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# ISABELLE ALFANDARY

## *Identity between Sex and Gender in Freud and Lacan*

“Become who you are”: the famous Nietzschean imperative taken from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* could allow one to formulate the question of becoming between sex and gender, which it would be up to each individual to actualize. The question of a sexuated individual’s gender identity is not anecdotal for the new analytic science founded by Freud, if only because this discipline is entirely founded upon uncovering the sexual—what Jean Laplanche calls “generalized sexuality”<sup>1</sup>—in the mental constitution and the discovery of a childhood sexuality’s existence. Freudian psychoanalysis, from the outset, could not skip over the question of an individual’s sexuated and sexual becoming, of what is known as their psychosexual development. In psychoanalytic theory, this implies two concepts: the concept of sexual identity and the concept of object-choice (*Objectwahl*). These two concepts are inseparable from a third, the concept of narcissism as it was brought to light by Freud in the essay *On Narcissism: An Introduction*<sup>2</sup> (1914), but are nevertheless to be differentiated from one another. The question of an individual’s sexuated and sexual becoming have been debated by psychoanalysts since the very first Freudian texts through to the contemporary era and, for that matter, it has provoked some polemics within and outside of the analytic community. The object of the present study will be limited to considering the question of identity between sex and gender in the works of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, in order to show how a theory of difference between the sexes is elaborated by Freud, how Freudian heritage is taken up by Lacan and significantly inflected on one point: the effects and valence of the experience of the difference between the sexes. Also, as counterintuitive as it may seem at first sight, the

idea that psychoanalysis would by definition be a theory of gender is, notwithstanding explicitly supported by Gayle Rubin in her famous article “The Traffic in Women: Notes towards a Political Economy of Sex,” just as Anne-Emmanuelle Berger very rightly noted: “As a description of how phallic culture domesticates women, and the effects in women of their domestication, psychoanalytic theory has no parallel. And since psychoanalysis is a theory of gender, dismissing it would be suicidal for a political movement dedicated to eradicating gender hierarchy (or gender itself).”<sup>3</sup> Beginning with *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) co-authored by Freud and Breuer and the discovery of the unconscious by Freud by way of more or less hysterical young women, the question of the feminine in its alterity, both in principle and in experience, has held a persistent and enigmatic place in Freudian theory.

## Freud and the fate of anatomy

### *Fundamental bisexuality*

The Freudian conception, as it is stated in the fifth of the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1915-1916) entitled “The Psychology of Women,” takes its support from the bisexuality fundamental to every individual, which the new analytic science’s practitioners apprehend and which work in biology confirms:

*And then science tells you something that runs counter to your expectations, and is probably calculated to confuse your feelings. It points out to you that parts of the male sexual apparatus are also to be found in the body of the female, although in a rudimentary condition, and vice versa. Science sees in this phenomenon an indication of bisexuality, as though the individual were neither man nor woman, but both at the same time, only rather more the one than the other. It then expects you to make yourselves familiar with the idea that the proportions in which the masculine and the feminine mingle in an individual are subject to quite extraordinary variations. And even though, apart from very rare cases, only one kind of sexual product—ova or seminal cells—is present in any one individual, you will go wrong if you take this factor as being of decisive importance, and you must conclude that what constitutes masculinity or femininity is an unknown element which it is beyond the power of anatomy to grasp.<sup>4</sup>*

What then is this “unknown element which it is beyond the power of anatomy to grasp” and that makes man or woman the gender of a subject? Freud considers that it is up to psychoanalysis to solve the riddle of gender becoming, for the key to this riddle is not written

in nature. It is, for Freud, a mental key and not a biological one, nor simply an anatomical one. Bisexuality occurs in men just as much as in women, as Freud recalls in this lecture, and the reduction of masculine and feminine positions to categories of activity and passivity would be in this respect, incorrect. Freud especially reinterprets masochism, which he identified with women, starting from social conditions of existence for women, furthermore, insisting, just this once, upon the link that joins the feminine with instinctual life:

