", but demarcating the limit between them. The abject provides the self its connection to the object (through the piece of the self that is relinquished to the world), but also threatens to destroy this connection and the integrity of the self, precisely because it is what Kristeva calls "the jettisoned object": it is "radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 1982: 2). For this reason, the abject elicits an uncanny feeling of dread and fascination in the subject, which can be summarized in the encounter with a dead body: the discarded self *par excellence*.

The corpse, seen without God and outside of science [i.e., outside of a culturally mediated context], is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does

not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (*Ibid.*: 4)

However, for Kristeva, abjection also characterizes the relation to the mother, from whom one must separate in order to individuate oneself, and (following Lacan) before one can become a speaking subject (*ibid.*: 13). Especially in the case of the boy, because the child and mother are but one merged entity before ego formation, he must relinquish this identification with her to make way for an identification with the "father" (or his equivalent), and the paternal law (language). Interestingly, for Kristeva the father merely represents some third term whose function is to interrupt the unity between mother and child. This function may just as easily be served by her friends, female lover or work, as by the male head of a nuclear family. Thus her theoretical apparatus does not necessitate patriarchy, although the meaning of abjection – particularly as it concerns the abjection of the mother – suggests a mechanism for the reproduction of misogyny.

Kristeva's work in linguistics – influenced by Lacan, as well as Saussure and C. S. Peirce – also gestures towards a concern for the cultural significance of femininity. According to Kristeva, there are two registers of language: the symbolic and the semiotic. The former is far less broadly encompassing than Lacan's use of the term, referring only to structural elements of language rather than culture in general: grammar, the extant or conscious dimension, and that which brings to language its stability and form. The semiotic, on the other hand, refers to the unconscious register of language: its mobile, motivating force (or "drive", in the Freudian sense of libidinal energy). The semiotic, then, comprises the material element of language, its rhythms and timbres, which, without the symbolic, would consist of nothing but inarticulate noise. Language as it is lived, in speech and in writing, requires each of these registers if it is to be meaningful: for, while the symbolic organizes meaning, from the semiotic issues language's "material conditions" – understood not merely in terms of biology, but as its historical and social significance. For Kristeva, this semiotic register, like the abject, simultaneously provides language with its ground, and threatens to upset meaning. It is the "feminine" – repressed, misunderstood, volatile, unconscious – quality of language, which both supports, and looms as a potential destroyer of, the boundaries of the symbolic through which language is structured, but which do not (*contra*

structuralism) amount to its totality. In this respect, the "feminine" represents a revolutionary force of language and meaning, manifest in poetry and art, among other social practices.

Luce Irigaray: the speculum of the other woman

Luce Irigaray addresses psychoanalysis more directly as an antagonist of feminism. Yet, influenced by the deconstructive philosophy or interpretive practices of Jacques Derrida (as well as Freud and Lacan), she does so by situating her thought within its concepts, as its "unconscious" underside. Irigaray's aim is to enact a kind of "self-examination" of psychoanalysis against itself (Irigaray 1985a: 63). This involves an intimate reading of the theorist whom she addresses, sometimes at the level of a line-by-line analysis, from the viewpoint of the repressed. Like Derrida, Irigaray speaks from and for the very position within Western males' discourses that must remain silent, if the integrity of the author's position is to remain intact. However, Irigaray's point is directly political, concerning what she sees as a repression of femininity for the purpose of supporting the masculine subject's self-identity, at work in Western philosophy and culture in general. Feminist concerns can only be addressed, according to Irigaray, once the West's ontological reliance upon the subjugation of the feminine is reworked and relinquished.

Irigaray's technique for dismantling this "ontology" is to figuratively occupy this unvoiced position within the text, and push it out (speculum-like) until philosophers' unacknowledged debt to the feminine is fully revealed. In psychoanalytic parlance, Irigaray enacts a return of the repressed of the dominant discourse. Such an acting out invariably draws upon the very stereotypes of femininity that it hopes to abolish: like the hysteric or the *femme fatale*, who toys with the philosopher but refuses to bring him to climax. But such a mimicry of traditional female positions does not represent an uncritical complicity. It is about revealing what is at stake in Western philosophers' masculine self-understandings: what they take for granted, in order to function smoothly. In this manner, in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (a reference to de Beauvoir, as well as to gynaeceology), Irigaray responds to Freud by "inhabiting" his lecture on "Femininity" as its own Other, interpolating within it objections to each statement Freud makes about the "truth" of woman's sex.

