



Oedipus, the Limit of Psychoanalysis

It is well known that the Oedipus complex plays a central role for Lacan. In his early seminars, including *The Psychoses*, *The Object Relation*, and *Formations of the Unconscious*, he refers to the Oedipus complex constantly, recurrently, and persistently. Indeed, his conceptual edifice revolves around it. The mother's desire, the phallus as object of the mother's desire, the child that initially wants *to be* the phallus and then comes to accept *to have* the phallus; the Name-of-the-Father—none of this would make any sense outside its reference to the function of the Oedipus complex. This is all so much magnificent and complex machinery that depends on, indeed is a part of, the Oedipus complex, which, for Lacan, we must invoke if we are to explain pretty well anything that is at all relevant to psychoanalysis, whether it be a phobia in a child, the nature of hysteria and obsessional neurosis, why psychosis and not neurosis, the conditions for fetishism and transsexualism to be set in place, or, of course, the engendering of masculinity and femininity. In all of this, the particular dynamics of the Oedipus complex in each particular case are invoked, in the constant belief that this is where we have to look to understand the origin and nature of the different clinical structures that are the psychoanalyst's daily fare. Without the Oedipus complex, there is no possibility of understanding neurosis, psychosis, or perversion, no way of thinking about sexuation. The constant return to the Oedipus complex indicates Lacan's belief that nothing can be under-

stood in the absence of a reference to it as the cornerstone of psychoanalysis. Whereas Freud called it the “nucleus of the neuroses,” Lacan went further, declaring that the Oedipus complex covers the entire field of analytic experience, marking the limit that our discipline assigns to subjectivity.¹

Lacan discusses, elaborates, and develops Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex at great length in his early seminars. See, for instance, his discussion of the “three moments” of the Oedipus complex in *Seminar V*; or, in *Seminar IV*, the detailed breakdown of the Oedipus complex in terms of the real father, the imaginary father, and the symbolic mother; symbolic castration, imaginary frustration, and real privation; the imaginary phallus, the symbolic phallus, and the real breast. All this is discussed and elaborated in the 1950s—and in a way, it must be said, that is very compelling, clarifies a great number of issues in psychoanalysis, and is clinically useful.

Critique of the Oedipus Complex

Then something unexpected happens. At about the time of *Seminar XVI*, *Seminar XVII*, *Seminar XVIII* (1968–71) Lacan gradually came to dismiss the Oedipus complex as being at best useless and irrelevant and, at worst, liable to lead us into significant errors of judgment in the clinical setting. Most analysts ignore it altogether, he says, even those trained in his school. Those who make it a point of reference for their work get into all sorts of bother—one need look no further than Freud’s own cases. This turnaround is particularly apparent in *Seminar XVII*, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, and *Seminar XVIII*, *D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, where Lacan adopts a surprisingly new approach to the Oedipus complex and to what up till then had been the key signifier the Name-of-the-Father. Quite suddenly Lacan starts referring to the Oedipus complex as “Freud’s dream.” If it is a dream, he says, it can no longer be a theoretical construction to be unpacked, dissected, and rebuilt; it can no longer be the bedrock of psychoanalysis. If it is Freud’s dream, it is a formation of the unconscious and that implies that it calls for interpretation.²

Why this turnaround from seeing the Oedipus complex as the bedrock of psychoanalysis to the judgment that it is a dream of Freud’s? While there are probably a number of reasons, one factor is absolutely

crucial: the introduction, in the late 1960s, of the theory of the four discourses and, in particular, the role played within the four discourses of the concepts of master, master signifier, S_1 , and master's discourse.

$$\begin{array}{ccc} S_1 & \rightarrow & S_2 \\ \hline \$ & & a \end{array}$$

The master's discourse

Many things follow from this, in particular, the hysteric's discourse, the analyst's discourse, and the university discourse, which are derivatives of the principal discourse, the master's discourse.

When Lacan calls the Oedipus complex Freud's dream, we have to understand that he is distinguishing it from myth. It is *also* a myth, one that takes two forms in Freud's work: the Oedipus complex that derives from Sophocles's play and a myth of Freud's own invention, which is the myth of the primal father that is advanced for the first time in *Totem and Taboo*. But by calling it a dream he is implying that there is a place for it to be treated psychoanalytically and not anthropologically.

