

Also by Juliet Mitchell
WOMAN'S ESTATE
PSYCHOANALYSIS AND FEMINISM
THE RIGHTS AND WRONGS OF WOMEN
(editor with Anne Oakley)

Also by Jacqueline Rose
THE CASE OF PETER PAN OR THE
IMPOSSIBILITY OF CHILDREN'S FICTION

FEMININE SEXUALITY

Jacques Lacan and the
école freudienne

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Seminar of 21 January 1975

Lacan's seminar of 21 January 1975 was published in the third issue of Ornicar?, the periodical of the department of psychoanalysis at the University of Paris VIII. The department was reorganised in 1974-5 under the direction of Lacan and the supervision of Jacques-Alain Miller, who has become increasingly responsible for its administration. It defined its programme as a continuing reassessment of Freud's discovery through the work of Lacan, and the development of closer ties between psychoanalysis and other disciplines (linguistics, logic, topology). Ornicar? was set up to publish information on the department's teaching programme and research projects. It appears five times a year. In Lacan's lifetime, each issue included a draft of Lacan's current seminar.

The seminar that follows, therefore, reflects Lacan's preoccupation with logic and topology, as well as his attempt to construct a possible 'matheme' of psychoanalysis which had come to predominate in his later work. This was defined in the first issue of Ornicar? as the formulation of analytic experience as a structure, against the idea that such experience is ineffable. It appears in this seminar more as an examination of notions such as 'form' and 'consistency', which imply a presence or unity of the subject, and which Lacan opposes with concepts and figures from logic, topology and the formulae of written language, which cannot be cohered in the same way.

In this context, the idea of woman as an object of fantasy is taken further. Lacan argues that woman's position in the sexual relation is that of a 'symptom' for the man, which serves to ward off the unconscious, and to ensure the consistency of his relation to the phallic term. Once again Lacan underlines the precarious nature of any such consistency.

This final article is in many ways elliptical. But it demonstrates the close link between the question of feminine sexuality and that investigation of the foundations of logic and language, which was the constant emphasis of Lacan's work.

The 'Seminar of 21 January 1975' was published in Ornicar? (Lacan, 1975-), 3 (1975), pp. 104-10.

The question which arises at this point in my exposition is the following, answering to the notion of consistency in so far as consistency presupposes demonstration – what could be supposed to be a demonstration in the real?

Nothing supposes it other than the consistency for which the cord is acting here as the support. The cord is the foundation of accord. And, if I make a leap, I could say that the cord thus becomes the symptom of what the symbolic consists of.

Not a bad formula according to the evidence of language – *wearing down to the thread* [*la corde*], used to designate the wear of the weave. When the thread shows through, it means that the weave is no longer disguised in what is called the fabric. *Fabric* is everywhere and always metaphorical in use – it could easily serve as an image of substance. The formula *wearing down to the thread* clearly alerts us sufficiently to the fact that there is no fabric without weave.

I had prepared for you on paper a whole weave made up uniquely of borromean knots which could cover the surface of the blackboard. It is easy to see that you end up with a hexagonal pattern. Don't think that by cutting through any one nexus of the weave you would set free any part whatsoever of what it is tied to. If you cut only one ring, then the six rings in between, thereby freed, will be held in place by the six times three (eighteen) other rings to which they are tied in borromean fashion.

If earlier on I let slip prematurely the term symptom – it being the law of language that something should slip out before it can be commented on – it is precisely because the symbolic provides the simplest metaphor for consistency.

Not that the circular figure is not first of all a figure, that is to say, imaginable, since the notion of good form was founded on this very figure. It is the appropriate notion for making us bring into the real its share of the imaginary. And I would go further – good form and meaning are akin. The order of meaning is naturally configured by what the form of the circle designates as the consistency presupposed to the symbolic. It accords with this, as it were primary, image. It took psychoanalysis to make us see its connection with the order of that body from which the imaginary is suspended.