*But we must take care not to underestimate the influence of social conventions, which also force women into passive situations. The whole thing is still very obscure. We must not overlook one particularly constant relation between femininity and instinctual life. The repression of their aggressiveness, which is imposed upon women by their constitutions and by society, favors the development of strong masochistic impulses, which have the effect of binding erotically the destructive tendencies which have been turned inwards.<sup>5</sup>*

We must thus take care not to move too fast with our task and qualify the Freudian conception as essentialist. Indeed, throughout his lecture Freud distinguishes between what he calls “the sexual function” and “social training.”<sup>6</sup> The mental characteristics that he attributes to the feminine must be brought back to this dual determination whose pieces, for him, cannot easily be established. What does this mean? That, in this lecture, Freud picks back up on what he calls the “early history of femininity”<sup>7</sup> from the converging lines of psychogenic and social causes, reciprocally influencing each other. The psychogenesis of the feminine is thus less epochal than it might appear, including within Freudian discourse, since all of the factors being taken into consideration in the determination of the feminine position are not abstracted from all social contextualization. The universality of the oedipal schema, if it is not challenged in this text, is at least tempered by taking into consideration the situation dealt to women in society and the ontogenic mental effects brought on by this situation of the phylogenic kind.

Freud endeavors to understand “the way in which women develop out of children with their bi-sexual disposition.”<sup>8</sup> The Freudian clinical hypothesis is that “the case of the boy shows us that the development of the little girl into a normal woman is more difficult and more complicated; for she has two additional tasks to perform, to which there is nothing corresponding in the development of the man.”<sup>9</sup> Unlike the boy, indeed, in order to become “a

normal woman,”<sup>10</sup> the girl must change both erogenous zone and object, according to the famous Freudian dual determination.

### *A libido shared by the two sexes*

In order to understand the riddle-like aspect that feminine sexuality represents, one must bring it back to the nature of libido which, Freud considers to be the same in both sexes: “there is only one libido which is as much in the service of the male as of the female sexual function.”<sup>11</sup> This is a crucial point: Freud recognizes here that the drive that animates the sexual life of all human beings is of the same nature. The object-choice that determines an individual’s gendered position is therefore a matter of fate. If he recognizes the existence of the castration complex, which, he claims, determines the differentiated development of girls and boys, then he is obligated to recognize that feminine fates are multiple, that what he refers to as a “normal”—heterosexual—feminine sexuality is not the only possible fate for the girl. Even if Freud maintains that “the anatomical distinction between the sexes must, after all leave its mark in mental life”<sup>12</sup> and even if the castration complex has an anatomical basis, the singleness of libido does not complicate it any less by making feminine desire less eligible for the same objects as those sought after by the boy. The so-called mystery of the feminine is, in all likelihood, not foreign to the woman’s mental bisexuality.

Freud admittedly presents, to say the least, a gloomy vision of the difficulties that await the feminine individual: in many instances, he takes care to explicitly protect himself from all biases—this is especially the case in “On Narcissism: An Introduction”<sup>13</sup>—however, the dissymmetry of masculine and feminine positions from the standpoint of anatomy puts the girl into a situation that leads Freud to conclusions and, in certain instances, extrapolations that come close to essentializing characteristics and today prove to be, to say the least, unsettling.<sup>14</sup> Anne-Emmanuelle Berger goes so far as to maintain that if one follows Freudian reasoning all the way through, then feminine sexuality appears as a “neurotic formation,”<sup>15</sup> the neurosis being characterized by repression.

Freud thus develops scenarios of differentiated fates for the girl and the boy, which fall within a strict causality whose compositional factors form an alliance with contingent events from childhood life. Starting from *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*<sup>16</sup> (1905), Freud differentiates the phases of development of sexual organization and upholds his theory of libido, up until his

lecture on “The Psychology of Women” (1915-1916). The individual’s psychosexual development, for him, rests upon a causality—that following Lacan, one could qualify as “mental”—of a constrained and unconscious teleology. For Freud, the object-choice, despite its naming, does not depend upon a free will, but rather upon a tendency that is expressed during the oedipal period and is confirmed—or disconfirmed—at puberty. The individual’s psychosexual development is characterized by repression (and the amnesia that comes along with it), as well as alternating of phases of expression and latency. As continuous as it may be, this development is more or less stealthily expressed and is an unconscious process.

