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Freud and Castration

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Introduction

The topic of castration represents one of the most important links between the clinical and the philosophical side of Freud's work. Freud's view of the human being is constantly associated to castration. Primeval barbarism is represented by the image of the father who castrates the sons, while civilization is represented by the ambivalent attenuation and substitution of castration by circumcision. In modern society, the circumcised penis, both sacred and damaged, characterizes the essence of the Jew, representing the mirror for the gentile fear of feminization and dissolution of the evolutionary process. Castration is emasculation, and emasculation is the symbol of defeat and passive submission. If castration is not anatomically defined by Freud, it is because the fear of castration is the fear of homosexuality - i.e. the fear of becoming a female in relation to another man and, above all, the man par exellance, the father who appears as the giant in the eyes of the little child. Thus, if castration anxiety can be "fixed", resulting in a "complex", it is because of the desire of passive submission, because of the longing for the father and the wish of being loved by him. To be loved by the father is to be assaulted like the mother who looses her penis by her surrendering. Rooted in the primal scene, castration anxiety is a protection against passivity, helping the child to recognize himself as a male. In fact, a male is a male not because of anatomy, not because he has a penis, but because he may loose it becoming a female. Females as well are fictive entities created by triangular speculations in which everybody takes the place of someone else. Anatomy is ambiguous and the clitoris provides the illusion of power: thus only through castration girls realize the expected passive submission, permitting the reality to be what it is.

Like in the ancient mystery cults and neoplatonic philosophies (see Burkert 1987), also in Freud's vision of the world, the Being is constantly risking to degenerate in Chaos and only castration permits to preserve stability. In Freud's view castration is, therefore, both the original trauma and the posthumous (nachtr'glich) order of the world. Why?

In contemporary psychoanalysis Freud's speculations on castration have lost their original fascination, but no serious attempts to historically research their origin and meaning have been made, in spite of the apparent contradictions in Freud's "discovery" of the castration complex. What is commonly thought is, in fact, that this discovery took place only in 1908, through the "analysis" of little Hans (Freud 1908, 1909). However, this also raises the question how we should understand the many fantasies and symbols of castration which appear in Freud's previous works, especially in The Interpretations of Dreams. Significantly, in Anzieu's study of Freud's self-analysis, the term "castration" is indexed 19 times and in Sigmund Freud's Dreams by Grinstein, castration's anxiety is quoted 16 times in reference to seven dreams (Anzieu 1975, Grinstein 1980); but no adequate explanations for such an impressive and vast presence have been given.



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In this study I will try to relate the emerging of the symbols of castration in Freud's work to the medical practice of castrating hysterical women. As a matter of fact, Freud created psychoanalysis in a period utmost characterized by this medical practice. Nevertheless, he never directly referred to this framework, neither in the autobiographical reconstructions of his discovery of sexual etiology, nor in the private letters and documents published to date, actively building a taboo. However, what is even more astonishing is the generalized taboo concerning this framework which has characterized the psychoanalytic culture and self-consciousness. In no study has the medical practice of female castration been clearly connected to the beginnings of psychoanalysis, not even after the finding and publication by Hirschmüller (1978) of the case history of one of the first patients of Freud, the castration of whom Breuer had tried to oppose. The collective disavowal of this historical context has been so vast and deep, that it could have paradoxically confirmed Freud's castration anxiety theory had it not been for one, but not insignificant, detail: that the object of castration were exclusively women. Therefore, in a previous paper I have suggested that the taboo of women's castration may be an essential root of the unconscious dissemination of psychoanalysis in the 20th Century.

1. Dissection of the pelvis and dissection of the soul¹

Freud's pediatric training represents the first connection with surgical treatments of hysteria. Freud worked for ten years (from 1886 to 1896) with nervous and hysteric children. This took place in a period when the onset of hysteria in children represented a crucial issue in the general theory of the disease, even more crucial than male hysteria, since it raised the question of sexuality before the biological maturation of the genital organs. In 1886, immediately after his studies in Paris, Freud had a short pediatric training with Adolf Baginsky, who was at that time the German pediatrician most representative of the approach claiming the etiological role of masturbation and seduction in infantile nervous disturbances. However, no significant reference was ever made by Freud neither to this specific teaching of Baginsky nor to the influence of the pediatric circles and ideas. On the contrary, his later reconstructions about his "discovery" of child sexuality and sexual etiology were clearly intended to conceive, through various distortions and falsifications, the real connections with the medical milieu in which they took shape. Why?

