

## Female Sexuality and Menopause

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Menopause corresponds to a crucial time in a woman's libidinal economy. In order to examine this time from a psychoanalytical perspective, I suggest we start from the way Freud deals with the girl's relation to the *Oedipus complex*. The girl's discovery of her castration (as a reality and not merely a threat) leads her to change her love-object. Having been the phallus for the mother, she will now have to move into the symbolic equation of the phallus with the baby and seek out the one who can give her this phallic equivalent - the father. In 1925, Freud will call this *the girl's entry into the Oedipus complex*<sup>1</sup>. At menopause, the promise it implies - that of a baby who will be a substitute for the phallus - is no longer possible. This not infrequently coincides with the children's leaving home. What might have given the woman a phallic feeling in motherhood - a certain imaginary power derived from the children's dependence upon her - will be missing now. This raises the question of the *exit from the Oedipus complex*. But what form will it take for a woman?

Freud often spoke of the climacteric in his writings, Freud (1912) points out that *"We see people fall ill who have hitherto been healthy, ... (because) a change has taken place in them. As a result of their having reached a particular period of life, the quantity of libido in their mental economy has experienced an increase which is in itself enough to upset the equilibrium of their health. It is well known that more or less sudden increases of libido of this kind are habitually associated with puberty and the menopause ) Here the damming-up of libido is the primary factor; it becomes pathogenic as a consequence of a relative frustration on the part of the external world, which would still have granted satisfaction to a smaller claim by the libido. The unsatisfied and dammed-up libido can once again open up the paths to regression."*<sup>2</sup>

It is a fact: at menopause, women have more difficulty than before for finding sexual partners. Not only partners in life, but simply sexual partners. This is a reality of our

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<sup>1</sup> Freud S.: *Quelques conséquences psychiques de la différence anatomique entre les sexes.*\*\*

<sup>2</sup> Freud S.: (1912) *Types of Onset in Of Neurosis*, S. E., v. XII, p. 235-236.

societies, clearly expressed in epidemiological studies. Even when they have a life-partner of the same age, they are often confronted with problems linked to what Freud called the *male climacteric*. This is a fact, well-described by andrologists: at the end of their fifties men often experience a decrease in their sexual potency. The sexual non-relation, a favorite subject of Lacan, takes on pathetic reality here: just when a woman is experiencing a remarkable increase in her sexual libido, when she has finally accomplished the mourning necessary in her relation to the mother and is at last ready to accept that a man can give her a vaginal orgasm, at this very moment her partner's sexual potency diminishes. This does not mean that her partner's desire diminishes: Freud clearly affirms that men's libido also increases at this age. It can therefore happen that this male partner will seek to satisfy his libido elsewhere, at the same time gaining reassurance about his potency. With a much younger partner he can more easily use his socio-economic potency to compensate for his loss of physical potency. We have all seen well-known male personalities who marry younger women who are not yet socially and economically accomplished and therefore need them; the men thus feel potent because they are useful and important.

Freud always made a parallel between menopause and puberty. Helene Deutsch returned to this parallel, which enabled her to hypothesize that in menopause, as at puberty, there are incestuous fantasies responsible for the struggle against the emergence of any sexual fantasy. She thinks that the horror a post-menopausal woman can feel at her own libido is due to the fact that the unconscious incestuous object is now the son, or a substitute. This seems to me to deserve the name *Jocasta complex*.

To return to Freud: he says that this static libido can open the way to regression, which provides us with a psychoanalytic explanation of how witches come about. It is interesting to note that for the libido Freud uses the word *stasis* (which Strachey translates as "damming-up"); stasis is a medical term indicating a stoppage or considerable slowing down of the circulation of an organic liquid, for example, blood stasis. All traditional societies fear post-menopausal women, especially if they are still interested in sex and have no husband. Since menstrual blood is no longer flowing, it is supposed to increase their

power, which, as it is not under a man's control anymore – that would, we could say, allow for libidinal exchanges – can become dangerous. The anthropologist Françoise Héritier<sup>3</sup> (Claude Levy-Strauss spiritual daughter) says that the post-menopausal woman is most at risk of being accused of witchcraft. Freud also thinks that regressions of the libido can allow for a new emergence of infantile forms of sadistic-anal and sadistic-oral fantasmatic organization. An example of this may be found in the movie *One hundred and one Dalmations* with Glenn Close as Cruella.

The next year (1913) Freud<sup>4</sup> tries to understand how the charming girl, the loving wife and the tender mother will be transformed into the “old dragon” against whom comedy writers have always directed their invective. *“It is a well-known fact,(...) that after women have lost their genital function their character often undergoes a peculiar alteration. They become quarrelsome, vexatious, and overbearing; they exhibit typically sadistic and anal-erotic traits which they did not possess earlier, during their period of womanliness.”*

Let us point out right away that he speaks of a loss womanliness of femininity in women at the time of menopause. In clinical work with these women, they often complain about this. We will therefore have to approach the notion of womanliness ( femininity) in psychoanalysis.

What seems important to me is that from 1895 until 1937, Freud affirms that there is an increase in libido at the moment of menopause. On many points Freud could say that his opinion had changed, but on this point he remains firm. Now, we know that this idea is not very popular at present. Even feminists prefer to think that women have arrived at a time of their lives when sex drives ,and the male partner, hold little or no interest for them. The idea that there could be a flight from an increased – and therefore threatening - drive

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<sup>3</sup> Héritier F. : *Masculin-féminin : la pensée de la différence*, Ed. Odile Jacob, Paris 1996, p. 84

<sup>4</sup>.Freud S. : (1913) *The disposition to obsessional neurosis*, S. E., vol. XII, p 323-324; G. W. vol. VIII, p. 449-459.

demand is not in line with the “politically correct” ideas of American feminists, but ancestral worries about the power of witches are right in keeping with Freud’s remarks.

