

CHAPTER THREE

Guiding Remarks for a Congress on Feminine Sexuality

'Guiding Remarks for a Congress on Feminine Sexuality' takes up points of controversy on the specific issue of feminine sexuality, as it appears in clinical practice. It is, therefore, a complement to 'The Meaning of the Phallus'. It was written in the same year, 1958, two years before a Colloquium on feminine sexuality, organised by the Société française de psychanalyse, which took place at the municipal University of Amsterdam in September 1960.

The article appeared in 1964 in a special issue (no. 7) of La Psychanalyse (the journal of the Society) on the question of feminine sexuality. The issue included, together with the papers from the congress, articles by Helene Deutsch (1925), Ernest Jones (1927, 1933) and Joan Rivière (1929), which had formed a central part of the earlier psychoanalytic debate on femininity in the 1920s and 1930s.

The article is laid out as a series of points, questions addressed to psychoanalysis around those topics – frigidity, masochism, passivity – which have conventionally come to be associated with feminine sexuality. These concepts, in which we can recognise a fully ideological account of femininity, are characterised here by Lacan in terms of mistake, omission and prejudice. Lacan argues that their theorisation by psychoanalysis has for the most part rested ultimately on a recourse to physiology or nature, and that the implications of the concept of the unconscious, in relation to desire and its representations, have been lost. The stress again here is that femininity cannot be understood outside the symbolic process through which it is constituted.

In this article, the problem of femininity is unequivocally the problem of the symbolic articulation of its forms. This raises issues, only touched on at the very end, which go beyond the domain of psychoanalysis proper, to the more familiar instances of women's subordination.

'Guiding Remarks for a Congress on Feminine Sexuality' was published in Ecrits (pp. 725–36).

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Guiding Remarks for a Congress on Feminine Sexuality' takes up the specific issue of feminine sexuality, as it appears in practice. It is, therefore, a complement to 'The Symposium on Feminine Sexuality', which was written in the same year, 1958, two years before the Symposium on feminine sexuality, organised by the International Psychoanalytic Association, which took place at the municipal congress in September 1960.

Published in 1964 in a special issue (no. 7) of the Journal of the Society for the Study of Feminine Sexuality, it included, together with the papers from the Symposium, Helene Deutsch (1925), Ernest Jones (1927), and Sigmund Freud (1929), which had formed a central part of the debate on femininity in the 1920s and 1930s.

It is presented as a series of points, questions addressed to those topics – frigidity, masochism, passivity – which are normally associated with feminine sexuality. In these points, in which we can recognise a fully ideological position, are characterised here by Lacan in terms of the concept of prejudice. Lacan argues that their theorisation of femininity for the most part rested ultimately on a recourse to the concept of desire and that the implications of the concept of the feminine, and that the implications of the concept of the feminine, have been lost. It is argued that femininity cannot be understood outside the context in which it is constituted.

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I Historical introduction

Taking the experience of psychoanalysis in its development over sixty years, it comes as no surprise to note that, whereas the first outcome of its origins was a conception of the castration complex based on paternal repression, it has progressively directed its interests towards the frustrations coming from the mother, not that such a distortion has shed any light on the complex.

A notion of emotional deprivation linking disturbances of development directly to the real inadequacies of mothering has been overlaid with a dialectic of fantasies which takes the maternal body as its imaginary field.

What is unquestionably involved here is a conceptual foregrounding of the sexuality of the woman, which brings to our attention a remarkable oversight.

II Definition of the subject

This is an oversight which bears directly on the issue which I would like to draw your attention to here, namely, that of the feminine part, if the term has any meaning, of what is played out in the genital relation, in which the act of coitus occupies, to put it no higher, a limited and local place.

Or, alternatively, so as not to fall down on the distinguished biological references which continue to gratify: what are the paths of libido laid down for the woman by the anatomical characteristics of sexual differentiation in the higher organisms?

III Reassessment of the facts

Such a project requires first that we reassess:

- (a) the phenomena to which women testify within the conditions of psychoanalytic experience in relation to the paths leading to, and the act of, coitus, as confirming or otherwise the nosological bases of our medical point of departure;
- (b) the subordination of these phenomena to forces which our practice recognises as desires, especially to their unconscious residues (together with the ensuing effects on the psychic

- economy whether these be efferent or afferent in relation to the act), amongst which residues those of love can be considered on their own account without prejudicing the transmission of their consequences to the child;
- (c) the as yet unchallenged implications of a psychical bisexuality which was originally attributed to the duplications of anatomy, but has increasingly been ascribed to the logic of personal identifications.