If the trajectories of the sexes are set apart from each other on account of the need to demonstrate a differentiated *telos*, even so, just as Freud noted over and over again, they are *de facto* no longer clear for a certain time. In the section of *Three Essays* “Differentiation between Men and Women,” Freud writes: “concerning the autoerotic and masturbatory manifestation of sexuality, we might posit the proposition that the sexuality of little girls is entirely masculine in character.”<sup>17</sup> In this passage, he even allows himself to qualify libido as masculine however, without removing this attribute from persons of the opposite sex. In 1915, he adds a footnote<sup>18</sup> that focuses on a decisive semantic point: the difference between “masculine” and “feminine.” He repeats that the ordinary usage of these notions proves to be greatly confusing for their scientific usage. He distinguishes between three distinct acceptations: the activity/passivity acceptance, the biological acceptance, and the sociological acceptance. For Freud, the first acceptance is the one that primarily interests psychoanalysis, even if he insists upon the fact that the feminine and the masculine can never be found in their pure state in individuals, each individual being an alloy of characteristics belonging to its and to the opposite sex: “On the contrary every individual person shows a mixture of his own biological sex characteristics with the biological traits of the other sex and a union of activity and passivity; this is the case whether these psychological characteristic features depend on the biological or whether they are independent of it.”<sup>19</sup>

### *Activity/Passivity: a juncture between sex and gender*

This last comment lets it be understood that even if for Freud an individual’s sex, with some exceptions, is recognized, it is not the whole of psychosexual development. One piece of a totally different kind comes to confirm a subject’s biological sex or not. The characteristics of activity and passivity assigned to masculine or feminine sexes, which Freud holds on to despite

the difficulty of their use, supply a juncture point between sex and gender in Freudian theory. This piece, as it is left to the individual, that is to the unconscious mind and not to a deliberate decision, is quite performative insofar as it actualizes the individual as part of one's psychosexual development, without simply stemming from one's biological sex. Despite the note from 1915, added to *Three Essays*, which respectively assigns activity and passivity to the masculine and the feminine, these characteristics can be deconstructed short of any essentializing of sex and gender with regard to libido, which Freud maintains that both sexes have—at least to begin—in equal share. Activity and passivity, if they prove to be coordinates of sexual life, are essentially polarities that one could qualify as instinctual, positions that are related to the erotics and death drives that Freud delineates.

In the lecture devoted to the psychology of women, the question of the phallic stage and of the girl's renunciation of clitoral masturbation are discussed at length. The beginning of the girl's development is marked by likenesses rather than divergences with the boy. For a long time the girl remains stable in a position that she does not give up on despite the difference that, according to Freud, strikes her: "We are now obliged to recognize that the little girl is a little man. As we know, in the boy this phase is characterized by the fact that he has discovered how to obtain pleasurable sensations from his little penis, and associates its state of excitation with his ideas about sexual intercourse. The little girl does the same with her even smaller clitoris."<sup>20</sup> Remember that in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud had already noted that as it concerned pre-pubescent auto-eroticism, the girl's and the boy's situations were comparable. The prohibition of masturbation is, in this lecture, considered solely from the point of view of the feminine. Its effects, according to Freud, are as crucial as they are detrimental with regard to the one who pronounces them, namely the mother: "The strongest of these frustrations occurs in the phallic stage, when the mother forbids pleasurable activities centering round the genital organs—often with an accompaniment of harsh threats and every indication of disapproval—activities to which, after all, she herself stimulated the child."<sup>21</sup> The renunciation of onanism is not only decreed by the castrating maternal authority, according to Freud, but for the girl it is also accompanied with an interior struggle that results in an alternating between the desire for masturbation—an archive of the phallic stage—and interior depression that marks the penis-envy stage during which the girl gives up on herself, worn down, in the face of an organ that she deliberately considers to be insufficient and

bearing no possible comparison to the boy's organ. The Freudian theory of repression that forms feminine castration complex gives way in particular to masturbation, a renunciation which marks the end of the girl's attempt to persist in a masculine-type libidinal economy:

*Many years later, when her masturbatory activity has long been suppressed, we may find an interest persisting which we must interpret as a defense against the temptation, which she still fears. It finds expression in feelings of sympathy for persons to whom she ascribes similar difficulties; it may enter into her motives for marriage, and may indeed determine her choice of a husband or lover. The settling of the problem of infantile masturbation is truly no easy or unimportant task.<sup>22</sup>*

The Freudian conception therefore turns the feminine fate into a fate constrained, as it were by the discovery of castration: whether “reality” is accepted *in fine* and so to speak metabolized, or whether it is the object of a struggle, or even a denial, that does not end and that takes the form of a “masculinity complex.”<sup>23</sup> Becoming feminine is, for Freud, a necessarily frustrated becoming.

### *Trauma of discovering the feminine*

What Freud refers to as the “difference between the sexes” is a reality that has the effect of traumatic revelation on the subject, on whichever side of the barrier the subject is located. The boy understands, and simultaneously expresses consternation at, the absence of a maternal penis; the girl is no less unnerved in discovering this absence which, according to Freud, strikes her and provokes within her a series of coping mechanisms—between compensation and consolation—when faced with this difficulty. The juncture between sex and gender plays out, for Freud, in a way that is anything but primal or mechanical in an individual's childhood development. The first question for the child is not the question of the difference between the sexes, but the question of the origin of life: the child's first obvious question has to do with the terrifying possibility of being dethroned by another child yet to be born. “The fact of the two sexes is usually first accepted by the child without struggle and hesitation.”<sup>24</sup> To begin with, in the idea that boys and girls make for themselves, the masculine sex dominates as a singular model.

Libidinal life begins well before the discovery of the difference between the sexes, as an

erogenous organization of the child's body has already taken place well before this event and has left an indelible libidinal mark. The discovery of the difference between the sexes requires the individual, and especially the girl, to be repositioned—what Freud sums up in the necessity for a dual change of zone and object—not so much in relation to her own ongoing pregenital libidinal organization, as in relation to what she understands and projects in her relationship with the outsiders who surround her, which are her father, mother and potentially her brother and sister. The girl's trauma essentially stems from her relation to and her imaginary comparison of the modalities of her experience of pleasure. The discovery of the difference between the sexes is traumatic for her insofar as it interrupts and comes to complicate her libidinal and instinctual life. She subordinates her search for pleasure to a reflexive, or even calculated, imaginary and obsessive process that, even if it is not the earliest one, obligates and constrains her in her libidinal development. The girl individual, according to the Freudian hypothesis, comes into being for herself in her difference which takes the form of an irremediable absence. In "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes" (1925), Freud writes: "A little girl behaves differently. She makes her judgement and her decision in a flash. She has seen it and knows that she is without it and wants to have it."<sup>25</sup> The judgment scene—judgment of castration—that Freud offers is, for that matter, not devoid of interest: if, according to Freud, women compositionally lack an aptitude for justice, the least that one can say is that they are not lacking in proficiency for the development of judgment, nor in celerity for its exercise. Difference in anatomical objectivity is subjectivizing for the girl—and for that matter, for the boy—but as it concerns her, this subjectivizing irremediably marks the end of a golden age and coincides with a brutal fall into reality.