It seems possible to assert that at this moment a woman loses the two promises that were made to her when she entered the Oedipus complex and which have enabled her to accept being a woman: that of a child as a phallic substitute and that of her whole body having a certain phallic quality or “phallicity”. She has to make a double mourning, since she can no longer lay claim to either the phallicity of motherhood or that of her beauty. I was deep in reflection upon this subject returning from summer vacation, two years ago, when my eye was caught by huge billboards in all the Paris metro stations proclaiming: *Lucky to be a woman*. A lovely Cinderella looks at us with deliciously naïveté as nine adorable babies emerge from beneath her long ball gown.



She *has* the phallus of motherhood.  
She herself is not without *being* the phallus.

Before analyzing each one of the losses experienced at menopause by our womanly being, losses so well condensed in this advertising image, I think it is important to begin by determining the different points in Freud's work that have to do with the constitution of female identity and of femininity. We will therefore have to go back to the question of the Oedipus complex for the girl, the role of the phallic phase and the controversy to which Freud's conception of femininity thus gave rise. So I am going to review with you the debate which rocked psychoanalysis between 1923 and 1935. This is necessary for understanding Lacan's contribution and for the essential goal of theorizing the losses so well embodied by the above image, losses which are constantly decried by women at this age. It seems interesting to me to reread all these classic texts in light of this clinical work on menopause.

Let us start by approaching what in Freud's work continues to pose great problems for Anglo-American feminists, who are today the most active militants, but also the most active theoreticians of mid-life crisis. What they cannot stand is the very idea of a phallic loss at the moment of menopause, because (like many psychoanalysts.) they cannot accept the primacy of the phallus. Lacan himself recalled that Jones was not the only one who had immense difficulties with Freud's assertion that there is a first phallic phase common to both girls and boys. This remained incomprehensible to almost all those around Freud, even though clinical data supported it. It was necessary for Lacan to locate this phallus as a *signifier* before biological and naturalistic commentary could stop invalidating its place. Let us first remember how this concept takes shape in Freud's work.

### **The primacy of the phallus in Freud's work**

In 1923 Freud said that infantile sexuality has a truly genital organization which differs from the adult organization in that *"for both sexes, only one genital, namely the male one, comes into account. What is present, therefore is not a primacy of the genitals, but a primacy of the phallus."*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Freud S: (1923) *The Infantile Genital Organization*, S. E., vol. XIX, p. 142.

The mother is endowed with a certain form of the phallus: the ability to have a baby. In this same text, Freud reminds us that the conviction of the penis' absence in the woman can lead to a great depreciation, or even horror, of woman .

If we want to understand something of the horror, disgust (*Abscheu*) that the very mention of the woman's menopause produces in the sexual game, a horror which is surely at the root of the refusal to recognize the existence of this subject in psychoanalysis, we have to make a detour by Medusa's head<sup>6</sup>. In his text, *Medusa's Head*, Freud<sup>7</sup> recalls that the latter replaces the presentation of the female genitalia whose ability to ward off misfortune – was well-known. Freud then gives as an example a fragment Rabelais' *Pantagruel*<sup>8</sup>, where the devil flees when a woman shows him her vulva. The woman is Papefiguière who, as one might expect, is an old woman. But by what right do we equate *old woman* and *post-menopausal woman*?

The capacity for procreation is an obstacle to death; once this obstacle is lost there is nothing in fantasy that can stop time from rushing on towards final annihilation. Therein lies one of the causes of crisis in couples at mid-life. Some men, themselves coming to the end of their prime, feel threatened by the loss of their wife's fertility; this can lead them to find a younger partner, with whom they will often have a child.

### **Menopause and the loss of the Oedipal promise**

A first and obvious loss at menopause is that of the possibility of continuing to hope for children to make up for the lack of a phallus. This corresponds to the moment when the children leave home, especially in the United States where they go off to live on university campuses. So there is necessarily a phallic loss of motherhood. Ruth Lax points out that penis-envy is reactivated then when the woman compares her situation with that

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<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 144

<sup>7</sup> Freud S. : *Medusa's Head*, S. E., V. XVIII, p.273-274.

<sup>8</sup> Rabelais : « Pantagruel, Le Quart Livre », chap. 47, in *L'Intégrale*, ED. du Seuil, Paris, 1973

of her male partner. He can keep on having children, and often does not deprive himself of this when he starts over again with a younger woman.

Lacan<sup>9</sup> locates the dissymmetry of the Oedipus complex in the register of the symbolic: There is no symbolization of the woman's sexual organ, he says, and the imaginary register only gives absence in relation to the man's sexual organ. At the beginning of his theorization, Lacan thinks that it is a phallic *Gestalt* - not the prevalence of the maternal object - that forces the girl to follow the same path as the boy for a while.

In 1925, Freud<sup>10</sup> again speaks of the sight of the little brother's sexual organ "*strikingly visible and of large proportions*" and how the girl succumbs to *penis-envy*; "*She makes her judgment and her decision in a flash. She has seen it and knows that she is without it and wants to have it.*"

This humiliation will encourage the abandonment of masturbation. It heralds the wave of repression which will remove from the young girl a large part of masculine sexuality and make way, at puberty, for the development of femininity. Freud<sup>11</sup>, until the end of his work, will affirm the necessity of *Penisneid* in "*the development of her femininity*" and Lacan will follow him in this. But, in the worldwide psychoanalytical movement, Jones' ideas will make penis-envy a prevailing defensive element.