While I was wondering about this behavior, I became progressively aware that supporting sexual etiology before Freud's etiological - and semantic! - revolution led, nearly unavoidably, to certain therapeutic implications, which were probably the reason of Freud's reticence. Sexual etiology was in fact conceived within the theoretical framework of the "reflex neurosis theory". According to it, the local inflammations or overstimulations of the genital "nerves" and organs were believed to be responsible for various nervous disorders and symptoms, which were cured by "eliminating" their local causes. Before puberty this was mainly done by cauterizations and surgical operations on the genital organs like circumcision, the amputation or scarification of the clitoris, the cutting of labia minora and similar means. These treatments, which were rather spread in the second half of the nineteenth century, were considered as a cure for infantile onanism and hysteria, being recommended also whenever a clear "localization" was missing (i.e. when inflammations or abnormalities of the genital organs were not found) because of their "psychic" effect. Such a theory and treatment were also part of the teaching of Adolf Baginsky in the period of Sigmund Freud's paediatric training with him.

Surgical operations were not, however, limited to children. A new cure for hysterical and nymphomaniac women, which was called "castration", began to spread in the same period of Freud's studies in Paris and Berlin. Around 1886 books, articles and dissertations began to appear with titles such as: *Castration in hysteroepilepsy*, *Cure of hysteria by castration, Cure of moral insanity by castration, Castration of* the *woman*,

¹ Sources and bibliographic references of this chapter can be found in Bonomi (1994a, 1994b).



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Contributions to the problem of castration, Castration of woman in nervous diseases, On castration in neurosis, Hysteria cured by castration, and so forth (see Bonomi 1994a). Finding such references was a surprise to me, since in none of the many studies written on hysteria in connection to Freud's first years of practice, the "castration of women" was even mentioned. Only recently Shorter (1992) made a very detailed reconstruction of this medical practice² which, however, is still missing an important linguistic point. Shorter states that these gynecological operations were commonly referred to with the neutral terms of Battey's operation (in America) or Hegar's operation (in Europe), which is only partly true. In fact, when the operation was recommended as a treatment of hysteria it was the term "castration" to be mainly used (at least in central Europe). This linguistic peculiarity does not seem to be irrelevant, since it points out a network of sexual fantasies enacted by the operation within the pre-analytic doctor-patient relationship. It also reveals a semantic history of the word "castration" coming before Freud's later "retranscription" or "translation" within the new language of psychoanalysis.³

Traditionally the word "castration" in gynecology meant the removal of the uterus, and started to indicate the removal of the ovaries when a new surgical operation was introduced by Hegar in Europe and by Battey in America, in 1875. The operation was rarely performed as a treatment of hysteria before 1885 when Hegar's Der Zusammenhang study der Geschlechtskrankheiten mit nervösen Leiden and die Castration bei Neurosen (The relationship of sexual illness with nervous diseases and the castration in neurosis) appeared. Already in 1887 we find a dissertation entitled Beitrag zur Casuistik der Castration bei Neurosen (A contribution to the study of castration in neurosis) in wich the castration of hysterical women was presented as the most discussed problem of the time (Merkel 1887). Few years later, in 1892, Jolly referred to "the contemporary vain sacrifice of a great number of ovaries" while discussing the idea that "hysteria does not come from the uterus" (Jolly 1892) - a statement which will be ambiguously recalled by Freud in his Autobiographical study (Freud 1925). Finally, in 1896, Kroemer's impressive study Beitrag zur Castrationsfrage (Contribution to the problem of castration) appeared, in which it was stated that the operated women had become "legions" (Kroemer 1896).