The difference between anthropology and psychoanalysis is important, and even though Lacan always appreciated it, it took some time for him to realize its full significance. Lacan initially thought that psychoanalysis could draw upon Lévi-Strauss's anthropology of myths, and he engaged in some serious efforts to make use of Lévi-Strauss's work in his own work on individual analytic cases. His approach in *Seminar IV* in 1957 to the analysis of Little Hans draws heavily upon Lévi-Strauss's study of myths and analysis of the Oedipus myth, or myths, in particular. He takes a similar approach in "The Neurotic's Individual Myth," conceived analogously to Freud's thesis on religion, when he takes obsessional neurosis to be an individual religion of the neurotic. Here, it seems, the analyst has much to learn from the anthropologist's method for the analysis of myths, which comprises a comparative study of all the different versions of the myth that are known to exist. If one applies this method to Little Hans, as Lacan does, then the evolution of his phobia can be regarded as exhibiting a number of versions of the key Oedipal myth, as the young boy grapples with the questions of his existence and his sexual identity.

In "The Structural Study of Myth," Lévi-Strauss develops a method for uncovering the underlying structure of myths and takes the myth of

Oedipus as a case study.³ Noting that the myth can be found all around the world, though disguised in various ways, he gathers together all its known variants for analysis. For Lévi-Strauss, the meaning of the myth resides not in the story narrated but in the way in which the elements of the myth, the “mythemes,” are combined with one another. A mytheme is a phrase or proposition, not unlike a fantasy, at least as Lacan understands it, such as, for example, “A child is being beaten.”

Lévi-Strauss’s method consists of writing the themes of a myth out from left to right, with different myths located one above the other, as if they were each the parts of the one orchestral score. When the elements from different myths express the same theme or idea, one locates them one above the other, without taking any account of the order in which the elements occur in the original myth. Take, by way of illustration, Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* and Sophocles’s *Antigone*, which Lévi-Strauss considers to be variants of the same myth. This gives:

Myth of Oedipus

1	2	3	4
Oedipus marries his mother, Jocasta.	Oedipus kills his father, Laius.	Oedipus im-molates the sphinx.	“Labdacos” means lame. “Laius” means left.
Antigone buries her brother, Polynices, in defiance of the law.	Eteocles kills his brother, Polynices.		“Oedipus” means swollen foot.
Blood ties are overrated.	Blood ties are underrated.	The de-struction of monsters	Difficulties in walking properly
Contraries Human origins		Contraries Autochthonous origins	
Contraries			

Note the following about the four columns: Columns 1 and 2 are contraries; and so, too, are Columns 3 and 4, although it is less apparent because the opposition appears in symbolic form. In column 4 the difficulty with walking represents the terrestrial, or autochthonous, origins of humans, while in column 3 the destruction of monsters signifies the negation of these autochthonous origins. Thus, columns 1 and 2, on the one hand, and columns 3 and 4, on the other, form two contrary pairs.⁴ Now, if we also consider the fact that columns 1 and 2 concern the question of human origins, and columns 3 and 4 concern the question of autochthonous origins, then, again, we can see that the key term in the opposition around which the contrary relations in the left-hand pair revolve is contrary to the key term in the opposition around which the right-hand side contraries revolve. These myths thus use this “bridging” technique to move from an initial problem—“Is one born from one or from two?”—that is the inevitable question and enigma of human reproduction, to another, derivative issue, “Is the same born out of the same or out of something that is different?”

This, then, according to Lévi-Strauss, gives us the structural law of the Oedipus myth. It confronts the impossibility of passing from belief in the autochthonous origins of humans to the recognition of birth from two parents. A myth is a kind of logical instrument for resolving contradictions such as these. It typically fails to resolve the contradictions, since the contradictions it confronts are nevertheless real ones. However, for Lévi-Strauss, the mere fact that the motivation for myth is to resolve a contradiction means that mythical and scientific reasoning are no different in kind; mythical reasoning is not a “primitive” form of thought that scientific reasoning has superseded.

Concerning Freud’s Oedipus complex, note that Lévi-Strauss’s analysis is somewhat double-edged as far as psychoanalysis is concerned. On the one hand it claims that the Oedipus complex is universal and that it can be found in widely different cultures that have had no contact with one another. Yet this discovery, which in appearance psychoanalysis can claim to have made, is a sign that psychoanalysis’s epistemological pretensions are unjustified, for Freud’s Oedipus complex turns out to be just another version of this myth, alongside all the others. In Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of the Oedipus myth, with all its variants, the Freudian version becomes so much grist to the anthropologist’s mill: psycho-

analysis cannot claim to have revealed “the truth,” the true meaning, of the myth; rather, the psychoanalytic version becomes merely a modern version of the myth, indistinguishable from all the others in being just one more variant. In Freud’s version, the question of autochthony disappears, it is true, but the other theme, *How is one born from two?*, remains. For Lévi-Strauss this merely shows the continuing importance and relevance of the Oedipus myth across very different cultural and social contexts.