### **What value can this concept of the phallus have for clinical work on menopause?**

The feeling of inferiority and of humiliation is often relived by women at menopause, to such an extent that some will then be diverted towards the organization of a masculinity, to lean on a virility that they have found again, what Helene Deutsch calls the "life-preserver".

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<sup>9</sup> Lacan J. : (1956) *Le Séminaire, livre III : Les Psychoses*, éd. Seuil, Paris, 1981, p. 195 et suivantes.

<sup>10</sup> Freud S. : (1925) : *Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes*, S. E., V. XIX, p. 252.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem : p. 255

Moreover, to understand Lacan's thinking about such important points as the phallus, the signifier, lack, desire and, of course, femininity, we must return to the debate between Freud and Jones. Lacan cites Jones more than three hundred times in his seminars. It's impossible to understand seriously Lacan without reading the English authors of the first half of the XX Century

With regard to what he says about women, Freud is viewed as old-fashioned, outmoded, very much marked by the prejudices of his time, and not only by the feminists and psychoanalysts of your country – even in France psychoanalysts dealing with femininity share this idea. Lacan, as we will see, threw all his support behind Freudian assertions, but he was a man and many women-analysts have viewed his adherence to Freudian ideas about women from this perspective. Unlike many of my colleagues, I think that Freud's assertions are indeed scandalous but nevertheless quite true and that they allow us to understand the disaster of menopause as a re-actualization of this first humiliation. But we have to look again at the debate of 1925-1935 to appreciate the importance of Jones and his criticisms in the current opinion of analysts now writing about femininity, an opinion in which it is not easy to know what we owe to Jones.

In 1927, Jones begins by saying *“There is a healthy suspicion that men analysts have been led to adopt an unduly phallo-centric view of the problems in question, the importance of the female organs being correspondingly underestimated.”*<sup>12</sup> Jones accuses women analysts of showing a barely concealed interest in the male organ, to the detriment of their own and thus contributing to the general mystification. But he does not ask himself why they have such an interest. So Freud is accused of phallo-centric prejudice

Because of the threat of aphanisis, the little girl will have to choose between an erotic attachment to the father and her femininity. The latter, for Jones, consists of an identification of the little girl with her mother through an experience where the little girl's anus plays the role of a primitive vagina passively waiting to be fed by a penis-nipple. If the

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<sup>12</sup> Jones E. : (1927) « Early development of female sexuality”, in *Int. Jour. of Psycho-Analysis*, vol. VIII

little girl renounces her father, feminine desires develop in an adult way. If she does not renounce him, the object relation is transformed into identification and it is only then that we will see a penis complex develop. Jones based this article on five cases of female homosexuality and we can tell that, for him, the *Penisneid* will be an accident on the way, a failure of identification leading the girl towards the father, into a masculine identification. In female homosexuality, Jones includes a whole category of women who “*retain their interest in men, but who set their hearts on being accepted by men as one of themselves.*”

He recalls that for Karen Horney the fact of a girl accepting the absence of the penis means that she dares to have incestuous desires; in this configuration, penis envy, which is clinically observable, is a great defense against the guilt attached to these desires. For the girl it means a protection against her femininity for fear of aphanisis.

He sums up: “*Freud’s ‘phallic phase’ in girls is probably a secondary, defensive construction rather than a true developmental stage.*” For him, femininity is a primary element of identification with the mother, as masculine identity will be the identification of the little boy with his father. Here we find ourselves at the naturalistic level of this issue, a naturalism rather dear to Anglo-American thinking. The problem is that when one begins with such a concept, one doesn’t see why this femininity, this womanliness this feminine identity, would be especially threatened at menopause. Now, this is exactly what clinical work on menopause is crying out at us - when it is not gagged by the analyst’s own disavowal.

In 1931, Freud writes his text dedicated to female sexuality. He retains the essential part of what he had already argued in 1925, an argument which had given rise to the controversy I’ve been speaking about and to which Freud responds at the end of this article.

Freud<sup>13</sup> reaffirms that “*in women, their sexual life is regularly divided into two phases, of which the first has a masculine character, while only the second is explicitly feminine.*” As for the Oedipus complex, it is the final result of a rather long development, it is created by the influence of castration and “*indeed, it is all too often not surmounted by the female at all.*”<sup>14</sup> I think it is interesting to emphasize this for, in my view, it is only at menopause that the problem

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<sup>13</sup> Freud S. : *Female Sexuality*, S. E., V. XXI, p. 228.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem* p. 230.

of liquidating the Oedipus complex will come up for many women; up until then, the Oedipal promises have been able to stay the course, along with the girl's Oedipus complex.

To Karen Horney's hypothesis Freud responds clearly: "*This does not tally with my impressions.*"<sup>15</sup> He concludes the article by commenting on Jones, whose idea seems to him analogous to Horney's: "*This does not correspond either to the dynamic or the chronological position of things.*"

Freud<sup>16</sup> will return to this the following year in his last article on femininity, he writes: "*in conformity with its peculiar nature, psycho-analysis does not try to describe what a woman is – that would be a task it could scarcely perform – but sets about enquiring how she comes into being, how a woman develops out of a child with a bisexual disposition.*"<sup>17</sup>

Freud takes the side of the *made* against the *born*. From the point of view of his English naturalism, Jones will argue that one is born a woman. Simone de Beauvoir will immortalize this debate in her formula, "*One is not born woman, one becomes it.*" You probably don't know that, during the years when she was working on *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir went to Lacan's seminar and got very interested in the debate between Freud and Jones about femininity that was stirring up the psychoanalytical milieu. She had even asked Lacan for help with her book, but they could not agree about the time for doing the work, so it didn't happen this way. However, the French feminist movement remained for a long time marked by this debate and will be different from the American movement. While your feminists are generally against hormone replacement therapy, saying that doctors want to use it to keep women in the place of an object of desire for men, ours have always claimed this treatment as their right, that is, the right to maintain the condition of the woman it takes one so long to become.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibidem p. 243.