IV Glaring omissions

A summary of this kind would bring out certain omissions, whose interest cannot simply be dismissed as 'not proven':

1. On the one hand, recent developments within physiology, such as the fact of chromosomal sexuality and its genetic correlates, as distinct from hormonal sexuality, and the relative share of each in anatomical determination; or simply what appears to be a libidinal predominance of the male hormone, to the extent of its regulating the oestrogen metabolism in the menstrual phenomenon. While the clinical interpretations of these facts may still be subject to reservations, yet they demand consideration no less for having been consistently ignored by a practice which would sooner claim messianic access to decisive chemical forces.

The fact of our keeping, here, at a distance from the real may well raise the question of the division deliberately being imposed – which if it does not belong between the somatic and the psychic, which are in fact continuous, should be made between the organism and the subject. This assumes that we repudiate the affective dimension which the theory of error lays on this subject, and articulate it as the subject of a combinatory logic, which alone gives the unconscious its meaning.

2. On the other hand, the key position of the phallus in libidinal development is a paradox exclusive to the psychoanalytic approach, which must be addressed because of its insistent recurrence in the facts.

This is where the question of the phallic phase for the woman becomes even more problematic, in that having unleashed a fury during the years 1927–35, it has since been left, in a tacit under-

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standing, to the good will of individual interpretation.

Only by asking why this is the case, might we possibly break
this deadlock.

When in this instance the terms imaginary, real or symbolic are
used to refer to the incidence of the phallus in the subjective
structure where development is lodged, they are not the words of
a particular teaching, but the very words which signal under the
pens of their authors the conceptual slidings which, because they
went unchecked, led to the lull experienced after the breakdown
of the debate.

V The obscurity concerning the vaginal organ

However oblique a way of proceeding, noting a prohibition can
serve as a prelude.

A prohibition which seems to be confirmed by the fact that
psychoanalysis, as a discipline which answered from its field in
the name of sexuality, and seemed to be about to bring its whole
secret to light, gave up on what can be uncovered about feminine
jouissance at exactly the same point that a scarcely zealous
physiology admits to being licked.

The fairly trivial opposition between clitoral orgasm and
vaginal satisfaction has had theory backing its cause, to the point
of laying at its door the distress of subjects, and even of turning it
into an issue, if not a platform – not that one can say that any light
has been shed on the antagonism between the two.

This being because the vaginal orgasm has kept the darkness of
its nature inviolate.

For it has been shown that the massotherapeutic notion of the
sensitivity of the cervix and the surgical notion of a *noli tangere* of
the rear lining of the vagina are contingent factors (doubtless in
hysterectomies but also in vaginal aplasias!).

The representatives of the female sex, however loud their
voices at the analysts, do not seem to have done their utmost
towards the breaking of this seal.

Apart from the famous 'lease-hold' of rectal dependency on
which Lou Andreas-Salomé took a personal stand, they have
generally kept to metaphors whose pitch of idealism indicates
nothing deserving preference over what the first comer might
offer us by way of less intentional poetry.

A congress on feminine sexuality is not going to hold over us

the threat of the fate of Tiresias.

VI The imaginary complex and questions of development

If it is the case that this state of things betrays a scientific impasse in our way of approaching the real, still the least one might expect of psychoanalysts, gathered at a congress, is that they bear in mind that their method was born precisely from a similar impasse.

If in this instance symbols have a purely imaginary hold, it is probably because the images are already subject to an unconscious symbolism, in other words to a complex – an apt moment to remind ourselves that images and symbols *for* the woman cannot be isolated from images and symbols *of* the woman.

It is representation (*Vorstellung* in the sense in which Freud uses the term to signal something repressed), the representation of feminine sexuality, whether repressed or not, which conditions how it comes into play, and it is the displaced offshoots of this representation (in which the therapist's doctrine can find itself implicated) which decide the outcome of its tendencies, however naturally roughed out one may take such tendencies to be.

Remember that Jones, in his lecture to the Viennese society which seems to have scorched the earth for any contribution since, already came up with nothing other than a pure and simple rallying to Kleinian concepts in the perfect crudity with which their author presents them: by which I mean Melanie Klein's persistent failure to acknowledge that the Oedipal fantasies which she locates in the maternal body originate from the reality presupposed by the Name of the Father.