Lacan takes a different view from Lévi-Strauss about the relationship between science and myth, and also about the place of the Freudian Oedipus complex. He agrees that at the heart of myth there is a point of impossibility, a “contradiction.” Lacan’s name for this impossibility is the real, and in the Oedipus complex this “bit of real” is the impossibility of any sexual relationship between man and woman. However, he differs from Lévi-Strauss in thinking that myth covers over this bit of impossibility by giving it a sense, a “bit of meaning,” in the form of a fiction. The myth is, thus, a fictional story woven around this point of impossibility, or the real, which is why Lacan says that there is indeed truth in myth, but that it is truth that has the structure of fiction.

Lacan thinks that science does the opposite to this activity of myth of covering over points of impossibility. Whereas myth is something that generates sense and meaning, which is its function, the tendency of science is to reduce meaning and sense to the point of eliminating them. Science pares them away to the point where it can demonstrate an impossibility. Lacan also claims that writing is essential to this process and that there is no science, and he includes mathematics in this, without writing. It is therefore significant that myth, on the other hand, proceeds by way of speech, which is crucial to the way in which myth expresses the truth. Myth, for Lacan, accomplishes this “bridging” mentioned by Lévi-Strauss by producing something that is a mixture of the imaginary and the symbolic, and it is in actual fact a way of papering over the impossible, real kernel around which the myth is constructed and for which it was originally formulated. Science cannot write the impossible, any more than myth can *say* it; here they are on common ground. However, science differs from myth in that it can, and does, use symbolic means to demonstrate and expose this impossibility, whereas myth con-

stantly revolves around the impossibility in recurrent attempts at resolving questions that have no answers.

For Lacan, Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myth actually makes myth much closer to fantasy than to science. At least, it does if we think of fantasy in the way Lacan does, as a phrase or proposition—"A child is being beaten," for instance—that takes the place of a point of impossibility, a "contradiction," such as the sexual relationship between man and woman, which both indicates the place of the impossibility and, at the same time, occludes it by means of a fantasmatic profusion of meaning.

We need, then, to distinguish four domains: myth, fantasy, science, and psychoanalysis. The difference between science on the one hand and fantasy and myth on the other comes down to the response each makes to the real. Lacan's insight was to see that this was the point at which psychoanalysis was on common ground with science, and his ambition was to make psychoanalysis more scientific at this point.

A dream is not a myth, however, and if Lacan is right in thinking that the Oedipus complex was "Freud's dream," then the Oedipus complex is not a myth either. If it is a dream then it will have been formed according to different laws. As we know from Freud, the dream is a product, a "formation," of the unconscious. The dream work distorts and disguises the latent content of the dream in the service of unconscious desire according to the two processes by which the latent material is encoded: condensation and displacement, which are equivalent to the linguistic operations of metaphor and metonymy. These unconscious processes are both unknown to myth. This is why Lacan was able to point out the limitation of Lévi-Strauss's analysis with great precision. In "Radiophonie," a radio broadcast of 1970 prepared over the course of *Seminar XVII*, Lacan says, "Myths, in their elaboration by Lévi-Strauss, refuse everything that I have promoted in the instance of the letter in the unconscious. They perform no metaphor, nor even any metonymy. They do not condense; they explain. They do not dislodge; they lodge, even to the point of changing the order of the texts."⁵

The mechanisms of dream formation make dreams specific to the language (or, as sometimes happens, languages) in which they are dreamed. Dreams rely on the features of a language, its polysemies, ambiguities, and so on, that constitute the language as language, *lalangue*, in one

word. This language-specific character of dreams contrasts with the universality of the Oedipus myth. Lacan continues the radio address by adding that the myth is “untranslatable.” This seems an odd thing to say, given that one and the same myth can be found in different linguistic communities with very little variation, that myth has something universal about it, and therefore that myths do indeed “translate” from one linguistic community to another. However, what Lacan has in mind is that a myth is not rooted in any given language. A myth is neither embedded in nor an expression of a particular language. Rather, it is part of language in the same way that proper names are, passing untranslated from one language to another.