<sup>16</sup> Freud S. : *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, S. E., v.. XXII, p.5-182*

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem p. 116.

But let us return to Freud's last text. He knows that there are voices arguing for early vaginal sensations, but he thinks that it is hardly possible to distinguish these from anal or vulvar sensations, and he asserts that in no case do they have much of a role to play. We know that it is on this precedence attributed to the vagina that Jones based his idea that one is born woman. Each one has his own thing then, there is nothing to be envious of. This hypothesis will appeal very much to American feminists.

For Freud, the fact that the girl recognizes her lack of a penis does not mean that she is resigned to it. He writes: *The wish to get the longed-for penis (...) may contribute to the motives that drive a mature woman to analysis, and what she may reasonably expect from analysis – a capacity for example to carry on an intellectual profession – may often be recognized as a sublimated modification of this repressed wish.*<sup>18</sup>

This paragraph deserves to be transcribed here, not only because it deals with the mature woman, the focus of my interest, and that it offers both a rather realistic avatar of penis-envy and a reasonable goal that we know to be obtainable in the treatment of women of this age, but also because we note that the phallus in question is a signifier and not a piece of flesh. It is a signifier which, in the register of the imaginary, has the value of power. The problem is that professional success, which really can give women phallic satisfaction can frighten their long-term partner. True, there are some exceptions: women who are able to leave the imaginary phallus in the field of the Other, even once they have acquired it.

In this same article, Freud persists. For him, the discovery of castration is a turning point in the girl's development, for which he sees three possible outcomes: sexual inhibition or neurosis, a masculinity complex – but also normal femininity.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibidem p. 125

The feminine situation is only established when wishing for a penis is replaced by wishing for a child, “*if the child takes the place of the penis, in accordance with an ancient symbolic equivalence*”.<sup>19</sup>

This wish for a penis must therefore be recognized as the feminine wish *par excellence*, in contrast with Jones’ position for whom it is mainly a prelude to various forms of female homosexuality.

Freud then alludes to the inevitable disappointments that the girl will receive from her father. But he will not reprise here the idea he set forth in 1923, in the *Ego and the Id*<sup>20</sup>: the idea of the little girl’s identification with the father, which follows her renunciation of her father as a love-object. He makes also a link between identification with the father and Ego Ideal .

- 1- Karen Horney (1924)<sup>21</sup> took up this idea of the transformation of the love for the father – resulting from her disappointment at not receiving from him the expected baby or penis – into an identification with him. She use’s the word *privation*, and Lacan will made a concept with it She had read this as the source of the girl’s demand for the phallus, which she viewed as being secondary for the girl.
- 2- Jones(1927)<sup>22</sup> had taken up this idea and made it into the root cause of female homosexuality. But he says also that this identification is such a perfect defense that we find indications of it in all little girls going through the Oedipal stage of development; that it is therefore a universal phenomenon. But Jones finds it difficult to explain why this identification with the father would be greater in those who will become homosexual. I will try to explain it: nothing prevents a father from signifying to his daughter that while refusing her demand – a refusal he is obligated to give because of the law against incest – he recognizes the value of her desire, that is to say, he legitimizes it; he recognizes that she appears seductive to

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<sup>19</sup> Ibidem p. 128

<sup>20</sup> Freud S. : (1923)*The Ego and the Id*, S. E., v. XIX, p.12-59.

<sup>21</sup> Horney K. : « The genesis of the castration complex in women », in *Int. Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. V, 1924

<sup>22</sup> Jones E : op. cit.

him and that surely another, not submitted to the law against incest, will be happy to respond to her desire. Unfortunately it does not always happen this way, as Freud's case of the young homosexual woman can attest.

- 3- Lacan, then sees here the cause of another indispensable element in the formation of the female subject: the identification with the father's insignia, which constitutes her Ego Ideal. Lacan emphasizes, however, that the girl does not really become the father; she is not transformed into a man, something which seems to escape English authors who describe this identification as being linked with homosexuality. The subject boasts signs, signifying elements of the father, what Lacan calls *the father's insignia*. She becomes him as ego ideal. For Lacan, the Ego Ideal is not a compelling instance like the Super Ego, but a sound basis for the subject's identity.

Another of Freud's observations is central for thinking about the catastrophe for femininity at this time of menopause. Freud attributes "*to femininity a higher degree of narcissism influencing its choice of object; to the extent that to be loved is for the woman a greater need than to love. Penis-envy also participates in the corporal vanity of the woman, given that she has to hold her attractions in even higher esteem, in order to compensate for her original sexual inferiority.*"<sup>23</sup>

Lacanianians formulate this by saying that even if a woman does not have the phallus, she herself is not without *being* the phallus, just as – I would add - the mother is not without *having* the phallus; in this respect, a woman and a mother are not the same thing. This makes explicit the two promises made to the little girl with regard to her future, promises included in the advertisement showing Cinderella with 9 babies: the phallicity of motherhood and that of the bodily image erected as phallus. These are lost at the menopause.