Reflecting her debt to deconstruction, Irigaray interrogates not only Freud's positive theories, but also the rhetoric with which he presents

them. These stylistic nuances, Irigaray argues, far from being merely incidental, already reflect the masculine "imaginary" that conditions how the "question of woman" may be addressed. The force of Irigaray's argument against Freud, then, is that the "question" of woman is only a question because women's voices are excluded from representations of human enquiry. And it is this very "lack" of women's perspectives (and correlatively, of woman's sex) that ensures the smooth functioning of masculine identity and desire.

Irigaray's relation to Lacan is also oppositional – perhaps especially so after she was expelled from the École Freudienne, and her position at the University of Vincennes, upon publication of *Speculum*. However, the psychoanalysis with (and against) which Irigaray works is Lacanian rather than Freudian, in that it deals with structures and linguistics instead of drives. From Lacan she takes a focus upon the "symbolic" as the place in which gender is assigned, as well as the concept of the "imaginary" – albeit an imaginary that is retroactively gendered "masculine," and against which a "feminine" imaginary must reassert itself. Yet she criticizes Lacan for continuing to define "woman" in terms of penis-envy, even if elaborated in terms of structural linguistics, rather than Freud's "biologism." What Irigaray does with Lacanian theory is try to demonstrate what a female sexuality unhinged from masculine desire might look like. What are the corollaries we might invent for such a femininity in the fields of language and poetry, as well as in social relations between the sexes, and – most significantly – between women (whether mothers and daughters, lovers, colleagues, or friends)? The essay "This Sex Which Is Not One", for instance, develops a conception of the female body not as lacking (nor as complete, as masculinity represents itself), but rather as plural: as self-embracing, proliferating and contiguous to itself. Likewise, in "When Our Lips Speak Together": of the same volume, Irigaray depicts a feminine body and pleasure that is self-sufficient, drawing upon and enlarging (through mimicry) the image of narcissistic woman that Freud entertains in "On Narcissism" and elsewhere.

"And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other", on the other hand, emphasizes intergenerational relationships between women: a relation that is poisoned by the patriarchal culture that psychoanalysis summarizes, being mediated by the separating function of "the father". In this piece Irigaray plays the part of the daughter, imploring her mother to attend to their relation. Employing the metaphor of lactation, she contends that the relation between them should allow each to grow rather than devour one another. In this piece, Irigaray refers to the Lacanian

indictment that, to an extent, girls must always stay trapped within the imaginary, by reappropriating the reflective function that each plays for the other as a mode of exchange between mother and daughter: "You/I exchanging selves endlessly and each staying herself. Living mirrors" (Irigaray 1981: 61). In this manner, Irigaray re-evaluates the identification between mother and daughter, and recommends that this relation be developed rather than discouraged. In so far as the mother is able to short-circuit a sexual economy in which she is defined as lacking, she will not resent the daughter for failing to provide her with the coveted phallus. In turn, the mother will avoid inflicting her own sense of lack upon her daughter. Thus, at this stage of her work, Irigaray emphasizes a self-sufficiency of women among themselves, challenging the status allotted to them as commodities of exchange enabling men's relations to each other. In some of her later works, by contrast, the question of "sexual difference", and relations between men and women, eclipses that of relations between women. And here the psychoanalytic Oedipal narrative remains central for her, as exemplifying the masculine imaginary to which her feminism responds.

Sarah Kofman: the enigma of woman

Sarah Kofman reads psychoanalytic theory as far more equivocal and subtle than Irigaray allows. Indeed, Kofman's book on Freud and femininity, *The Enigma of Woman*, in part serves as a vehicle to accuse Irigaray – parenthetically and in footnotes – of relying upon distortions and exaggerations of Freud's position (Kofman 1985: 12, 104, 109n, 122, 115, 116, 117, 118n, 120n, 126, 132, 132n). Kofman presents a very close, scholarly and sympathetic reading of Freud, who (with Nietzsche) was a formative influence on her work. However, *Enigma* is also a critical examination of Freud from a feminist perspective. Kofman's primary objective is to demonstrate how Freud's writings on femininity dramatize the underside of his own masculinity: or in other words, his investment in representing woman in the manner he does. One of her methods for doing this is to place Freud's various contradictions about "woman" alongside one another. For instance, she indicates the incompatibility between saying that woman lacks – constructing her botched desire by fabricating a relation to the penis – and the claim that woman is characteristically narcissistic, which would suggest an enviable self-sufficiency with regard to desire (Kofman 1985: 52). Other contradictions in Freud's representation of woman include his conflicting accounts of her "modesty" as cultural, and then

as natural (*ibid.*: 49–50); his claims that woman is inscrutable to the male point of view, and that her truth is accessible only by means of the most scientific (i.e. psychoanalytic) methods (*ibid.*: 39–42); and that woman is a "great criminal" – self-sufficient and in possession of her own secret – whilst also being ignorant of herself, and thus requiring the expertise of the analyst (*ibid.*: 66).