While it was only in 1970 that Lacan became fully aware of the distance separating psychoanalysis from anthropology, with hindsight it is possible to see that the crucial development in Lacan’s move away from Lévi-Strauss’s views occurs in 1958 with the development of the theory of the paternal metaphor, where the metaphoric process of substitution of the Name-of-the-Father for the mother’s desire places us squarely within the field of formation of the unconscious. By 1970, Lacan is aware of the significance of metaphor and metonymy and how they differ from the operations at play in the construction of myths; we can get an idea of the time it took for Lacan to understand by the degree of lag between, on the one hand, the elaboration of a theory of metaphor and metonymy and the Lévi-Straussian analysis of Little Hans in *Seminar IV*, and on the other the critique of Lévi-Strauss in 1970.

Castration and the Oedipus Complex

A dream disguises; the dream work is a work of distortion. According to Lacan, then, the place given to the father in Freud’s work covers up and papers over its underlying structure, presenting it in disguised form. Nevertheless, the father does not occupy just one place in Freud’s work but varies from one version of the Oedipus complex to the next, from *The Interpretation of Dreams*, through *Totem and Taboo* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and down to Freud’s final work, *Moses and Monotheism*. Nevertheless, all versions of the myth consistently paper over the same form of the real as impossible: the sexual relationship between man and woman. There is a further element that for Freud is part

of the father's role and is essential to and recurrent in Freud's account of the Oedipus complex, present in all versions, but which is absent from the original myth of Oedipus: the castration complex.

Psychoanalysts since Freud have had difficulty knowing what to do with or how to understand the castration complex and have proposed a number of candidates as the source of the threat or fear of castration. The most popular of these is that the trauma of castration originates in the registration of the anatomical difference between the sexes, the ensuing recognition of a "lack," and the child's aggression toward the father, which comes to be turned back around upon him or (less persuasively) her in the form of the threat of castration.⁶ By the same token, however, there is no real reason to specifically invoke castration in the case of the primal horde father. Why should the threat from the primal father be the threat of castration? And in the Oedipal myth, in either Freud's version or Sophocles's version, there is, strictly speaking, no particularly prominent place given to castration.

Indeed, there is no inherent link between castration and its mythical, Oedipal, settings. Given this fact, it might be fruitful to acknowledge the point and begin to treat them as separate and distinct. This is what Lacan undertakes in *Seminar XVII*. Thus, on the one hand Lacan explores the question of the castration complex independently of the Oedipal context in which it is embedded. This line of approach eventually leads him to the formulas of sexuation that we are familiar with from *Seminar XX, Encore*. On the other hand, we can enquire into the reasons why Freud holds so strongly to the Oedipus complex itself. If we follow Lacan well enough, we may be able to see why he thinks that the Oedipus complex in Freud is designed to "save the father."

For Lacan castration is not a fantasy, and, a fortiori, is not a fantasy about a castrating father or any supposed encounter with the opposite sex. These are at best precipitating causes for what is a real operation, which is brought about by language itself. For Freud, in the case of the little girl the castration complex acts as a trigger for her to pass into the Oedipus complex, whereas the little boy exits the Oedipus complex as a result of his encounter with castration. For Lacan castration is an operation that is brought about by language and determined by the master signifier, S_1 , and arises from a confrontation between the signifier and enjoyment.

Lacan's four discourses in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* are an attempt to formalize the structure of this relationship between signifier, in the form of semblant, and enjoyment. All four discourses, but particularly the master's discourse, share a common aim with the myth of the primal horde in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, in that Freud's work is as much an attempt to give an account of the social bond that binds people together, along with an account of what segregates them, as it is an account of the origin of religion.

All of this in Freud is constructed on the basis of the father's murder. There is of course no question of the father's murder describing an actual historical event, even though Freud believed it had to be true, and even though this was the work he took perhaps greatest pride in. The primal-horde tale takes precisely the place of a myth, describing as it does an ahistorical event that, as Lévi-Strauss puts it, "evokes an abolished past" that is projected into all eternity, and a fortiori into the present. If we reject the thesis that the father's murder has any role to play as a historical event, if we consider that its status is that of a myth, and, further, if we also consider castration to be a real operation of language, stemming from the symbolic, then the question arises of what role the father's murder plays in Freud's work.