The rest of Freud's last text on femininity still provokes the indignation of many woman analysts, even in France, no matter what analytical movement they belong to

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<sup>23</sup> Freud S. :\*\*

First, Freud reminds us that women – who are said to have contributed little to the discoveries and inventions of history and culture – nevertheless invented the technique of plaiting and weaving. By looking at their pubic hairs, they are supposed to have had the idea bringing of all these threads together and thus to have invented the principle of weaving.

This passage recently gave rise to an uproar of female indignation in our group of analysts working on femininity.

. It seems to me that they are wrong to take this passage at face value; for at another, less naïve level of understanding, this text seems to contain some interesting keys.

Freud speaks of shame. Clinical work with little girls gives us daily examples of that kind of shame associated with a woman's being seen in her phallic lack. Mythology reminds us also of Diana's fury at being seen naked in her bath by Acteon. In her rage, she causes the young man's body to be torn apart by his own dogs as punishment for having seen – what else, if not what she didn't have? What she lacked?

But if it is necessary to conceal the entire body by weavings and veils, it's because this body, as a whole, has an acquired phallic value. Lacan recalls that the celebrations of the Mystery cults involve the unveiling of the phallus, whose value lies precisely in this veil that conceals it. This allows Lacan to point out to what extent the value of the phallus depends on its being a concealed lack, which he writes as (-□). From there he can go on to theorize that the game of seduction is based on the hiding-unveiling. Lacan will affirm the necessary division of the woman subject in femininity.

But before going into Lacan's theorization of the femininity, we must approach the last paragraph of Freud's 1932 text on femininity: *“But do not forget that I have only been describing women insofar as their nature is determined by their sexual function. It is true that that influence extends very far; but we do not overlook the fact that an individual woman may be a human being in other respects as well.”*

“*What?!*” exclaim my women analysts colleagues, furious, “*he concedes that sometimes we are a human being? What he says about women is unbearable!*” Here, too, the text lends itself to a completely different reading which will cut again what we were beginning to discern about the division of the female subject. It seems that Freud is pointing out to us that what he has just said about the weakness of women’s social interests, of their dissocial character and of their lesser capacity for sublimation does apply to the feminine dimension of a woman. When he says that *an individual woman may be a human being in other respects as well*, he is speaking of the subject’s necessary division.

To paraphrase Lacan, we could say that a subject born of the female sex is not completely submitted to the condition of womanhood. We have said that, on the long road to becoming a woman, the Oedipal little girl will, at a given moment, due to the effects of the necessary disappointment of her demands on her father, give up her love for him and take refuge in an identification with his insignnia, the basis for her Ego Ideal. The ego ideal part of any female or male subject constitutes what Freud here calls “human being” and is submitted to the same laws that govern boys. The other part is the one where a woman accepts to make herself into an object, object of desire.

This division which constitutes the woman – that Lacan asks us to write by barring the L/a – is essential to understanding something about clinical work with menopause. Therein lies one of the central misunderstandings that affect this work. When some women talk about the difficulties and the suffering that they are experiencing, they are mainly referring to the crisis in their feminine part, be it their motherhood or their capacity to seduce. Very often, these women are in other ways subject who are very successful with regard to their paternal ego ideal. These subjects are even at the high point of their career; as “human beings” they’re doing very well; which doesn’t keep them from suffering as women.

It is interesting to see how Anglo-American feminists prove him right, even if they’ve never heard of him. Whether it be an important author like Germaine Greer, or the Boston Women’s Collective, they all think that menopause is a lucky break for a woman, because it allows her (finally!) to be able to find her *unity*. They no longer want to have to be an object

of desire for anyone – and above all for a male partner - they want to be able to dedicate themselves, at last, to their deepest being. No more masquerade! No more seduction play! In this demand to find their unity again, they do recognize that this division is proper to women. If many women suffer at menopause, it's because they don't want to reduce themselves to being only *human beings*. Even if they can no longer be mothers, they want to remain women; and that's the problem.

### **Lacan: the phallus: signifier of what the Other doesn't have**

. Lacan uses his studies in hysteria to treat the question of the feminine and femininity. For that purpose, let see how he reads one of the dream *The Interpretation of Dream*. An hysterical young woman, intelligent, perceptive and reserved, like “still water”, recounts two dreams. The first is very short. “*I dreamt that I arrived too late at the market and could get nothing either from the butcher or from the man who sells vegetables.*”<sup>24</sup>

Her associations lead Freud towards what Lacan<sup>25</sup> calls the signifier of the phallus. First of all, the closed butcher shop makes Freud associate to a coarse expression peculiar to Vienna at that time: the expression “open butcher shop” means that someone's fly is open and something is visible. The phallic element hidden in the dream is clearly analyzed by Freud regarding the vegetables offered to the dreamer: a mixture of black radishes and asparagus whose sexual character is put forward. But the butcher in the dream has a German expression that refers to the absence of something, to a “there's no more” : “*Das ist nicht mehr zu haben.*” Freud recognizes this utterance as something he himself has said to the patient. He is trying to grasp the origin of sentences heard in dreams. Lacan will be interested in this utterance insofar as it is the acknowledgement of the *lack of object*. And he adds that here it is a question not of a frustrating experience, but of a signification as such.

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<sup>24</sup> Freud S.: *The Interpretation of Dreams*, S. E., volume IV, p. 183

<sup>25</sup> Lacan J.: *Le séminaire livre V: Les formations de l'inconscient* ( 1957-1958), le Seuil, Paris, 1998, p. 375 et suiv.