### *The Injustice of anatomy*

This scenario of becoming takes the girl to be some kind of an injustice. This is at least what comes out of Freudian analysis and what leads the psychoanalyst to categorically pronounce that women have a less marked propensity for justice than men:

*It must be admitted that women have but little sense of justice, and this is no doubt connected with the preponderance of envy in their mental life; for the demands of justice are a modification of envy: they lay down the conditions under which one is willing to part with it. We say also of women that their social interests are weaker than those of men, and*

*that their capacity for sublimation of their instincts is less. The former is no doubt derived from the unsocial character which undoubtedly attaches to all sexual relationships.*<sup>26</sup>

For Freud, the difference between the sexes upsets the child of the feminine sex's organizing erogenous and libidinal pattern. The difference, as soon as it is uncovered, takes on the aspect of a comparison that proves to be a disadvantage for the girl. This disadvantage, which she perceives, is also the one that Freud recognizes in her: the Freudian thesis of the difficulty of becoming a woman—what Freud un-hyperbolically calls “the difficult development which leads to femininity”<sup>27</sup>—if she has no real clinical or theoretical foundations, is still marked by a sympathetic inflection—which one would have to question the reasons for—that is not necessarily exhausted alone by undeconstructible Freudian paternalism. From this point of view, the trauma of feminine discovery is evident to the man analyst, not in the same way as it is to the little girl whose development he describes, but it is nevertheless evident to him. This observation does not invalidate the logical necessity of the Freudian scenario, but actually allows the charge of injustice to be glimpsed and highlights the ethical translation that Freud immediately associates with this discovery. For Freud, the feminine poses nothing less than the question of justice, a justice that the girl calls for, an injustice that strikes her and takes on a tragic character insofar as the difference between the sexes holds an injustice that cannot be repaired. The feminine, for Freud, is found marked with the seal of a tragic fate:

*After a woman has become aware of the wound to her narcissism, she develops, like a scar, a sense of inferiority. When she has passed beyond her first attempt at explaining her lack of a penis as being a punishment personal to herself and has realized that that sexual character is a universal one, she begins to share the contempt felt by men for a sex which is the lesser in so important a respect, and, at least in holding that opinion, insists on being like a man.*<sup>28</sup>

In Freudian psychoanalysis, gender is determined by the mental reaction and development that results from the subject's discovery of the anatomical real. In this excerpt, Freud describes the girl's reaction by hypostasizing and scripting a series of feelings and judgements lent to the child of the feminine sex. The trauma of such a discovery, according to our view, arises from the sex identity that establishes itself in a feminine individual coming along with a tragic translation of her gender. For Freud, at the moment when a girl or boy, individual discovers the condition of their biological sex, they respond mentally. If, as Freud writes,

paraphrasing Napoleon, “anatomy is destiny,”<sup>29</sup> seeking therein to flatly bring an end to feminists’ egalitarian claims, then each individual has—Greek tragedy shows it in the most illustrative way that there is—its own way of answering this. And this answer, in view of gender, is performative.

The oedipal pattern suspends and refashions pregenital organization, which it just appended itself to. The point of entrance into Oedipus, according to Freud, marks the definitive separation of the girl and boy’s paths, as the castration complex and the Oedipus complex produce opposite effects in each of the two sexes.<sup>30</sup> The Oedipus complex is a “secondary formation”<sup>31</sup> to the castration complex. One scenario—Oedipus—takes over the one that came before it. In view of the Oedipus complex, another difference distinguishes the girl from the boy: in 1925 Freud recognizes that he is not able to supply a valid reason for its dissolution as it concerns the girl<sup>32</sup>, whereas under the effect of the threat of castration, it is smashed to bits in the case of the boy who turns away from the forbidden object of his affectionate attention. The oedipal scenario, as it concerns the girl, according to Freud, residually and obscurely endures.

## Lacan and the comedy of the sexes

### *The wager of the signifier*

Lacan is not unaware of the traumatic event of discovering castration, particularly maternal castration—which, for the individual, ensues as a threat or as a reality—but offers a reading of it whose inflection is noticeably different. Without challenging the Oedipus complex, he questioned its relevance: without going so far as to explicitly refuse it, he, as I attempted to show<sup>33</sup>, complicated its structure, pointed out its vanishing points. He construes sexual difference, not as tragedy, but as yet another theatrical genre: comedy. Not that Lacan hadn’t devoted a detailed analysis to tragedy and to one of its most emblematic figures—Antigone—in the seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*<sup>34</sup>, but it is through comedy that, quite unexpectedly, he apprehends the castration complex as it relates to gender becoming. It appears that Freud’s fatalistic reading, which essentializes the position of the feminine fastened to a melancholic fate, is not the only possible reading of an anatomical difference that, if it is not irrelevant, emerges significantly transformed in Lacan: the signifier of the phallus comes