It is to be stressed that the practice reached its climax in the same year when Freud coined the word "psychoanalysis" (Freud 1896), meaning that his treatment was a "dissection of the soul", thus functioning as a "surgery" not of the body but of the psychic representation of the body. In fact Freud had embraced the "soul treatment" with the ambition to make out of it an etiological treatment which could eliminate the causes, as surgical operations were supposed to do.⁴ However, -the fact that, while performing it, Freud had the fantasy to perform a "surgical operation"⁵, makes an uncanny impression.

2. The divorce of sexuality from genitals

Freud initially opposed the genital localization of nervous disturbances according to the teachings of Breuer and Charcot. In his early article on *Hysteria* (1888), Freud claimed that "hysteria has been observed in women with a complete lack of genitalia" and a similar statement will be later included in the first edition of the Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905):

² However, Shorter does not connect this practice with the beginnings of psychoanalysis, mentioning Freud only in reference to the nasal' reflex neurosis theory.

³ Curiously enough, one of the first models of normal memory conceived by Freud was based on the ideas of "retranscription" *(Umschrift)* and "translation" *(Übersetzung).* See Freud's Letter to FLiess of December 6 1896, in Freud (1985).

⁴ Freud had rejected hypnotic suggestion mainly because it was a symptomatic treatment, adopting the "Breuer method" (the cathartic method) because he considered it to be closer to etiology (Freud 1888, p. 56).

⁵ Freud revealed his habit of silently comparing his psychic treatments to "surgical operations" (Breuer and Freud 1893-95, p. 308) in the final chapter of the Studies of Hysteria, which was written in the same period of the severe surgical incident of Emma Eckstein.



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"sex glands do not constitute sexuality, and the observations on castrated males merely confirm what had been shown long before by removal of the ovaries - namely that it is impossible to obliterate the sexual characteristics by removing the sex-glands" (p. 214 n. 2).

This passage, which was suppressed in a later edition, deserves special attention. The statement "sex glands do not constitute sexuality" is topical in Freud's work, representing the scientific evidence of what will be later presented, in his *Autobiographical Study* (1925, p. 38), as the "divorce" of sexuality "from its too close connection with the genitals". As well known, such a divorce was essential in the building of a broader view of sexuality, permitting to equate the sexual activity of children, adults and perverts under the umbrella of the libido theory.

The statement "sex glands do not constitute. sexuality" is connected to the "removal of the ovaries", i.e. to castration. The statement becomes clearer if understood as referring to the cases of those hysterical women who, after being castrated, had later displayed the same symptoms.⁶ The failure of gynecological operations in "obliterating the sexual characteristics" appears therefore to be the primary experience promoting the "divorce" between sexuality and genitals and the consequent enlargement of the idea of sexuality.

However, in the quoted text, Freud uses the word "castration" only in reference to the male gender. The whole paragraph to which it belongs, takes in account phenomena like eunuchism, surgical operations performed on males and male sterility, and also the quoted statement is focused on the castration of males. The reference to the "removal of ovaries", although being primary and essential, is in fact introduced only to strengthen the evidence, and Freud will be able to eliminate the line in a later edition leaving unaltered the conclusions.

This striking neglect of the topic of female castration in favour of male castration was not an isolated phenomenon, but was common to a larger cultural movement given that, around the end of the century, various books began to appear on male castration in an historical, moral, medical and legal perspective⁷. The reason for this cultural interest among doctors is, in my opinion, to be essentially found in the previous two decades of intense practice of castration of the hysterical and nymphomaniac woman. We can suppose that the increasing aggression was threatening to turn against males, thus promoting various types of cultural defences, among which the changes in the theory of hysteria and the new view6 on sexuality supported by the arising class of sexuologists. These defences confirm Freud's theory of castration anxiety only partly, since the loosing element had been the fin de siecle's outstanding aggressivity toward female sexuality. However, it has to be pointed out that this aggressivity will join the ideals of negative eugenetics during the first decades of the new Century, and that castration anxiety will be deflected in the sterilization of various categories of people representing a threat to the purity and perfection of the race. Laws on sterilization began to be introduced from 1907 onwards, and in the following thirty years more than 30,000 people were officially sterilized in the U.S.A. In Europe several congresses on castration and sterilization took place after 1903. In Germany the law on sterilization (GzVeN) was adopted only in 1933, immediately after the coming to power of the national-socialist party, and it was included in the programme of "annihilation of lives deprived of value of life" (in 1935): 350,000 people were legally sterilized and 100,000 "annihilated" in the tragic years which ended with the Holocaust.