Jones' objections to Freud primacy of the phallus reinforce Lacan's idea that one must have another look at the notion of the phallus: Lacan will make it into a signifier. In the analysis of this dream, he makes it into the signifier of what the other does not have; it is only because the *Other lacks it* that it can be the *signifier of the Other's desire*.

### **To be or not to be the phallus**

A second dream from the same patient: *"Her husband asked her: 'Don't you think we ought to have the piano tuned?' And she replied: 'It's not worth while'"* She had spoken this phrase herself the day before when she was visiting a woman friend. She was asked to remove her jacket and had answered that it wasn't worth while, that she had to be leaving soon. Freud then thinks that the same day, during the session, she had suddenly caught hold of her jacket where a button had just come undone. *"It's as though she were saying: Please don't look; it's not worth while."*

If the phallus is the signifier of desire, and of the Other's desire, then a new aspect of the problem will be presented to the subject: to be or not to be the phallus. But a woman's being cannot be reduced to being the phallus. She will thus push back what she is behind appearance. Lacan says : *"She makes herself into a mask so that, behind this mask, she can be the phallus."* All the hysteric's behavior is manifested in this gesture of catching hold of the button, accompanied by the phrase *"It's not worth while."* It's not worth while, since it's not a question of looking behind because that's where the phallus is. It's not worth while to go looking there, because it won't be found there. There is hysterical provocation here: something which is presented to desire, presented behind a veil but which, on the other hand, cannot be found.

The *hysteric's bodice* becomes the fundamental condition of woman in relation to man with regard to desire. Lacan sums it up this way: *"Behind the shirt, above all, don't go looking there, because, of course, there's nothing, there's nothing but the signifier. But that's not nothing - the*

*signifier of desire.*<sup>26</sup> After recalling that such was the structure of the unveiling of the phallus in the ancient Mystery cults, Lacan associates to the sense of shame. If for the man it's only the phallus that must remain veiled, for the woman it's the whole of her being that must remain veiled, so that it can be in its entirety in the place of the phallus. The unveiling that shows nothing but absence is what Freud called horror; *Abscheu*, the horror in reaction to absence as such, the head of the Medusa.

Lacan recalls how post-Freudian analysts have argued that sexual maturation would entail going from a partial object to a total object, and he comments, not without humor: “by reaching the place of desire, the other becomes not at all a total object; the problem is that on the contrary he becomes totally object, insofar as he is the instrument of desire.” Here again, American feminists, without ever having heard of Lacan, keeping showing that he is right; their essential struggle consists in denouncing the place of object assigned to the woman. Their mistake is in thinking they see in this the effects of a macho ideology when it is a problem of the very structure of desire.

<sup>iii</sup>Our day-to-day clinical psychoanalytical work did not need feminist discourse to find out how much this place can be completely intolerable for some female subjects. However, this possibility of a division of the female subject, who would take refuge in masquerade in order to hold a phallic place behind the mask, is certainly not only an elegant solution, but perhaps the only possible one for attaining *femininity*.

### **Femininity as masquerade**

Using material from a treatment, J. Rivière<sup>iii27</sup> describes in a woman an apparent fragility proper to the feminine position and to the capacity for seduction which is its corollary. For her, this is only a *masquerade* concealing a phallic, virile position, tied to socio-professional success. Lacan remarks that in 1929, when she wrote this article, women who

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<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>27</sup> Rivière J. : (1929) « Womanliness as a Mascarade », *Int. Jour. Of Psycho-Anal.*, X, p. 303-313.

assumed male functions this way were rare. Moreover, at the beginning of her article, Rivière thinks that it is a particular form of homosexuality, already described by Jones, a form in which women still aim for a male partner, but expect to be recognized by men as one of their own. The patient is also an accomplished wife and homemaker; she seems to experience enjoyment in sexual relations. Nevertheless, every time she has a brilliant socio-professional success, proving her phallic power, she becomes timid, frail, and humble afterwards, showing a feminine devotion bordering on sacrifice, feeling obligated to play this role in order to seduce one of the men involved in the situation. And this coquettish game worked. For Lacan, it's as if the woman was saying: *But you see, I don't have the phallus, I'm a woman and purely woman.*"

Rivière is a student of Jones for whom penis-envy is not a primary element, but the result of an identificatory regression toward the father, accompanied by a destructive hatred of the latter. The woman patient is supposed to have the feeling of supremacy over parental figures, to have carried out a surreptitious subtraction of the source and the very symbol of their power and, because of this, to fear retribution.

Even if for Rivière it is a situation of splitting, which in her view is necessarily pathological, she nonetheless calls this masquerade *femininity*. Let us see how Lacan builds his own concepts subverting what the author thought he was saying.

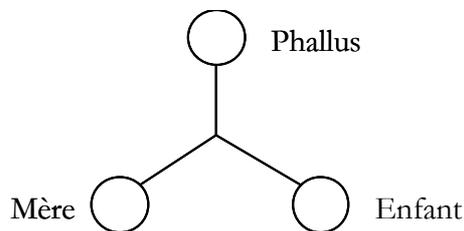
Concerning Rivière's article, Lacan begins by arguing that it is not a matter of pathological splitting, but rather of a necessary division in the constitution of the subject. He expresses admiration of Rivière's patient whose "*character of freedom and fulfillment is not a frequent in the evolution of female sexuality.*" Regarding this patient, now prototypical, he will remark that she finds it necessary *to be*, to some degree, *this phallus*, insofar as it is the very sign of what is desired. She thus identifies her subject's being with the phallus, signifier of the Other's desire, which will be concealed, hidden by the feminine masquerade, where she appears in her feminine mode. For Lacan it is indeed to this division that manifestations of what is considered femininity are responding.