When one thinks that this is all Jones manages to produce out of his grand design to resolve Freud's paradox, which sets up the woman in primary ignorance of her sex (although this is at least tempered by the informed admission of our ignorance) – a design which is so inspired in Jones by his prejudice for dominance by the natural that he is happy to sanction it with a quotation from Genesis – then it is none too clear what has been gained.

For in so far as it is a question of the wrong done to the female sex (is woman 'born or made' Jones cries) by the equivocal function of the phallic phase in the two sexes, then femininity

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does not seem to be made any more specific by the even more
 equivocal function which the phallus acquires when it is pushed
 right back to oral aggression.

So much fuss will not have been in vain if it allows us to play
 the following questions on the lyre of development, since that is
 the tune.

1. Is the bad object, which is extracted by a fantastic phallophagia
 from the breast of the maternal body, a paternal attribute?
2. When this object is raised to the status of a good object, which
 is desired as a more controllable (sic) and more satisfying nipple,
 (more satisfying in what?), then we have to ask: is this object
 taken from the same third party? For we cannot simply parade
 the notion of the combined parent, without knowing whether it
 is as image or symbol that this hybrid is constituted.
3. How does the clitoris, which, however autistic one would
 have it, none the less imposes itself in the real, come to be
 compared with the preceding fantasies?

If it independently places the sex of the little girl under the sign
 of an organic minus-value, then the way that its fantasies take on
 an aspect of endless reduplication renders highly suspect the
 'legendary' fable of how these fantasies arise.

If the clitoris (it too) is combined with the bad as it is with the
 good object, then a theory is needed of how the phallus is
 assigned the function of equivalence in the emergence of all
 objects of desire, for which mention of its 'partial' character is not
 enough.

4. At all events, we arrive at the question of structure, which was
 introduced by Freud's approach: which means that the relation
 of privation or lack-in-being symbolised by the phallus, is
 established by derivation from the lack-in-having engendered by
 any particular or global frustration of demand. It is on the basis of
 this substitution, which in the last analysis the clitoris puts in its
 place before succumbing to the competition, that the field of
 desire precipitates its new objects (with the child to come at the
 fore), as it picks up the sexual metaphor into which all other
 needs had already entered.

This remark assigns to questions on development their limit
 by demanding their subordination to a fundamental synchrony.

VII Mistakes and prejudices

At this point we should also query whether phallic mediation drains off the whole force of the drives in the woman, and notably the whole current of the maternal instinct. Perhaps we should also state here that the fact that everything that can be analysed is sexual does not entail that everything sexual is accessible to analysis.

1. As far as the supposed ignorance of the vagina is concerned, while on the one hand it is difficult not to attribute to repression its frequent persistence beyond the point of credibility, yet the fact remains that, apart from certain case-studies (Josine Müller), which we will disregard precisely because of the traumatic character of their evidence, those who hold to the 'normal' knowledge of the vagina are reduced to founding it on the primacy of a downwards displacement of the experiences of the mouth, that is, to a considerable worsening of the disagreement they claim to palliate.

2. The problem of feminine masochism comes next, already signalled by this promotion of a partial drive (a drive which is regressive in its condition, whether or not one classifies it as pre-genital) to the rank of one axis of genital maturity.

In point of fact such a classification cannot be taken merely as the homonym for a passivity which in itself is already metaphorical, and its idealising function, which is the other side of its regressive note, is made glaringly obvious by the fact that it has remained unchallenged in the face of the accumulation (possibly overstated in modern analytical genesis), of the castrating and devouring, dislocating and astounding effects of feminine activity.

Even given what masochistic perversion owes to masculine invention, is it safe to conclude that the masochism of the woman is a fantasy of the desire of the man?

3. Either way, the claim that fantasies of breaking bodily frontiers can be deduced from an organic constant, for which the rupture of the ovular membrane would be the prototype, can be denounced as irresponsible idiocy. Such a crude analogy reveals only too well the distance from Freud's way of thinking in this area when he elucidated the taboo of virginity.

4. For what we are touching on here is the particular force dis-

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tinguishing *vaginismus* from neurotic symptoms, even where the
two co-exist, which explains its responsiveness to the suggestive
method, whose success in painless deliveries is notorious.

If it is the case that analysis has got to the point of swallowing
back its own vomit by tolerating a confusion of anxiety and fear
within its orbit, perhaps this is the occasion to distinguish
between unconscious and prejudice in relation to the effects of
the signifier.

