Man's Fear of Women
A contribution of the study of the castration complex

Jorge Silva Garcia

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Before the theoretical discussion of man’s fear of women, it is worthwhile presenting a clinical history that clearly shows the mother as the cause of her son’s castration fears. When this material was first discussed, some analysts considered that this specific case could only be found in peculiar social subgroups; that this mother’s perverse, blatant seduction is not a common occurrence. Actually this is not the issue and perverse or unconscious seduction may be more or less overt. What this paper seeks to emphasize is that the fear of the mother in particular, and of women in general, is a far more frequent cause of the castration complex, than the fear of the father. A careful perusal of the bibliography can leave no doubt on this score. One must add as a warning that to call attention to the high frequency of mother’s psychopathogenetic role in the appearance of the castration complex, by no means eliminates the role of some fathers in this respect.

One could add that many significant findings are found in instances of severe pathology. A 25 years old man seeks therapy because of genital impotence which became evident since his first attempt at the age of 18. He has a normal erection only during masturbation, or when he feels a strong sexual excitement but he loses it when penetration is attempted.

Before considering psychoanalysis, he thought of entering a religious order, but he could no resign himself to remaining impotent. He tried self-analysis, but failed. He then decided to override his vanity, communicating his problem to an analyst. His story was a first told with tears, shame, and deep pain. After this catharsis, cynical, presumptuous and sometimes indifferent attitudes appeared. These attitudes persisted several months during which he spoke of this numerous and varied sexual experiences: homosexual games and zoophilic attempts during his childhood; voyeurism and variety of heterosexual experiences (with the exception of coitus), since childhood until the present he boasted of how women favored him, including relatives.

At the beginning of his analysis, the memories of his father were negative, later ambivalent, until the portrait of a good but passive and weak man emerged. His father was an occasional alcoholic, who, even though he feared his wife, and his efforts weak, tried to help his son free himself from her negative influence. For example: the patient’s long hair was combed with curls by his mother till he was seven; one day, on the sly, his father took him to the barber shop, and then, in great fear, both returned home to face the mother’s anger. The transference, his wish to criticize and exploit his father, was evident. His father died when he was eleven years old.

The mother remarried twice. The second marriage lasted a few months, and the third, a few years. In both cases, the marriage was dissolved by divorce. She is a seductive woman with strong sexual desires, and without modesty in regard to her son: knowing that her home had many peep-holes and convenient mirror arrangements, she undressed, and permitted female friends and relatives to do the same, thus favoring and stimulating her son’s voyeurism. He gave her enemas and scrubbed her back

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when she took a bath, even though he was already sixteen. He knew that she read pornographic literature and on one occasion, when he was thirteen or fourteen, he found her masturbat- ing in the living room. She ridiculed his infantile and juvenile efforts to become a man, and on occasions she beat him severely.

There is a harsh, brutal memory of the maternal grandmother: an old woman that opens her thighs and shows her bare genitals to a six-year old child who is playing on the floor, under the pretext that this would teach the child not to spy. The child, fascinated and fearful abandoned his game and fled weeping, followed by the sarcastic laughter of both his mother and his grandmother.

His first revealing dream during analysis, preceded a visit to his mother who lived far away:

„I dreamt that I was going to my hometown in a bus, and as we were drawing near, I was seized by both anguish and fear that rapidly grew in intensity until they became unbearable. I got off the coach and asked if they could wait for a moment. I took off my genitals, desperately looking for a place to hide them. At last I saw a barrel of brine and I left them there, thinking that there they would keep well until my return. My anguish and fear disappeared. I could continue my journey”.

The fear of his mother as the cause of his impotence, was becoming ever more conscious. Putting it in another way, one could say that in front of his mother he neither dares nor wishes to be a man: it would be too dangerous, so in his dream he prefers to put his genitals in a barrel of brine, and come castrated to her.

One night, when he saw a film on submarine-warfare, he had the following dream:

„While escaping in a submarine we came into a cave and then the entrance became blocked. I was the engineer on board and I noticed that we could not leave because there was not enough water and then I thought two things: how were we going to be able to breath in there, and that we could be saved only if another submarine came to our rescue. Another submarine did come. Then women were there and I found myself with a girlfriend; I was in a hurry to possess her before I lost my erection and I succeeded, but when I wanted to withdraw, my penis was trapped by her vagina which stretched out and out until somebody chopped it off with his knife and I was freed. Satisfied, I started looking for another woman. I had a nocturnal erection”.