Freud's obsession for castration may appear out of proportion for today sensitivity. However, when we consider it within this general framework, it appears to grasp the unconscious side of the destructive wave of his time. Thus Freud's dream of the "self-dissection of the pel-

⁶ The evidence that the removal of the ovaries in the treatment of hysteria had an high rate of failures was well known by gynecologist, but did not prevent them to operate.

⁷ Among these there was also the book of Rieger (1900) which, in the Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, is presented as a source of the statement that "sex glands do not constitute sexuality". Freud had read it when it was published, "recommending" it to his friend of Berlin Wilhelm Fliess (see letter to Fliess of September 24, 1900).



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vis", which is the final dream of The Interpretation of Dreams (Freud 1900, p. 451-4), seems to stand like a symbol for a whole epoch. Significantly the dream was mysteriously interpreted by Freud as representing his own self-analysis, transforming once again "dissection" into "analysis".

3. The Freud, Fliess and Emma Eckstein "triangle"

In the years we are dealing with, Freud did not only oppose castration, but was also a supporter of the "nasal reflex neurosis theory", by which the genital localization was substituted with a nasal localization. This theory, which represented a peculiar "divorce" of sexuality from the genitals, was created by his friend from Berlin Wilhem Fliess, but there are many indications that Freud pushed Fliess towards it. The theory permitted not only to disconnect the diagnosis and treatment of certain nervous disorders from the genitals, but also to enact a symbolic castration by operating the nose.

In February 1895, one of Freud's patient, Emma Eckstein, was operated on by Fliess. The operation was expected to be harmless but the patient risked to die because of a medical error: Fliess had forgotten a long piece of iodoform gauze in the nasal cavity. The gauze was taken out only two weeks later by another physician, and on that occasion Freud reacted by fainting. As'he wrote from Vienna to Fliess:

"At the moment the foreign body came out and everything became clear to me - and I immediately afterward was confronted by the sight of the patient - I felt sick I do not believe it was the blood that overwhelmed me - at that moment strong emotions were welling up in me." (Letter of March 8, 1895).

Some of these "strong emotions" were later reflected in the "specimen dream" of psychoanalysis, the famous dream of "Irma's injection's (Schur 1965), the symbolism of which was strictly connected with Freud's private meaning of the "divorce" of sexuality from the genitals. In the dream, the infected mouth and nose cavity reappear as symbol of the infectious and threatening "vagina dentata" (Mahony 1977), and a gynecological inspection is implicated as the latent meaning of the mouth-nose examination of the suffering young woman (Anzieu 1975). The dream was therefore revealing that the nasal localization represented a defence against the dangerous female sexuality. However, if female sexuality was feared, it was also because it represented the passive and masochistic tendencies of the male. In fact, Irma represented not only Emma Eckstein, but also Freud's passive self that homosexually submits to male inspection (Mahony 1977). Therefore, although it was the female sexuality to be primary feared, the danger was paradoxically symbolized by the male sex - the penis represented by the dirty syringe which had infected Irma.

Freud's identification with Emma Eckstein was made stronger by the fact that he had requested to be operated on the nose by his intimate friend from Berlin in the same occasion when Emma Eckstein was also operated on. Significantly, soon after the operation, Freud wrote for Fliess a short "Case History" of himself, ending by the sentence "this morning I once again wanted to die (relatively) young" (enclosed in the letter of March 4, 1895). This emotional state was probably part of the "strong emotions" and the identification causing his faint when confronted with Emma's risk of dying. In any case, the issues of passivity and masochism will be the main reasons for the subsequent emerging of castration fantasies in Freud's self analysis.