Lacan, who raises this question in *Seminar XVII*, gives as his response the thesis that the father's murder is set in place as a myth in order to cover up the castration that institutes *both* the law *and* fantasy, which is a consequence of the law. There is a fundamental fantasy at issue here, that of the father who enjoys—and, in particular, who enjoys all the women. This fantasy of the father who enjoys is of course an impossibility—as Lacan comments, a man generally finds it hard enough to satisfy just one woman, and even then, he must not boast about it. The fantasy is also a retrospective effect of the institution of the prohibition of jouissance, which I am inclined to think is the sense of a difficult remark Lacan makes when he gives the myth of the father's murder the status of a "statement [*énoncé*] of the impossible."⁷ The father who is retroactively created as the father who enjoys is what Lacan calls the real father; this is the real father of *Totem and Taboo*.

Lacan does not, however, completely abandon all reference to the Oedipus complex, at least not to the father of the primal horde. This might seem a little bit surprising, given that the entire thrust of his

thought in *Seminar XVII* has been first to remove the link between the castration complex and the Oedipus complex and then to dismiss the family romance of the Oedipus complex itself. Yet while Lacan does separate the castration complex off from the dead father, he nevertheless retains the function that the dead father has in myth, specifically the *Totem and Taboo* myth, which is the function of both enjoyer (that is, the one who enjoys) and also prohibitor of jouissance. If castration is a function of language, in the form of the master, then why does he retain this vestige of a father, this residual father, whom he refers to, somewhat obscurely, as a statement of the impossible?

The following reasoning has been suggested by Geneviève Morel.⁸ If we assume that castration is a universal function of language that comes into play for any subject who both speaks and enjoys, then we have no way of explaining the fact that this function sometimes works and sometimes does not, and that sometimes it works better than other times. I have in mind the clinic of psychoanalysis, which includes the discovery of the foreclosure of phallic signification in psychosis and the implications this has for the way the psychotic enjoys, on the one hand, and all the possible vicissitudes of neurotic sexuation and psychopathology on the other. Yet if castration is automatic and is a mere fact of language, why isn't its effect the same in all cases? There must be individual factors, contingent elements, alongside the automatic operation of language. In other contexts, such as his discussion of *tyche* and *automaton* in *Seminar XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan is very aware both of how important it is that there be a place for the contingent and of the inclination in psychoanalysis to a type of immanentism. What Lacan calls the real father is invoked as the agent necessary to explain the contingency of the encounter with castration; the real father is a contingent agent of a universal operation, which explains why there is no identity across cases, why there is contingency in the universality of language.

Lacan makes the further claim that it is impossible for any subject to know this real father; even though the real father is specific to each subject, the subject does not have access to him. There is something that does not enter into the universal operation of castration but will remain an operator unknown to the subject.

Lacan refers to this real father as master-agent and guardian of enjoy-

ment.⁹ Although impossible to analyze, he says in *Television*, it is quite possible to imagine the real father.¹⁰ What the subject has access to in analysis is figures of the imaginary father in his multiple representations: castrating father, tyrannical, weak, absent, lacking, too powerful, and so on.

Saving the Father

I mentioned earlier that there was a second issue to explore in this seminar, which was why Freud holds so tenaciously to the Oedipus complex itself. We now need to explore why Lacan claims it has to do with Freud wanting to “save the father.”

The first thing to note is that there are some important and indeed puzzling differences between the two forms of the myth of the father in Freud—that is, the Oedipus complex and the myth of the primal horde—of which the most striking is the inversion in the relationship between desire and the law. The Oedipus complex is meant to explain how desire and *jouissance* are regulated by the law. Both the Oedipus myth “borrowed from Sophocles” and the primal-horde myth involve the murder of the father, but the consequences of this murder are exactly opposite in the two cases, and the reason for this is the different place occupied by the law in each. Both deal with what Lacan had been calling the Name-of-the-Father, which as signifier is closely bound up with *jouissance* and its regulation by the law, but, oddly enough, the relationship between the law and *jouissance* that unfolds in each ends up inverted. In Freud’s Oedipal myth the law is there from the outset; it is an inexorable law, demanding punishment even when the transgression has been committed unwittingly or unconsciously, and exists for the subject as an unconscious sense of guilt. The law precedes enjoyment, and enjoyment henceforth takes the form of a transgression. The relationship is the inverse of this in *Totem and Taboo*, where enjoyment is present at the outset, and the law comes afterward.