This dream, typical of the return to mother’s womb, shows the patient’s deep fear of just such an eventuality: the threat of his total destruction, to be choked by this mother whom he conceives as powerful and domineering. The dream shows that he needs the help of an adult man, of a strong and potent father that could save him. This he has achieved in the transference, as the dream evinces. Also in this dream his two conflictive fears are seen: the psychotic wish to return to the mother’s womb and remain a child, and the desire to be a man in spite of his fear of castration.

Some time later he narrated this other dream:

„I was in my apartment and I saw a girl with a needle inside her genitals; I thought: -‘poor girl, how she must suffer and make other people suffer’- and I wanted to take the needle out; woman gave me a box with needles and I said: not with that. I went to look for some pliers I use for fixing my fish hooks. When I came back I found two friends talking with her; I told them to leave so I could take the needle out”.

Shortly after he relates another dream:

„I was in a room with some girls. The moment I had an erection with one of them, an old woman came in and offered herself to me and immediately I lost my erection. The old woman was naked and I could see two teeth in her rectum. I wanted to have coitus with the girl but I couldn’t”.

Like in the other dreams, the fear of seeing his penis seriously hurt or destroyed by the vagina, is clear and constant. But in the last dream there is an important variation: the teeth in the rectum and not in the vagina, thus he is more the
necrophile than the biophile. In other words, the dream seems to indicate that his real connection with women is rectal, that is to say, with the door of waste, of that which is dead. He is not connected with the vagina which is the door of life. One could think that, because of the vagina or life is dangerous, he displaces his interest. Eitherway, the final conclusion would be the one described above. It must be mentioned that he cannot and will not use his penis; in front of his mother he keeps acting the role of a child that has only been permitted to spy, but has been forbidden to possess and to penetrate like a man.

After eleven months of therapy he narrated this dream:

„last night I dreamt that I was with a girl and she offered herself to me; when I was going to penetrate her, I saw that she had some gauze in her genitals. I took them out and woke up“.

One week later he had a normal coitus in his dreams. The patient said: „I woke up very happy knowing that very soon I would cease being impotent“.

A few days later he had the evidence of having lost his genital impotence and the symptom never returned. Almost a year after this event, unwilling to wait, he got married and months later he had to interrupt his therapy for external reasons.

Although the case has been presented quite incomplete, I think that it clearly shows that, he mother, in the first place, and the grandmother, in the second, are the causal agents of his fear of women, of the fear of castration, and of his unconscious wish not to be a man as manifested by his genital impotence. The fear of castration provoked by the mother, was sustained and progressive: by devaluing man in general and her son in particular; by the repeated humiliations the patient suffered when he tried to act as a man; by the violent corporal punishments and because she demanded that the patient be an obedient instrument at the service of her exhibitionism. She permits him to see her, to spy on her, and she not only doesn’t care but also stimulates him to see the nakedness of other women. All this she tolerates and with this she demonstrates that she never takes his virility seriously; on the contrary, she ridicules and devalues it. And ... he accepts all of this. As a voyeurist he is safe: he sees from far, safe and sound, he risks nothing and he resigns himself to the fact that women find him attractive, thus strengthening his narcissism. His father, because of his own fear of his wife, as well as his great passivity, added to his castration fear in a significant way. His premature death leaves many questions open.

Did the patient attribute his premature death to the mother and did this serve to strengthen his fear of her?

Due to his great love for his son, could the father have been of any help when his son grew up, despite his weakness, passivity and fear and the added fact that he was despised and exploited by his son?

We know that while alive, the father could not control the mother’s seductiveness and exhibitionism, at lest while he was off to work.

In addition to the fear described in the patient, there is a strong maternal fixation appropriated by her seductiveness, by the precocious awakening of his sexuality and by his unconscious wish to return to the mother’s womb, as demonstrated by the submarine dream. The maternal fixation was also favored because the patient despised, rejected and exploited his weak father.