Kofman's hypothesis is that these equivocations reveal Freud's fear of "woman". Woman for Freud is both an uncanny birthplace, and (correlatively) the enigmatic cipher of his own mortality. In this vein Kofman argues that penis-envy is a projection of men's fears regarding castration, and so does not reflect women's desires so much as what men require of woman's desire (Kofman 1985: 85). Through the notion of penis-envy, Kofman argues that Freud transfers to the father, as the bearer of the phallus, the omnipotence that the child originally accorded the mother (*ibid.*: 72). She argues that Freud's desire to be scientific and objective about woman is a means of mediating and controlling his discomfort respecting his own disavowed femininity and narcissism, as well as Oedipal desire for his mother and anxieties about death. Thus Freud domesticates the threatening and enigmatic "grand criminal" woman (who withholds her truth and so captivates men) into his own accomplice: the little hysteric, the meaning of whose "speech" the psychoanalyst alone is able to restore (*ibid.*: 67).

Arguably, Kofman's work represents the most worked-through and integral encounter between feminism and psychoanalysis. Other of her works, however, are haunted by her "unresolved" relation to both feminism and psychoanalysis, particularly her autobiography, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, which documents her childhood in exile as a Parisian Jew during World War II, the loss of her father in Auschwitz, and her subsequent "abjection" (Kristeva), or pathological rejection of her mother. To this extent, Kofman might have had something to learn from other feminists about the mother–daughter relation. And for this reason, Kofman is an appropriate conclusion to this chapter. For as we have seen, the relation between psychoanalysis and feminism is precarious precisely because, through its engagement with psychoanalysis, issues central for feminism have been enabled to bubble to the theoretical surface – whether the question of how girls become women, of the relation between women, or the relation between the sexes. Contestation about the uses and disadvantages of psychoanalysis for feminism provides a very good way into the conflicts between feminism. It also furnishes a privileged site for the ongoing negotiation of feminist futures.

Summary

- The question of femininity is one about which Freud equivocates throughout his career. His final position is that women's sexuality and identity are organized according to a masculine framework (i.e. the Oedipus complex), and are characterized by envy of the penis.
- Some of Freud's most significant followers and interlocutors have been women, from the earliest reception of his work: Helene Deutsch and Karen Horney, as well as Lou Andreas-Salomé, Melanie Klein, Marie Bonaparte and Freud's daughter, Anna.
- Helene Deutsch's focus was the influence upon a woman's sexuality of her mother. In her work, sexuality becomes a woman's means of exploring her relation to her mother, as well as her own "motherly" potential. Like Klein, Deutsch renders the mother more active than in Freud's accounts. Yet she also emphasizes what she (with Freud) identifies as women's passivity and narcissism, and has thus often been represented by feminists as regressive.
- Karen Horney was openly and scathingly critical of Freud's sexism. She is best known for her comparison of the psychoanalyst's attitude towards women and the little boy's attitude to the little girl. Horney rereads penis-envy in the context of other kinds of envy, such as womb-envy, challenging its primacy in Freud.
- Second-wave feminism (after de Beauvoir) identified Freudian psychoanalysis with patriarchy. Figures such as Kate Millett, Betty Friedan, Shulamith Firestone, Eva Figes and Germaine Greer argue that psychoanalysis served to naturalize cultural and social inequalities between men and women.
- Some Anglo-American feminists – notably Juliet Mitchell, Nancy Chodorow, Laura Mulvey, Jane Gallop and Joan Copjec – have since attempted to reappropriate psychoanalysis to feminism, by demonstrating how psychoanalytic theory provides insight into the social construction of gender and sex, family and patriarchy.
- French feminists, responding often principally to Lacanian theory, have attempted to negotiate a position between advocacy and criticism of psychoanalysis: particularly Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Sarah Kofman.

part III

Psychoanalysis and its discontented