The contrast between the two forms of Oedipus leads Lacan to say that there is “*une schize*, a split, separating the myth of Oedipus from *Totem and Taboo*,”¹¹ raising the question of the reason for the two versions. Why does Freud initially introduce the Oedipus complex and then subsequently insist upon the primal-horde father whose relationship to

jouissance is so different? One suggestion is that we should see them as responses, respectively, to the clinical experience of hysteria and obsessional neurosis. On this view the Oedipus complex would be the myth that Freud creates in response to the clinic of hysteria; the myth of the primal-horde father of *Totem and Taboo* his response to the clinic of obsessional neurosis. I think this is, in rough terms, Lacan's view in *Seminar XVII*.

Lacan's thesis in *Seminar XVII* is that the Oedipus complex is something Freud produces in response to his encounter with hysteria. It is not that the Oedipus complex is invented or introduced by the hysteric; the Oedipus complex is Freud's response to hysteria, a response, moreover, designed to protect the place of the father. Let me explain, with reference to the case of Dora.

Right from the outset, whenever Lacan discussed Dora he was always critical of Freud's treatment. He criticized Freud for missing the fact that the object of Dora's desire was a woman, Frau K., whereas Freud had relentlessly pursued the case as if her real object was a man, Herr K. From Freud's point of view, Dora's problem was that, as a hysteric, she was unable to acknowledge her desire for this man, whereas everything would have had a good chance of being brought to a successful resolution if only she could be brought to this realization. Throughout the entire analysis Freud persists in hammering away at this fact: you refuse to acknowledge that it's Herr K. that you desire. However, as Freud came to realize many years later, in assuming that Dora's object was a heterosexual one he had missed the crucial fact that the object of Dora's desire was a woman, Frau K.

As it happens, Freud's confusion in the face of hysteria did not stop there. For what he had also failed to grasp was the place and significance of the structure of desire in hysteria and in particular the role played in it by a desire for an unsatisfied desire. His failure to realize this meant that in his treatment of hysteria Freud would invariably look for some particular object or other as the object of the hysteric's desire. It is true that this object is, for Freud, typically a man, and that Freud thus misses the significance of the woman for the hysteric. But the point I am making is the slightly different one that, by failing to recognize that what the hysteric desires is a desire that is unsatisfied, his search for an object of the hysteric's desire always ends up coming up with something that is

forced and in one way or another rejected or resisted by his patient. This is apparent at every turn in the case of Dora.

We owe to Freud the first real insight into the crucial, even essential, role that lack plays in female sexuality. But his conclusion from this was that a woman can never be fully satisfied until she has filled this lack by receiving the phallus and, moreover, by receiving it from the father. Freud's solution to the woman's lack was motherhood, and this solution keeps insisting in his treatment of hysteria. He thinks that the hysteric will not be properly "cured" until she has this desire to receive the phallus from the father, or rather, since Freud is in no doubt that she does indeed have this desire, until she acknowledges it. This is why we see Freud relentlessly pursuing his efforts at getting Dora to acknowledge her desire for the father's substitute, Herr K., even to the point where this eventually brings about the early and abrupt termination of the treatment. This much is clear and can be demonstrated in Freud's case history.¹²

What is Dora's attitude toward this father of hers? Lacan emphasizes the importance of the role that the impotence of Dora's father plays. His impotence has for her the signification of his castration. Lacan takes this to indicate that seeing her father as deficient in this way is to measure him against some symbolic, ideal function of the father. The father is not merely who he is or what he is, but he is also someone who carries a title or fills an office. He is, as he puts it, an *ancien géniteur*, a former begetter, which, Lacan says, is a bit like the title of what in French is called the *ancien combattant*, former or ex-soldier, that is, a veteran, or a returned soldier, as we say in Australia. He carries this title of *ancien géniteur* with him. Even when he is "out of action," he maintains this position in relation to the woman. Using resources of English not available to the French, we could sum up this emphasis upon the father as he who begets or engenders by appeal to the pleonasm "The father fathers." As a matter of fact, one might suggest a new French verb, *perrier*, which would mean "to father." Not only would this recycle a word already in existence, but it would have other advantages as well. "The father fathers" would then come out as "Le père perrie."¹³ In any case, Lacan calls this fathering father, the father who begets or engenders, "the idealized father," and he is at the core of the hysteric's relation to the father.

On the one hand, then, there is the figure of the idealized father, and on the other, the hysteric's desire for an unsatisfied desire. The introduction of the Oedipal myth of psychoanalysis short-circuits the question of the hysteric's desire by guiding the hysteric's desire in the direction of the father. In this sense Lacan says that the Oedipus complex gives consistency to the figure of the idealized father in the clinical setting.