Who doubts – in point of fact everything called philosophy has to this day hung by this slender thread – that there is an order other than that along which the body thinks it moves. But this

order of the body is no more explained for all that. Why does the eye see spherically, when it is indisputably perceived as a sphere, whereas the ear hears sphere just as much, while presenting itself as a spiral?

Would it throw any light on the fact that these two so manifestly differomorphic organs, if I may so put it, perceive spherically if we were to consider things from the angle of my *objet a*? The *petit a* could be said to take a number of forms, with the qualification that in itself it has no form, but can only be thought of predominantly orally or shittily. The common factor of *a* is that of being bound to the orifices of the body. What repercussions, therefore, does the fact that the eye and the ear are orifices have on the fact that perception is spheroidal for both of them?

Without the *petit a*, something is missing from any theory having any possible reference or appearance of harmony. And why? Because the subject is only ever supposed. It is its condition to be only supposable. If it knows anything, it is only by being itself a subject caused by an object – which is not what it knows, that is, what it imagines it knows. The object which causes it is not the other of knowledge [*connaissance*]. The object crosses this other through. The other is thus the Other, which I write with a capital O.

The Other is thus a dual entry matrix. The *petit a* constitutes one of its entries. As for the other, what can be said about it? Is it the One of the signifier?

The idea is at least conceivable, since it did once enable me to couple the One with my *petit a*. On that occasion, I had used the golden number [*or*] to introduce a factor which I had been led to by experience, that is, that between this One and the *a* there is no rationally determinable relation. One can never work out the ratio between the One and the *a*, in other words there is no reason why by placing one over the other it should come out. The remaining difference would be as small as can be figured, it would even have a limit, but within this limit, there would never be any conjunction, any coupling, of One and *a*.

Does that mean that the One of meaning has something to do with the matrix which crosses the Other through with the mark of its double entry? No, for the One of meaning is not to be confused with what makes the One of the signifier.

The One of meaning is the being, the being specified by the unconscious inasmuch as it ex-ists, ex-ists at least to the body, for

the striking thing is that it ex-ists in discord. There is nothing in the unconscious which accords with the body. The unconscious is discordant. The unconscious is that which, by speaking, determines the subject as being, but as a being to be crossed through with that metonymy by which I support desire, in so far as it is endlessly impossible to speak as such.

By saying that *a* is that which causes desire, what I mean is that it is not its object. It is not its complement, either direct or indirect, but only that cause which, playing on a word as I did in my first Rome discourse [*Ecrits* (1953)], is always a cause.¹

The subject is caused by an object, which can be noted only in writing, which is one step forward for theory.

In all this what is irreducible is not an effect of language. The effect of language is the patheme, or passion of the body. But from this language which has no effect, what can be inscribed is that radical abstraction, the object I write with the figure of writing *a*, nothing of which is thinkable – except that everything which is thought of as a subject, the being one imagines as being, is determined by it.

The One of meaning hardly comes into it – it is merely the effect of the One of the signifier, which in fact only works by being available to designate any signified.

As for the imaginary and the real which are here mixed up with the One of the signifier, what can be said about them? What can be said about their quality, what Charles Sanders Peirce calls *firstness*, about what it is that divides them up into different qualities? How, in this instance, can we separate out something like life and death? Who knows where to situate them? – since the One of the signifier comes down as a cause on both sides. It would, therefore, be a mistake to think that it is the imaginary which is mortal and the real which is the living.

Only the common usage of a signifier can be called arbitrary. But where does this arbitrary come from, if not from a structured discourse?

Let me appeal here to the title of a review, which is currently coming out under my auspices at Vincennes – *Ornicar*?² It is, surely, an example of determinacy by the signifier. In this case, the fact of being ungrammatical is merely to figure a category of grammar, but, in so doing, the title demonstrates configuration as such, that which, in the eyes of Icarus, merely adorns him. Language is an adorning. It is all rhetoric, as Descartes stresses in

the tenth rule. Dialectics can be conceived of only through the usage that it has in relation to a pathematically ordered common use, that is to say, to a discourse associating not the phoneme, even taken in its broadest sense, but the subject determined by being, that is to say, by desire.