It is only because the girl can depend on this identification with the father's insignnia, the basis of her ego ideal, that she will afterwards be able to take part in the masquerade of femininity, in this appearance – in this “*making oneself the object of an Other's desire.*” – without fear of losing her being. This *Spaltung*, this splitting, far from being a pathological element becomes, from this moment on, the very structure of a woman's access to femininity.

### The phallus as signifier

From 1956 on, Lacan<sup>28</sup> emphasized the signifying character of the phallus, the signifier of an imaginary lack in the mother, a lack which causes her to aim for a third place between her child and herself.

#### The imaginary triad.



In his seminar on the object relation, Lacan will say that this relation is impossible to understand if we don't include the phallus as a third party.

One of the great contributions of Lacanian theory will be to promote the notion of the lack of the object as central - not as something negative, but as the very source of the subject's relation to the world. He recalls that Freud places *castration* at the very center of neurosis, but this notion does not seem fully elaborated to him. He will propose that we distinguish it from the registers of *privation* and *frustration*. Privation is a real lack of a

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<sup>28</sup> Lacan J. : (1956-1957) *Le séminaire livre IV : La relation d'objet*, éd. du Seuil, Paris, 1994, p. 28-29

symbolic object. Frustration is an imaginary lack of a real object: of the phallic organ is, as something real, it's chagrin, hurt, damage; it introduces the register of demanding one's rights. Castration is a symbolic lack, it is what rules the Oedipus complex and the prohibition against incest. The object of the lack in this case cannot be real; it is not a question of amputating a real organ in order to lay down the law against incest. The object of the castration is imaginary; what is intended is the phallus insofar as it is imaginary, not a real organ. From this point of view, the little boy, like the little girl, is submitted to castration.

### **Being and/or having the phallus**

Being the phallus for the mother will here oppose itself to really having the phallus, and in fact for the boy, what he has as a little boy is not worth much more than what she doesn't have, for in his demand for love he would like to *be* this phallus. In Lacan's view – for this is not very clear in Freud – in this test of the desire of the Other (maternal in this case) the child experiences that his mother does not have the phallus, otherwise she would not go looking elsewhere for it.

*“If the phallus is the mother's desire, the child wants to be the phallus to satisfy it.”*

We should keep in mind this double character of the phallus, of being signifier of the lack on the symbolic level while at the same time being the very mark of manly potency in the imaginary register. We will see that quite often one of the causes of mid-life crisis in couples is an inability to recognize this twofold character in the play of desire between man and woman.

On the subject of female orgasm, Lacan thinks: *the ambo-receptive organ may always be said to give in prematurely*” This sentence elicits some comments. Let us first note that Lacan does not call this organ the phallus. He mainly observes how it falls short of fulfilling its phallic role. This is interesting for our study of mid-life crisis, for we see how much anxiety can arise when this “ambo-receptive” organ becomes the sole proof that a man can give to his companion of a “phallicity” that she herself does not have, especially when he is in his sixties and cannot immediately repeat his homage to her. This problem does not affect great men, for they have plenty of phallus in other areas, enabling them to be loved and

desired by very beautiful women who know how to play at masquerade by offering themselves – or rather their splendid body, hidden-revealed - as this phallus, all the while communicating with their gaze that it's the men who have it.

How can a woman surmount her *Penisenvy* he asks. By the most ordinary means, that of seduction between the sexes: by offering herself to a man's desire as the phallic object, a phallus that is not detumescent. If a woman makes herself a man's object, if she occupies the place of the phallus, her feminine attributes become the sign of the man's potency. For Lacan, this is what he had pointed out as being the feminine *masquerade*.

Here we can see very well a common clinical situation: the gentleman with an attractive young woman on his arm, perceives in the gaze of other men his own phallic brilliance. Let us note that Lacan does not perceive that this glorious, phallic body can also become detumescent: this is the aging process, so worrisome for women who were able to play at this feminine masquerade. To see her feminine traits losing day by day their value, to no longer be the one whose body can be exhibited with pride as a phallic foil for the male partner, this is the other experience of castration that many women must deal with at menopause. These women will have to find other ways of meeting their demand for the phallus. And there are others.

*"If the phallus is the mother's desire, the child wants to be the phallus to satisfy it."* hers!

In 1966, Lacan returns to the concept of femininity as masquerade; to this "*diffuse erotic charm*" he will give the name *object a*, the object cause of desire, the object around which the drive will turn.

### *On the proper use of Viagra in mid-life crisis*

#### **Mid-life crisis**

We often hear people talk about mid-life crisis. Men can go through a period where their desire for their companion seems to abate, or in any case is no longer so erected as before. In general, they worry about it and begin to doubt their capacities. In the U.S.A. one easily speaks of E.D. in these cases: erectile dysfunction. In Europe, some men would gladly exchange their fifty year-old wife for two twenty-five year-olds.