Shortly before the nose operation Freud had sent to Fliess a draft on "paranoia" (draft H), in which gynecological treatments were viewed as "erotic equivalents".⁸ Later, also

⁸ "The mechanism of substitution also is a normal one. When an old maid keeps a dog or an old bachelor collects snuffboxes, the former is finding a substitute for her need for a companion in marriage and the latter for his need for - a multitude of conquests. Every collector is a substitute for Don Juan Tenorio, and so too is the mountaineer, the sportsman, and such people. These are erotic equivalents. Women know them too. Gynecological treatment falls into this category. There are two kinds of women patients: one kind who are as loyal to their doctors as to their husband, and the other kind who changed their doc-



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Emma Eckstein's severe nose bleeding, consequent to the surgical operation, were interpreted by Freud as "erotic equivalents" - as bleeding out of "longing"⁹ - and in a very impressive letter to Fliess, in January 1897, he arrived to consider in a similar perspective also the case history of a circumcised girl.

Although such views are far away from today's sensibility, it has to be pointed out that in those times passivity was the main psychosomatic "language" for relational disorders and that gynecological operations were very often requested by the patients themselves (see Shorter 1992). The following case history of Emma Eckstein - who many years later, after having submitted herself to a complete hysterectomy, will fall in love with the surgeon and develop severe masochistic fantasies¹⁰ - seem to confirm Freud's interpretations. Nevertheless, Freud's interpretation of -Emma's masochistic wishes appears to be also a projection of his owns.

It was by the reintrojection of the split masochistic wishes that the fantasies of castration would progressively emerge in Freud's self analysis, becoming a main symbol of The Interpretation of Dreams. Significantly the first irruption of a castration fantasy in this work is given by the daydream in which Freud imagines of travelling to Berlin for getting operated on, incognito, in Fliess's house, by an eye-surgeon recommended by him (Freud 1900, p. 170). As pointed out by Grinstein (1980, p. 53), the daydream expressed Freud's "passive submission to castration by Fliess". It also represented a continuation of the Irma dream. Generally speaking, the whole Interpretation of Dreams can be considered a progressive disclosure which finally finds its adequate conclusion in the dream of Freud's self-dissection of the pelvis. By this dream an ongoing process which is begun with Emma Eckstein's nose operation has been terminated: the image of castration, so many time eluded and alluded, finally emerges winning Freud's resistance and opposition to it. However, also a metamorphosis has been accomplished since it is no longer a question of real castration practiced by doctors on hysterical women, but of a male fantasy of emasculation.

4. Conclusions

How should we understand such a fantasy? We do not need to speculate, since Freud's later reading of President Schreber's paranoia also represents a self-interpretation of his own emasculation fantasy. Freud began to work on Schreber's *Memoires* during a trip to Italy with Ferenczi, in 1910, and shortly after he wrote a well known letter to Ferenczi saying:

"Since Fliess' case, with the overcoming of which you recently saw me occupied ... [a] part of homosexual cathexis has been withdrawn and made use of to enlarge my own ego. I have succeeded where the paranoiac fails" (Freud and Ferenczi 1992, letter of October 6, 1910).

Apart from the different outcome, Freud recognized a similarity between himself and Schreber, interpreting the dread and wish for emasculation of the latter in analogy to his own, both representing the dread and wish for a sexual abuse arising within a patient-doctor relationship. Freud's homosexual wish for Fliess was thus paralleled by Schreber's erotic desire for his persecuter, the famous doctor Flechsig¹¹:

"The exciting cause of his illness, then, was an outburst of homosexual libido; the object of this libido was probably from the very first his doctor, Flechsig; and his strug-

tors as often as their lovers." Draft H, enclosed with the letter to Fliess of January 24, 1895. It deserves to be stressed that in a letter to Abraham of 8 January 1908 (Freud and Abraham 1965), Freud wrote that a sexual fantasy of multiple conquests was behind the Irma dream.

⁹ See letter to Fliess of 17 May 1896, and Schur (1965).

¹⁰ See Masson (1984). The operation was made around 1910, and according to Masson Emma Eckstein is the patient alluded in Freud's study *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* (1937).

¹¹ Quoting from Schreber's *Memoirs* the sentence: "In this way a conspiracy against me was brought to a head ... my body ... was to be transformed into a female body and as such surrendered to the person in question with a view to sexual abuse ..." Freud added in a footnote: the person in question ... was none other than Flechsig" (Freud 1911, p. 19).