And simultaneously to acknowledge that the analyst is as
prone as anyone else to prejudice about sex, over and above that
which is revealed to him, or to her, by the unconscious.

Have we remembered Freud's often repeated warning not to
reduce the supplement of feminine over masculine to the
complement of passive to active?

VIII Frigidity and the subjective structure

1. However widespread frigidity may be – and it is virtually
generic if one takes into account its transitory form – it pre-
supposes the whole unconscious structure which determines
neurosis, even if it appears outside the web of the symptoms.
This accounts on the one hand for its inaccessibility to any
somatic treatment, and, on the other hand, for the normal failure
of the good offices of the most wished-for of partners.

Analysis alone mobilises it, at times incidentally, but always in
a transference which cannot be contained by the infantilising
dialectic of frustration, that is, of privation, but one which
always brings symbolic castration into play. In which context it
is worth recalling a basic principle.

2. A principle which can be simply stated: that castration cannot
be deduced from development alone, since it presupposes the
subjectivity of the Other as the place of its law. The otherness of
sex is denatured by this alienation. Man here acts as the relay
whereby the woman becomes this Other for herself as she is this
Other for him.

It is in this sense that an unveiling of the Other involved in the
transference can modify a defence which has been taken up
symbolically.

By which I mean that, in this case, defence should first be con-
ceived of in the dimension of masquerade which the presence of

the Other releases in its sexual role.

If we start by taking this veiling affect as our reference for object positions, then we might get some idea of how to deflate the monstrous conceptualisation whose credit in analytic circles I challenged above. Perhaps all that this conceptualisation shows is how everything gets ascribed to the woman in so far as she represents, in the phallogentric dialectic, the absolute Other.

We must therefore go back to penis envy (*penisneid*), where we note that at two different moments and each time with a certainty untroubled by any recollection of the other occasion, Jones makes of it a perversion and then a phobia.

The two appraisals are equally false and dangerous. The second indicates the abolition of the function of structure in the face of that of development, a position into which analysis has progressively slipped – this as against Freud's emphasis on phobia as the keystone of neurosis. In the first, analysis heads off into the labyrinth where the study of perversions has been attempting, with the utmost dedication, to account for the function of the object.

At the last turn in this palace of mirages, one ends up at the *splitting* of the object, having missed in Freud's admirable unfinished paper on the *splitting* of the *ego*, the *fading* of the subject which accompanies it.

Perhaps it will be this end point which finally lifts the illusion from the *splitting* in which analysis has got stuck by making good and bad into attributes of the object.

Inasmuch as the position of the sexes does differ in relation to the object, it is by all the distance which separates the fetishistic from the erotomanic form of love. We should find this standing out in the most common experience.

3. If we start with the man so as to measure the reciprocal position of the sexes, it is clear that the 'phallus-girls' of Fenichel's admirable if tentative equation, proliferate on a Venusberg way beyond the 'You are my wife' through which the man constitutes his partner, which confirms that what surfaces in the unconscious of the subject is the desire of the Other, that is, the phallus desired by the Mother.

This opens up the question of whether the real penis, in that it actually belongs to her sexual partner, commits the woman to an attachment without duplicity, granted the resolving of her incestuous desire whose course would in this argument be seen as

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natural. Taking this problem as settled, it can be posed the other way round.

4. Indeed, why not acknowledge that if there is no virility which castration does not consecrate, then for the woman it is a castrated lover or a dead man (or even both at the same time) who hides behind the veil where he calls on her adoration from that same place beyond the maternal *imago* which sent out the threat of a castration not really concerning her.

From then on, it is through this ideal incubus that a receptivity of embrace has to be transposed into the sensitivity of holding the penis.

It is this which is blocked by any imaginary identification on the part of the woman (in her stature as the object proffered to desire) with the phallic standard which upholds the fantasy.

In the position of either-or where the subject finds herself caught between a pure absence and a pure sensitivity, it is not surprising that the narcissism of desire immediately latches on to the narcissism of the *ego* which is its prototype. Analysis accustoms us to recognising that insignificant beings should be inhabited by so subtle a dialectic, which can also be explained by the fact that the least of the *ego's* failings is its banality.

5. The figure of Christ, which in this light conjures up others more ancient, can be seen here in a more widespread capacity than that which is called for by the religious allegiance of the subject. And it is worth noting that the unveiling of the most hidden signifier of the Mysteries was reserved to women.