to replace anatomy's unremitting resolution. In "The Signification of the Phallus" (1958) wherein Lacan reviews Freud's steps of the individual's sexual psychogenesis, he qualifies his own commentary on Freud as a "wager"<sup>35</sup> founded upon the introduction of the signifier. He maintains that the functioning of the Freudian unconscious can in no way be solved by biologism<sup>36</sup>, the correlate of this thesis being that the phallus is the signifier of desire marked with the seal of "the threat of or nostalgia based on not-having [*manque à avoir*]."<sup>37</sup> The phallus as signifier paints both sexes into the corner of what they are or don't have, forcing all of humanity into what Lacan refers to as "the intervention of a seeming": "This is brought about by the intervention of a seeming [*paraître*] that replaces the having in order to protect it, in one case, and to mask the lack thereof, in the other, and whose effect is to completely project the idea or typical manifestations of each of the sexes' behavior, including the act of copulation itself, into the realm of comedy."<sup>38</sup> Between the sexes, a comedy conceived of as the start of play for the phallic signifier, a comedy in line with what Anne-Emmanuelle Berger has rightly called "the theater of gender."<sup>39</sup>

In the *Transference* seminar, while he is embarking upon a close reading of Plato's *Symposium* during the November 23, 1960 session, out of the blue, Lacan proclaims: "love is a comic sentiment."<sup>40</sup> The psychoanalyst ponders the meaning of Aristophanes' presence in Plato's dialogue devoted to love, and examines the nature of comedy in light of sentiments of love. In, "the conjunction of desire with its object qua inadequate,"<sup>41</sup> he sees a relationship of structural inadequacy that strikes the aspect of desire, the lever of all comedy. The inadequacy that he is talking about is not unrelated to the castration complex that Freud uncovered. In the May 10, 1961 session of the same seminar, while analyzing Claudel's theater, Lacan recalls that the father is "the fundamental theme of classical comedy"<sup>42</sup>: the reason for this, beyond tricks and derision, is that he is "played" and Lacan specifies what he means by this: he is put into a situation of passivity—a characteristic that Freud identified as a defining characteristic of femininity for psychoanalysis. Comedy has, if one follows Lacanian analysis, an anthropological necessity that spans trends and eras: it comes to stage, to the ends of a non-tragic *catharsis*, the condition of humans faced with castration and the inadequacy of the object of their desire that ensues.

### *The Other's tropism and identification with its desire*

Starting from the question of desire, Lacan reworks the Freudian theory of difference between the sexes turned into sexual difference. In the seminar XVIII, *On a Discourse that Might not Be a Semblance*, whose January 20, 1971 session is subtitled “The Man and the Woman,” he employs an expression that was still completely new at the time, “gender identity,”<sup>43</sup> and contemplates the genesis and first appearance of this aforementioned identity. In order to think through it, Lacan sets out from the authority of the Other, the subject's desire emerging in the field of the Other according to a Hegelian paradigm: “This *from whence I want to come* is, in any case, quite exemplary of what I have claimed regarding the Other's desire. *Che vuoi? Keskiueu?*”<sup>44</sup> The notion of difference between the sexes as it is initially developed by Freud undergoes transformation, in Lacan, stemming from a question that the Other provokes and that constitutes the subject as such: what does he want (from me)? The very function of the question is to produce the subject. Lacan, in the January 20, 1971 session, takes a detour through a passage from Freud's essay *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921). We should note that, when Lacan refers to section VII which deals with identification, he only mentions it regarding one point—identification with the human idol, the leader of the group—excluding the main argument in which Freud details the identificatory process with the first object, “the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person,”<sup>45</sup> & prehistory of the Oedipus complex: “A little boy will exhibit a special interest in his father; he would like to grow like him and be like him, and take his place everywhere. [...] He takes his father as his ideal.”<sup>46</sup> At the same time, the boy instates his mother as an object of love. Identification is promptly marked by ambivalence: on the one hand, it is the manifestation of tenderness, on the other, it is a wish for elimination. Freud clearly differentiates identification and object-choice: “It is easy to state in a formula the distinction between an identification with the father and the choice of the father as an object. In the first case one's father is what one would like to be, and in the second he is what one would like to have.”<sup>47</sup>