What is the affect of ex-isting? (. . . .) What is it, of the unconscious, which makes for ex-istence? It is what I underline with the support of the symptom.

I say the function of the symptom, function to be understood as the f of the mathematical formula $f(x)$. And what is the x ? It is that part of the unconscious, which can be translated by a letter, in that only the letter makes it possible to isolate the identity of self to self from any quality.

By underpinning the signifier which the unconscious consists of, each One of the unconscious is capable of being written down by a letter. Doubtless we could do with some convention. But the strange thing is that this is exactly what the symptom, uncontrollably, brings about. Hence the aspect of the symptom of never ceasing to be written.

Not long ago, someone I listen to in my practice – and nothing I say to you comes from anywhere else, which is precisely its difficulty – someone articulated something for me, by linking the symptom to the dotted line. The important thing is the reference to writing as a means of situating the repetition of the symptom, as it presents itself in my practice.

The fact that the term came from somewhere else, from the symptom as defined by Marx in the social, does not detract from the appropriateness of its use in, if I may so put it, the private. The fact that the symptom should be defined in the social by unreason doesn't prevent its being distinguished, in the case of the individual, by all kinds of rationalisations. Every rationalisation is a particular rational fact, in the sense not of an exception, but of coming from anyone.

Anyone must be able to be an exception for the function of exception to become a model, but the reverse is not true – the exception does not come to constitute a model by its hanging out with anyone. That is the common state of affairs – anyone can attain the function of exception belonging to the father, which in most cases, as we know, results in its *verwerfung* [foreclosure] through the dependency it gives rise to, with the psychotic result that I have warned against.

A father only has a right to respect, if not love, if the said love, the said respect, is – you won't believe your ears – perversely [*père-versement*]³ orientated, that is to say, come of a woman, an *objet a* who causes his desire.

But what the woman thereby *a*-quires has no part in the matter. What she busies herself with are other *objet a*, being children, in relation to whom the father does none the less intervene – exceptionally in the best instances – in order to keep under repression, in the happy *me-deum* [*le juste mi-dieu*],⁴ his own version of his perversion [*père-version*]. Perversion [*père-version*] being the sole guarantee of his function of father, which is the function of the symptom, as I have written it.

It is enough that he be a model of the function. This is what the father must be, in that he can only be an exception.

The only way for him to be a model of the function is by fulfilling its type. It matters little that he has symptoms provided he adds to them that of paternal perversion [*père-version*], meaning that its cause should be a woman, secured to him in order to bear him children, and that, of these children, whether he wishes to or not, he takes paternal care.

Normality is not paternal virtue par excellence, but merely the happy *me-deum*, mentioned above, that is, the happy un-spoken. Naturally on condition that this un-spoken is not glaringly obvious, that is to say, that one cannot immediately tell what is involved in what it is not saying – which is rare.

Rarely does this happy *me-deum* succeed. Which will enliven the subject when I have time to take it up with you again. But in an article on Schreber [*Ecrits*, (1955–6)], I already made the point to you in passing that there is nothing worse than a father who proffers the law on everything. Above all, spare us any father educators, rather let them be in retreat on any position as master.

I was led to speak to you of *a* woman, since I tell you that *the* woman does not exist.

The woman can perfectly well be delineated, since it is all women, as you might say. But if women are 'not all'? Then if we say that *the* woman is all women, it is an empty set. The advantage of set theory, surely, is that it introduced a measure of seriousness into the use of the term 'all'.

A woman⁵ – the question can only be posed from the Other, that is, from that which can be given a definable set, a set which can be defined by what I have written up there on the blackboard

as Φ , or the phallus.