Lacan's conclusion is that the introduction of the Oedipal myth was "dictated to Freud by the hysteric's insatisfaction" and also by what he calls "her theater."¹⁴ The Oedipus complex, which derives from the myth whose dynamics revolve around the father and his death, merely gives consistency to the figure of the idealized father. The complex undoubtedly has explanatory value, but this merely redoubles the hysteric's wish to produce knowledge that can lay claim to being the truth. For the hysteric the Name-of-the-Father comes to fill the place of the master signifier S_1 , where it acts as a point of blockage for this discourse that determines it.

I have suggested a link between obsessional neurosis and the myth of the primal horde. We can begin with Lacan's comment that *Totem and Taboo* is a "neurotic product." I take this to mean that the work is a product of Freud's neurosis, and that the "something unanalyzed" in Freud crops up again in his encounter with obsessional neurosis. If this is so, then *Totem and Taboo* comes out of this encounter; it is Freud's response to the clinic of obsessional neurosis, just as the Oedipus complex is the product of his encounter with hysteria. As with the Oedipus complex, it needs to be interpreted.

I would like to return to the significant differences between the myth of the primal horde and the Oedipus complex. The first difference, which I outlined above, is that in *Totem and Taboo* the relationship between the law and enjoyment is inverted in comparison with the Oedipus complex, since here the primal father's enjoyment of all the women precedes his murder at the hands of his sons and the establishment of the law. His enjoyment is in a sense the condition for the establishment of the law; in the Oedipus complex, on the other hand, the law precedes transgression.

Note a second difference, related to but different from the first, between the father of the Oedipus complex and the primal father. Of course, whereas the father of the Oedipus complex is himself subject to

the law he transmits to his children, with the figure of the primal father we have an exception to this very law. The father of the primal horde is the *père sévère* ($\exists x \bar{\Phi} x$), who is egotistical and jealous, a sexual glutton, a father who enjoys, who is not limited by any submission to the law of an order transcendent to him. His death, moreover, is no liberation for the sons, for his power to prohibit is only increased by his disappearance. Through his death the sons are even more strongly bound to the law of prohibition that returns in the form of his son's identification with him.

Third, note the striking development from the Oedipus complex to the myth of the father of *Totem and Taboo* and later of *Moses and Monotheism*. At the outset, the father's function is clearly to pacify, regulate, and sublimate the omnipotence of the figure of the mother, called by Freud "the obscure power of the feminine sex." But by the end the father himself has assumed the power, obscurity, and cruelty of the omnipotence his function was supposed to dissipate in the first place.

In the context of this critique of the Oedipus complex, Lacan introduces the four discourses. Central to the four discourses is the master's discourse; or, more specifically, the concept of the master itself. The interest of the four discourses is that Lacan would like to dispense with the Oedipus complex—"Freud's dream," he calls it—and the primal-horde myth and replace them with a reference to the discourses. "A father," says Lacan, "has with the master only the most distant of relationships. . . . What Freud retains, in fact if not in intention, is very precisely what he designates as the most essential in religion—namely, the idea of an all-loving father."¹⁵

There is one further consideration about Freud's *Totem and Taboo* that should be mentioned. The reference in this passage to the son's identification with the father, in relation to the ideal of acquiring his father's position, suggests that an answer to the question of how in this myth the incest taboo arises should be sought in terms of an identification with the father and not merely in terms of a vaguely sociological theory of a social contract between equals. In the primal-horde myth Freud attributes a crucial role in the establishment of prohibitions to the son's love for the primal father: "[The primal father] forced [the sons] into abstinence and *consequently* into the emotional ties with him and with one another which could arise out of those of their impulses that were inhibited in their sexual aim."¹⁶ Now, there should be identification with the re-

nounced object, whereas the actual vehicle of the frustration draws the subject's hatred and aggression upon himself. However, here, "forced abstinence" produces an emotional tie with the agent, in a way that runs counter to what we should expect on the theory.

There is a hiatus in Freud's views on identification, which I have discussed elsewhere; it is a hiatus concerning the identification with the father at the very moment at which he is also the agent who deprives the subject of his erotic satisfactions. The importance of this for the Oedipus complex should be obvious; as Lacan says, "Love . . . relates to the father by virtue of the father's being the vehicle of castration. This is what Freud proposes in *Totem and Taboo*. It is in so far as the sons are deprived of women that they love the father—a bewildering remark that is sanctioned by the insight of a Freud."¹⁷ This brings us back to the relationship between the myth of the primal horde and obsessional neurosis. For if the myth is a product of an encounter with obsessional neurosis, then so too is the idea of an all-loving father. Yet this father-love combines with the father-who-enjoys, to form the obsessional's master, the object of his *hainamoration*.