His apparent cynicism, petulance and indifference, were his way defending himself from his lack of manliness as well as his lack of manhood. He started to develop in his job only after his first coitus. Before this happened he tended to escape his everyday work, accomplishing only the minimum requirements to prevent being punished or fired. He always sought receptive, passive pleasures such as overeating, movies, television and moderate alcoholism, with occasional drunkenness. When he began his psychoanalysis he was somewhat obese. In other words, his primordial conduct was that of a child that wished to appear viril and strong, but that had remained fixated in the pre-genital stage to a destructive, seductive mother.

Although the fear described in this clinical history is quite frequent (or could it be because
of this?) man continues to defend, sustain and affirm his pretended superiority over women. This tendency is reflected in Freud who substantiates the supposed inferiority of woman by the fact that she does not have a penis, consequently he thought that she envies those who possessed it and only wished, at the same time, to possess the treasured organ.

In accordance with this way of thinking, man considers if licit to fear another man, or that women fear men but never, that man could fear women. In other words: it is impossible for masculine narcissism to take a woman seriously, no matter how castrating she may be.

The Freudian premise of women’s small significance, is repeated in the clinical cases of the classical psychoanalytic literature, where the psychopathogenetic role of the mother remains unknown, even though a decisive influence is implied.

Karen Horney starts to develop a theory of the fear of man towards women, in which she shows how he fears that through women he can die and be destroyed, and at the same time he feels powerfully attracted towards them. Furthermore, Horney tells us (40. p. 351) „Groddeck once said publicly: ‘Of course man fears women’, and she adds” „during puberty the adolescent not only has to free himself of the incestuous fixation to the mother, but must also overcome his fear of all the female sex”.

Other authors, like Karl Abraham (1, 2 and 3) and Fenichel (17), mention the castrating desires of women in general, or specifically of the mother, without pointing or the effect that these castrating attitudes have in the male that has to live with them.

In spite of these papers, many analysts minimize or ignore man’s fear of women. Thus, this fear is not considered, not even in such clinical material where this fear is most apparent as in some cases of masculine genital impotence, in some cases of male homosexuality and in some cases of infantile enuresis.

One could ask oneself: Is it not true, that on many occasions, man seems to be more anguished by the fact that he possess a penis (because of the social mores and the inherent risks and responsibilities) than if he did not possess one? Is this not of dynamic significance in some passive male homosexuals? Is it not also possible that some women are delighted in not possessing a penis, precisely because they, therefore, do not have these responsibilities, risks and social pressures?

Man’s sexual development may be studied considering the libidinal stage reached, but there are other factors that can be considered. For example, the grown male can be seen from three different perspectives: the socio-cultural or the concept of manhood; the sexual or the concept of maleness; and the characterological or the concept of manliness.

Each historical epoch and the various social groups have a different yardstick to determine when a lad has reached manhood. In the orthodox Jewish tradition, manhood is reached at the age of 13. In the U.S. and Mexico, until recently, legal manhood was first declared at the age of 21 and it is now decreed at the age of 18. Whether the male is potent or impotent is of no import to the State or the bureaucracy; whereas in many so-called primitive cultures, sexual potency is a very important fact.

The concept of maleness corresponds to the Freudian narcissistic phallic character that is, to the man who has not succeeded in solving his Oedipus and remains fixated at a stage of genital rivalry with his father. Mere genital potency covers-up many fear and dependencies.

The concept of manliness is not explicit in the Freudian scheme but it corresponds to the genital character; in fact Freud never described this character and it was only until Wilhelm Reich (52) did so, in fruitful and rich strokes that the full significance of maturity was described.

For didactic purposes, man’s fear of women in general and of the mother in particular can be classified in three categories:

I. This is based on the anatomical and physiological characteristics of man. I will not go into the description of the phenomena that Fromm has described so clearly in this essay „Sex and Character” (32). I will only mention that man has to produce an erection to be able to perform the sexual act, that this erection is possible only if he has reached a minimal level of independence. Man is put on trial in each sexual occasion and in each, he is exposed to failure and thus to ridicule.
Man’s narcissism has little tolerance for ridicule, especially in relation to women; small wonder that the greater his narcissism the greater will be his fear of ridicule and thus his dread that a woman should witness his failure.