The phallus is not phallic *jouissance*. Is it, therefore, *jouissance* without the organ or the organ without *jouissance*? I am putting questions to you in this form in order to give some meaning – regretfully – to this figure. And, making the leap, for whoever is encumbered with the phallus, what is a woman?

A woman is a symptom.

The fact that a woman is a symptom can be seen from the structure which I am in the process of explaining to you, namely, that there is no *jouissance* of the Other as such, no guarantee to be met with in the *jouissance* of the body of the Other, to ensure that enjoying the Other exists. A manifest instance of the hole, or rather of something whose only support is the *objet a* – but always in a mix-up or confusion.

In point of fact a woman is no more an *objet a* than is a man – as I said earlier, she has her own, which she busies herself with, and this has nothing to do with the object by which she sustains herself in any desire whatsoever. To make of this A-Woman a symptom, is to say that phallic *jouissance* is equally her affair, contrary to what is said.

The woman has to undergo no more or less castration than the man. As for what is involved in her function as symptom, she is at exactly the same point as her man. We have yet to articulate what corresponds in her case to that real ex-istence I spoke of earlier as the phallus, the one over which I left you with your tongues hanging out. It has no relation to the little thingummy that Freud talks about.

The dotted lines of the symptom are in fact question marks, so to speak, in the non-relation. This is what justifies my giving you this definition: that what constitutes the symptom – that something which dallies with the unconscious (see Figure 1)⁶ – is that one believes in it.

There is so little sexual relation that I recommend you read a very fine novel, *Ondine*.⁷ In it you will see that in the life of a man, a woman is something he believes in. He believes there is one, or at times two or three, but the interesting thing is that, unable to believe only in one, he believes in a species, rather like sylphs or water-sprites.

What does it mean to believe in sylphs or water-sprites? Note that one says *believe in*, and that the French language even adds this further emphasis – *croire y*.

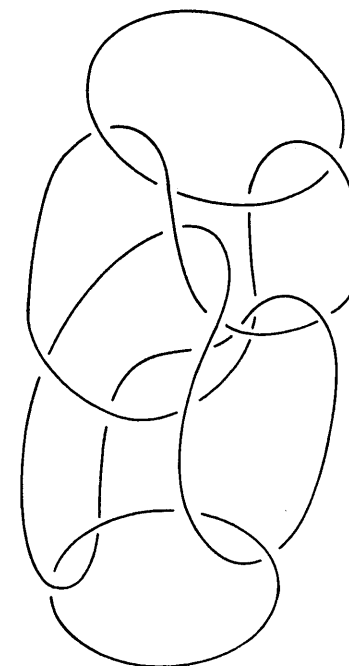


Figure 1

To *believe in*? What does it mean? If not to believe in beings in so far as they are able to say something. I challenge you to find me an exception to that definition. Were one dealing with beings who could not say anything, who could not pronounce what can be distinguished as truth and falsehood, then to believe in them would have no meaning. This goes to show the precariousness of this *believing in*, which the fact of the sexual non-relation manifestly comes down to – a fact not in question, given the overlapping of examples from all sides. Anyone who comes to us with a symptom, believes in it.

If he asks for our assistance or help, it is because he believes that the symptom is capable of saying something, and that it only needs deciphering. The same goes for a woman, except that it can happen that one believes her effectively to be saying something. That's when things get stopped up – to believe *in*, one believes *her*. It's what's called love.

It is in this sense that I have, on occasion, styled the sentiment

as comic – that well-known comedy, the comedy of psychosis. Hence the common saying that love is madness.

And yet the difference between believing *in* the symptom and believing *it* is obvious. It is the difference between neurosis and psychosis. In psychosis, not only does the subject believe in the voices, but he believes them. Everything rests on that borderline.

Believing a woman is, thank God, a widespread state – which makes for company, one is no longer all alone, about which love is extremely fussy. Love rarely comes true, as each of us knows, and it only lasts for a time. For what is love other than banging one's head against a wall, since there is no sexual relation?