At a more mundane level, one can thus account for:

- (a) the fact that the duplicity of the subject is masked in the woman, all the more so in that the servitude of the spouse makes her particularly apt to represent the victim of castration;
- (b) the true motive for the particular character of the demand for the fidelity of the Other on the part of the woman;
- (c) the fact that it is easier for her to justify this demand by making the case of her own fidelity.

6. This outline of the problem of frigidity is sketched out in terms which can accommodate without difficulty the classical instances of analysis. Its broad outlines are intended to help avoid the pitfall which is progressively distorting the true nature of analytic works, as they come more and more to resemble a makeshift

bicycle, put together by a savage who had never seen one, out of components taken from models so historically remote as to have no correspondence to the original. Not that this prevents their being put to double use.

The least we can ask is that some elegance should brighten up the trophies thus obtained.

IX Feminine homosexuality and ideal love

The study of the framework of perversions in the woman opens up a different bias.

1. Since it has been effectively demonstrated that the imaginary motive for most male perversions is the desire to preserve the phallus which involved the subject in the mother, then the absence in women of fetishism, which represents the virtually manifest case of this desire, leads us to suspect that this desire has a different fate in the perversions which she presents.

For to assume that the woman herself takes on the role of fetish, only raises the question of the difference of her position in relation to desire and to the object.

In the inaugural lecture of his series on the early development of feminine sexuality, Jones starts with his unusual experience of homosexuality in the woman, taking a line which he might have done better to sustain. He makes the desire of the subject branch off in the choice imposed on her between the incestuous object, in this case the father, and her own sex. The resulting clarification would be greater if it did not stop short at the too convenient prop of identification.

A better equipped observation would surely bring out that what is involved is more a taking up of the object: what might be called a challenge taken up. Freud's chief case, inexhaustible as always, makes it clear that this challenge is set off by a demand for love thwarted in the real and that it stops at nothing short of taking on the airs of a courtly love.

In that such a love prides itself more than any other on being the love which gives what it does not have, so it is precisely in this that the homosexual woman excels in relation to what is lacking to her.

Strictly speaking, it is not the incestuous object that the latter

chooses at the price of her own sex; what she will not accept is that this object only assumes its sex at the price of castration.

Not that this means that she gives up on her own sex for all that: quite the contrary, in all forms of feminine homosexuality, including those which are unconscious, it is towards femininity that the supreme interest is borne, and Jones clearly detected here the link between the fantasy of the man as invisible witness and the care which the subject shows for the enjoyment of her partner.

2. We still have to take up the naturalness with which such women appeal to their quality of being men, as opposed to the delirious style of the transsexual male.

Perhaps what this reveals is the path leading from feminine sexuality to desire itself.

Far from its being the case that the passivity of the act corresponds to this desire, feminine sexuality appears as the effort of a *jouissance* wrapped in its own contiguity (for which all circumcision might represent the symbolic rupture) to be *realised in the envy* of desire, which castration releases in the male by giving him its signifier in the phallus.

Could it be this privileging of the signifier that Freud is getting at when he suggests that there is perhaps only one libido and that it is marked with the male sign? Should some chemical configuration confirm this further, why not see this as the exalting conjunction of the molecular dissymmetry employed by the living construction, with the lack concerted in the subject through language, so that the holders of desire and the claimants of sex (the partiality of the term being still the same here) work against each other as rivals?

X Feminine sexuality and society

A number of questions remain concerning the social incidences of feminine sexuality.

1. Why is the analytic myth found wanting on the prohibition of incest between the father and daughter?
2. How should we situate the social effects of feminine homosexuality in relation to those which Freud attributed to masculine homosexuality, on the basis of assumptions remote from the

allegory to which they have since been reduced: that is, a sort of entropy tending towards communal degradation?

Without going so far as to set against this the antisocial effects to which Catharism, together with the love which it inspired, owed its disappearance, surely the more accessible movement of the *Précieuses*¹ shows the eros of feminine homosexuality as conveying the opposite of social entropy?

3. Finally, why does the social instance of the woman remain transcendent to the order of the contract propagated by work? And in particular, is it an effect of this that the status of marriage is holding out in the decline of paternalism?

All these are questions which cannot be reduced to a field regulated by needs.

Written two years before the Congress.

Note

1. *Les Précieuses*: a social and literary circle of ladies which centred around the Hotel Rambouillet in seventeenth-century Paris; they were renowned for their culture and for the refinement of their use of language (tr.).