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gles against the libidinal impulse produced the conflict which gave rise to the symptoms" (Freud 1911, p. 43)

Freud did not inform the readers that doctor Flechsig had been a well known supporter and practitioner of hysterical women's castration (Flechsig 1884a, 1884b 1885). However, this information was implicated in the connection between feminine wishes and the fear of castration, since such a connection seems to be the product of a syllogism built on a triangular relationship: I love the doctor like a female patient; the doctor castrates female patients; hence he will castrate me.¹² The fear of castration seems to be a natural outcome of the homosexual outburst and a symbol for it. I assume the same can be said about Freud's castration fantasies emerged within the Freud, Fliess and Emma Eckstein triangle.

The crucial point is that Freud universalized such a triangle reading it as Oedipal, and making out of castration a primary fantasy which, together with the parental coitus and the seduction's fantasies, was supposed to be rooted in the phylogenesis (Freud 1916-17). In order to understand his own life, as well as the lives of his contemporaries, Freud came to assume that the one who castrates, being both hated and loved, represented the "Father". And in order to support such an assumption, he created the myth of the primeval father who, once upon a time, castrated the sons.

Freud's mythology represented an outstanding mirror of the more or less disguised brutality of his epoch. However, it also reflected the neglect for femininity. While questioning the "unilaterally androphile orientation" of Freud's theory of sexuality in a famous page of the Clinical Diary (4 August 1932), Ferenczi related it to a "personal aversion to the spontaneous femaleoriented sexuality in women" which was rooted in his relationship with his mother. Erich Fromm (1959) also came independently to a similar conclusion, and today this view is shared by many scholars. Less attention has been given to Freud's homosexual fantasies, in spite of the fact that they probably represent the main source of his creativity.¹³ They had a clear role in promoting the pre-genital theory and in portraying the father-son relationship, but even Freud's theory of femininity was created on the ground of his own homosexual fantasy of emasculation. The main expression of Freud's androphile orientation is in fact represented by his late castration theory of femininity (Freud 1923, 1924, 1931), which is based on the idea that girls are born with the feeling of having a penis and should accept to be emasculated in order to develop a feminine sexuality.

This theory also presents a baffling continuity with medical practices such as cliteroctomy and castration of hysterical girls and women, and I wonder if Freud did not have the more or less unconscious fantasy of performing this kind of surgery through analysis, given that from the very beginning he had the habit of mentally comparing his treatment to surgical operations, while also later, he recommended to doctors practicing analysis the "surgeon-model". These pieces of information are like fragments of a puzzle which is still far from being fully recombined and understood. Since the most significant image of this puzzle is probably represented by Freud's dream of the self-dissection of the pelvis, I would like to conclude by stressing the similarity between this dream and the ancient rituals of the sacred self-emasculation by which men became priests of great mother goddesses like Ishtar, Astarte, Cybele, and so on.¹⁴ Significantly, in a letter to Fliess, Freud mentioned this primeval and crude sexual religion in connection with a scene about the circumcision of a girl. "I dream, therefore - Freud wrote in the same letter - of a primeval devil religion with rites that are carried

¹² Niederland (1974) and other authors (Calasso 1974, Masson 1988) had already mentioned Flechsig's papers on surgical treatment of hysteria in women, suggesting a direct Link with Schreber's intense castration fear. What I am here suggesting, on the contrary, is an indirect connection, mediated by homosexual, passive wishes, according to Freud's interpretation.

¹³ The concrete meaning of Freud's statement that he "succeeded where the paranoiac fails" by enlarging his own ego with "a part of homosexual cathexis", is, in my opinion, that his homosexual fantasies were enacted and controlled through the intellectual device of psychoanalysis.

¹⁴ In this perspective Freud's homosexual fantasies and phallic speculations appear to represent an unconscious link with his mother based on identification.



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on secretly ..." (Letter of 24 January 1897). For the rest of his life Freud will remain fascinated by this sexual religion; he will speculate about it and, in search of an explanation, he will continue to dream about it "secretly".

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