Love can no doubt be classified according to a certain number of forms, neatly picked out by Stendhal (love as *respect* which is by no means incompatible with *passionate* love, nor with love based on *inclination*), but the chief form of love is based on the fact that we believe her.

We believe her because there has never been any proof that she is not absolutely authentic. But we blind ourselves. This *believing her* serves as a stop-gap to *believing in* – something very seriously open to question. God knows where it leads you to believe there is *One* – it can even lead you so far as to believe that there is *The*,¹⁰ a belief which is fallacious. No one says *the* sylph or *the* water-sprite. There is a water-sprite, a sylph, a spirit, for some people there are spirits, but it all only ever adds up to a plural.

What we need to know now is whether the fact that there is no better way of believing *in*, than to believe *her*, is an absolute necessity.

Today, in relation to the story of the dotted lines, I have introduced the fact that a woman is a symptom. This so matches analytic practice, that, since nobody had said it before, I thought that I had better do so.

Notes

1. *qui cause toujours*: motto of causalist thought, literally 'is always a cause' or 'keeps talking' (tr.).
2. *Ornicar?*: reference to the French expression *Mais où est donc Ornicar?* used to teach school children the use of those conjunctions governing grammatical exceptions (*mais, où, donc, or, ni, car*) (tr.).
3. The French for 'perversely' (*perversement*) has the prefix euphonicly equivalent to the noun *père* ('father') (tr.).

4. *mi-dieu*: substituting *dieu* ('god') in the expression *le juste milieu* ('the happy medium'); later there is a further pun on *dieu* and *dit* (that which is spoken) (tr.).
5. *Une femme*: in French, the indefinite article means both 'a' and 'one'; Lacan is placing *Une femme* ('A woman') in opposition to *La femme* ('The woman'), and is also marking its relation to the category 'One' which he discusses above (pp. 164–6) (tr.).
6. Lacan's difficulty in many ways became greater in direct proportion to his increasingly elaborated use of the theory of knots which he took from Alexander (1928), and developed in relation to a possible topography of the unconscious in his later work. As regards the texts translated here, the sequence is at one level clear: from the early reference to castration ('we know that the unconscious castration complex has the function of a knot', MP, p. 75) – the insistence on the subjective and theoretical difficulty of the concept – to the renewed stress against any myth of imaginary cohesion or consistency ('knots lend themselves with difficulty to the image', SXXI, 9, p. 2). In this second sense Lacan's preoccupation with knots is part of what has been his continuous attempt to find a formula for the difficulty of unconscious processes which is not immediately cancelled by its own immediacy or presence – hence his rejection of geometrical optics in favour of topology ('a set of continuous deformations', SXXI, 6, p. 6), and the recourse to mathematics ('I do not want to write up anything which could be taken for a signified, nor lend to the signified any authority whatsoever', SVIII, 13, p. 5). More recently the theory of knots has been used to stress the relations which bind or link Imaginary, Symbolic and Real, and the subject to each, in a way which avoids any notion of hierarchy, or any priority of any one of the three terms: 'These three terms: what we imagine as a form, what we hold as circular in language, and that which ex-ists in relation both to the imaginary and to language, have led me to bring out the way in which they are linked together' (*Scilicet*, 6/7, 1976, p. 56). Above all, the emphasis is, as always, on the intricate and inextricable nature of the ties which make the subject both subject *of* and *to* the unconscious: 'the unconscious, this knot of our being – the word "knot", rather than the word "being", is the one that matters – the being of this knot which is driven by the unconscious alone' (SXXI, 4, p. 5). We can see this here, in the reference to the symptom (Figure 1) as that 'which dallies with the unconscious' (O, p. 168).
7. *Ondine*, novel by Jean Giraudoux (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1939) (tr.).
8. *La*: the feminine definite article implying 'The woman' (tr.).