The consequences for the sons of murdering the father of the primal horde are not the ones expected by the sons—principally access to a jouissance without limit—since no one accedes to the omnipotence of the vacated position. The prohibitions before the murder continue just as strongly afterward because the sons agree upon them among themselves so that total and mutual destruction does not ensue. As Freud writes in *Moses and Monotheism*, "Each individual renounced his ideal of acquiring his father's position for himself and of possessing his mother and sisters. Thus the *taboo on incest* and the injunction to *exogamy* came about."¹⁸

Lacan's conclusion is that the Oedipus complex is "strictly unusable" in the clinical setting, so by implication it is unusable with respect to all hysteria. He adds, "It is odd that this didn't become clearer more quickly."¹⁹ Given Lacan's long and detailed treatment of the Oedipus complex over many years, he is most likely directing this remark at himself. What takes the place of the Oedipus complex are the new reference points unfolding in this seminar: the introduction of a new concept of knowledge, S_2 , the split between it and truth, and, importantly, the concept of master, which has "only the most distant of relationships" to the

concept of father. These developments enable the Oedipus complex to play the role of knowledge claiming to be truth, which is to say that in the figure of the analyst's discourse knowledge is located in the site of truth.

$$\frac{a}{S_2} \rightarrow \frac{\$}{S_1}$$

Analyst's discourse

The Oedipus complex does not regulate the hysteric's desire; it is rather the result, the product—in the form of knowledge claiming to be truth—of the discourse by which it is determined, and which Lacan writes in the following way:

$$\frac{\$}{a} \rightarrow \frac{S_1}{S_2}$$

Hysteric's discourse

The hysteric presents as a subject divided by his or her symptoms (\$); he or she produces knowledge (S_2) and solicits the master signifier in the other (S_1): "She doesn't hand her knowledge over. She unmasks . . . the function of the master with whom she remains united, . . . [and] which she evades in the capacity of object of his desire. This is the . . . function . . . of the idealized father."²⁰ She wants the other to be a master, that he know many things, but all the same not that he know enough not to believe that she is the supreme price of all his knowledge. In other words, as Lacan puts it, she wants a master over whom she can reign; that she should reign, and that he not govern.

Notes

- 1 Jacques Lacan, "Function and Field of Speech and Language," *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. B. Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 65.
- 2 Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse*, ed. J.-A. Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 159.
- 3 Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," *Journal of American Folklore* 78 (1955): 428–44.

- 4 Two propositions are contraries when both cannot be true, though both can be false; contradictories are propositions that cannot be either true together or false together.
- 5 I am reading, along with Geneviève Morel, “textes” for “tentes.” Morel gives a very interesting account of the comparison between myth and dream in *Oedipe Aujourd’hui* (Lille: Association de la Cause Freudienne, 1997).
- 6 See Russell Grigg, Dominique Hecq, and Craig Smith, *Female Sexuality: The Early Psychoanalytic Controversies* (New York: Other, 1999).
- 7 Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre XVII*, 145. I refer you to my earlier comment about the real as impossible.
- 8 See Geneviève Morel, *Oedipe Aujourd’hui*, 51.
- 9 See the discussion of “agent” in chap. 8 of *Seminar XVII*.
- 10 “I hold that it is out of the question to analyze the real father; for better the cloak of Noah when the Father is imaginary” (Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, trans. and ed. D. Hollier, R. Krauss, and A. Michelson [New York: Norton, 1990], 19).
- 11 Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire XVIII, D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, session of June 9, 1971. Unpublished.
- 12 The fact that we can do this, incidentally, indicates what is absolutely remarkable about Freud’s case histories: even when Freud misses something crucial, traces of it can still be found in the text.
- 13 This is of course homophonic with *le père périt*, the father perishes.
- 14 Lacan, *Seminar XVIII*, session of June 9, 1971.
- 15 Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre XVII*, 114.
- 16 Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955), 18:24. My emphasis.
- 17 Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre XXIII: Le sinthome*, published in *Ornicar?*, no. 11 (1977): 7.
- 18 Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, in *The Standard Edition*, 23:82.
- 19 Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre XVII*, 113.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 107.