Women affected by this problem often tell us that the loss of their physical charms, the marks of time which are beginning to be felt on their bodies are responsible for what they believe to be their husbands' disaffection with them. Influenced by the idea that it's the wear on her body that is draining her husband's desire, many a woman gives up, considering that it's no use trying to keep playing the role of the one who has what it takes to cause desire in her husband. Some resign themselves to seeing their spouse shift his gaze, once again desirous, onto other women. It is said that the husband has been caught by the noonday demon, by his desire for new flesh; one concludes that the man is ungrateful to his companion of so many years. For others, this moment seems like liberation, they feel they are finally rid of this place in the masquerade where they were supposed to make use of their charms, and they feel relieved. For these women, the husband's Viagra will not only be ineffective, the mere idea that he would take it will be feared and condemned as proof of male phallic narcissism viewed with a very jaundiced eye. There is another category of women who fear Viagra, those for whom penetration continues to be rather unpleasant and who thus benefit from the relative impotence of their spouse. But still others start at this moment of their lives to make increased demands on their partner: through the potency of his erected desire, he must reassure her that her desirability remains intact. We see clearly in this context how the failure of male potency can be interpreted by the wife as the proof of the loss of her charms. If he goes to another woman (indeed sometimes a younger one) to reassure himself of his virility, the wife's initial hypothesis is proven right. But what in fact is happening? What psychoanalysis can answer is that sexual desire in man, in the being who speaks, always has some perverse feature. This is intrinsic to desire.

### **All desire has something perverse in it**

Here the notion of the perverse does not at all refer to pathology, but rather to the fact that, if this desire is to function, it must be able to hook onto a representation of what psychoanalysts call the positivized phallus. In practice this means there are two elements that enable this desire to become erect. First, the male desire for a woman generally will attach itself to one of her features: for some it's the legs or the buttocks, the shine of the eyes or hair, the curve of a breast, or some article of clothing. For others it will be a certain way of sitting, of dressing, of modulating the voice. It's this "object", which may be separated from her body that causes his desire. Here I'm speaking of desire, not love; the latter concerns the entire being. Of course there will be some feminists who will condemn what they call the reduction of a woman to an object. But many, while not letting themselves be duped, willingly take part in this and even play with the object that causes desire in their partner. They know what power they have in this. But a woman's power over her spouse's ability to prove his virility is even greater. It depends on a second element that he must find in his companion – and this is something not all women know. In order to keep his desire erected, the man needs to believe that in the eyes of his companion he is endowed with phallic value – a value of positive potency – which she does not have, and which she will therefore seek in him. This supposed potency can take various imaginary forms: if he is richer than she, if he has prestige or social status that can allow him to suppose she admires him, then he feels reassured. Being able to give her children can temporarily provide him with proof of his potency and also a one- or two-year respite from the demands he can fear his companion will make upon him..

### **For the man when there is no more perverse element, desire fails.**

It happens – and more and more often these days – that a woman no longer manages to signify to her spouse that, in her eyes, he has phallus. Her own financial independence removes from her husband's money the value of an imaginary phallus with which he is supposed to be endowed and which she is supposed to lack. Her career brings

her as much, if not more, honor than his does. So it is not social recognition either that can imaginarily embody the presence of the phallus in his field. As his wife can no longer receive a child from him, he is reduced to proving his phallicity in terms of his erectile organ. Though it imaginarily represents for many the phallic function, this organ is only one of the avatars, and the most fragile one at that. Burdened with proving all by itself the existence of the man's potency, it is even more likely to fail. It doesn't help that in his late fifties a man can experience some malfunctions that, without really being male menopause strictly speaking, correspond to an increase in time between two erections. It is then that he will consult an andrologist often complaining that his wife not only expects him to give bodily proof of his desire but that on top of that he must show himself capable of giving her a vaginal orgasm. How ironical! She who in the past seemed to prefer foreplay, now thinks only of being penetrated!

#### **On the feminine side:**

It is certainly not to get reassurance that some women become more demanding at this time in their life. It is likely that, for some, the end of their maternal role, or in any case the end of their possibility of having a child, permits them to rediscover or even to discover for the first time their sexual desire for their partner. Their refusal of the feminine, that is, their refusal of vaginal orgasm, seems to abate at this moment when they mourn being a mother, and at the same time mourn in certain way their own mother. So they are finally ready to receive the husband-lover who will lift them up to the heaven of enjoyment which has suddenly opened up to them. But when the husband faces her with no proof of his phallic potency other than the meager proof provided by the performances of his erectile organ, he can be fearful. Even if they don't lead him into impotence, he will tend to avoid women before whom he feels his phallic potency will be measured essentially in terms of his erectile performances. A joke that appeared in an American newspaper, reprinted by the very serious French newspaper *Le Monde* sums up this situation perfectly: a husband panics when he can't find his wife at home one hour after he took Viagra. "Try it with the housekeeper," his doctor advises. "But I've never had any problem with her," the

man replies with irritation ... This is the situation in France, but perhaps this phenomenon exists in the United States, too, with the same number of men and women who are alone in their fifties, the difference being that women who are alone in their fifties have had on the average five years of university study, while men who are alone at the same age stopped their studies five years before university.

These statistics already corroborate what I have been saying about how, for desire to function, it is necessary for this positive element of the phallus to be present. As analysts, we call this element perverse even if it is indispensable. It has to be there. If she has it, it's frightening, especially for older men. We know that younger men are often much less afraid of women at the top of their career. They are not yet afraid of failing in their virility. There is no reason why the marks of social success in this older woman should frighten them, on the contrary. But for a man in his fifties, thanks to Viagra, it can become the same.

### **Viagra in the drawer**

Here is where Viagra can turn the situation around. If, like the young man, he is sure of being able to prove his virile potency he will be less afraid of her and she will again be able to feel desired – as long as she knows that Viagra supports desire but does not in any way create it. She can then find pleasure again in the play of seduction. If she has an orgasm, all the better. He will see in his companion's gaze the proof of his phallicity. It is likely that, in the cases we are talking about, Viagra could have the same effects if it remains in the drawer, but next to the bed.

Can we hope that the burning charms of a woman's Indian summer will stop worrying her partner and that he can follow her towards autumn, savoring its fruits? After all, it is only in autumn that the grapes are harvested.

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