II. In this second category, man’s fear of women is a consequence of his dependency on them; in so doing, women become maternal figures i.e. he will relate to them as if they were mother. He who depends on someone is evidently not the master of his own existence; he who depends renounces a certain degree of his freedom and independence in favor of the person he depends upon; for he is forced to compliment, please, praise, flatter or submit to her; he who depends lives in constant fear of being rejected or abandoned, he will fear losing the shelter that permits him to elude all or a considerable quantity of risks and responsibilities.

Of course there are circumstances that favor the dependency and fixation on the mother: the long absence of the father or his death; the inefficiency of the father because he is rejecting, cold, indifferent, and does not share his life with his children; the father has been annulled as an authority because of his passivity; his weakness or his cowardice; or, not only does he not possess authority, but he has become the official executioner of the mother’s punitive wishes. In short one could say that all these factors, in the father, that destroys him as a model stimulates the son’s dependency and fixation on the mother and thus his potential fear of her. The father who is cruel, hostile and despotic is included in this same group for he alienates his son through fear (castration fear included) and deprives him of a model for identification; one could add that all too often these fathers rival with their son for the mother’s attention.

On the other hand, it must be stated that there may exist factors, in the mother herself, that favor her son’s dependency and fixation to her; these factors are very powerful. Before proceeding, it is well to repeat, that this paper does not exclude the role fathers may have in evoking the castration complex; but we do wish to emphasize the rather prevalent maternal role in this.

What are these negative maternal factors?
Mothers can make the experience of living very disagreeable, so much so that the son seeks to return, symbolically, to the maternal womb though it may mean total destruction, insanity (this also applies to daughters and of course, constitutional factors may be present in the children). Mothers can prevent the development of their children by infantilizing them; this significant process follows several dynamic procedures:

One can infantilize by sexual seduction, as in the clinical case presented in this paper where, furthermore, ridiculing was also used. One can infantilize by prolonging, unnecessarily, certain maternal cares, such as breast feeding, carrying, bathing and so on. Usually this coincides with other interferences in her children’s activities; she impedes their free socializing; she restricts their physical activities and may even restrict their surrounding world until they live a semi-captive or fully sequestered existence.

One can infantilize through bribery. Children can be bribed through permissiveness; they can be bribed with material goods, with flattery that hypertrophies their narcissism; or they can be bribed by having their negative traits stimulated and then the mothers, like modern Circes, transform their children into pigs, physically and psychologically.

Mothers can literally forbid the growth of their children through an education by fear: fear of rejection, of abandonment. This type of punitive mother, punishes every rebellion and demands an unconditional submission. Quite often this submission carries with it the implicit betrayal of the father and at times the betrayal is not only implicit, it is the in-qua-non condition. When the father is betrayed, all men are included; the son also betrays his own manliness and in so doing, accentuates his fixation on the mother.
III. Finally, there is a third category of fear of mother, a very intense fear, which will depend, aside from the anatomic and physiologic factors, and those of dependency, on two elements: the degree of regression, that is to say, the level of pregenital fixation on the mother. The direct consequence of this level of regression is the experience that one has of the mother resembling an all-powerful awesome being, the source of life and the source of death; this all-powerful mother must never be disobeyed, because she is needed so much and because she is experienced as someone who can destroy and devour, this is how she is frequently represented in dreams.

The second element that permits this type of intense fear requires the presence in the mother of strong destructive characteristics; it is the mother who, as it has already been said: does not hesitate in using any repressive method of inducing fear in her children in order to maintain control over them: she may even maim or kill them. (4, 5, 7, 14, 3, 4, 49 and 60.)

It is this last type of fear that has the greatest psychopathogenetic consequences. Under the influence of this fear, one can be impotent; but, most important of all, one can be potent, one can achieve maleness without achieving manliness; in other words, under the influence of this fear, the sexual functions may be normal, yet the man is not really a man.

Summarizing: the clinical experience and some data of psychoanalytic literature show us that with great frequency man fears women, and specifically his mother: This fear of women possesses a high grade of psychopathogenicity that the Freudian theory does not concede. That this fear in man is caused by the dependency relationship with the mother or substitute figures. But the most intense fear, will depend: on the level of pregenital fixation and the destructive character of the mother.

Man’s fear of women leads him to betray Man, and to betray himself with all the inherent consequences.

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