The heart of the Freudian argument, which Lacan does not explicitly cite is, however, of importance in view of the question of gender, since it gives rise to a psychogenic explanation of masculine homosexuality: the young man, having been attached to his mother in an unusually long and intense fashion, does not abandon her at puberty, but rather identifies with her, “transforms himself into her”<sup>48</sup> and sets out in search of objects that might satisfy her. The

ego becomes what was, up until then, his object: this is the formula of identification by introjection of the object into the ego that, according to Freud, characterizes masculine homosexuality as well as melancholy wherein “the shadow of the object has fallen upon the ego,”<sup>49</sup> as the expression from *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) states. It is astonishing that even though Lacan is precisely dealing with identification and its relationship to gender becoming, he does not comment on this key passage in which Freud makes object-choice depend upon an identificatory process.

This gap is all the more astonishing because the thesis that Lacan puts forward in this same session of the seminar is that gender identity stems precisely from a process of identification with the Other’s desire, that is to say, the Other’s phallus: “Sexual identification does not consist in believing oneself to be a man or a woman, but in considering that there are women for the boy, that there are men, for the girl.”<sup>50</sup> And Lacan clarifies: “Paradoxical as this formulation may seem, I am saying that it is in order to be the phallus—that is, the signifier of the Other’s desire—that a woman rejects an essential part of femininity, namely, all its attributes, in the masquerade.”<sup>51</sup> This is what Lacan refers to as the mark of the phallus that precipitates men and women into a comedy that oscillates between masquerade (woman) and display (man) in which some dress up and others make themselves up for purposes of phallic simulacra.

### *The Function of the mask*

Lacan borrows the idea of masquerade from Joan Rivière who, in an article from 1929<sup>52</sup>, defended the thesis of femininity as masquerade working from examples taken from her clinic. Rivière significantly reports on one of her analysands’ recurrent dreams in which the protagonists wore masks on their faces in order to avoid disasters and injuries. In this article, the English psychoanalyst defines femininity as a mask whose function is to hide the possession of masculinity and to avoid the reprisals that any woman who was discovered to possess such attributes might expose herself to. The comparison that comes to mind for Rivière is of a thief who would turn out his pants’ pockets and ask to be searched in order to prove that he is innocent. Lacan goes back to Rivière’s idea that the mask allows the feminine subject to avoid the dread of castration, but goes even further by judging that the mask *makes* the women, that it reveals her. All the more so since the mask is not an isolated accessory: it takes part in a masquerade, in a two-part game that calls upon the other sex.

The process of identification coheres, in this way, with what Lacan refers to as the function of the semblance or the mask. Starting with the seminar on the object-relation (1957), the phallus is expressed as functioning like a veil, also called a curtain:

*The curtain is, as it were, the idol of absence and, ultimately, if it is not for nothing that Maya's veil is the most commonly used metaphor to express the man's relationship with everything that captivates him, this is, in all likelihood, in part because it is indeed assuredly in the feeling that he has of some fundamental illusion in all of his desire's relations that the man incarnates and idolifies his feeling of this nothing that is beyond the object of love.*<sup>55</sup>

Given that no one, neither man nor woman, has the phallus, each of them is busy staging their relationship to what they are lacking. For Lacan, the phallus castrates women just as much as men<sup>54</sup>, because it is a signifier and not an organ. Identification with the phallus is universally negative and asymmetrically and fundamentally opposes men to women. In this regard, for Lacan, the castration complex proves to be more structuring for the subject and more foundational for the subject's gender identity than the Oedipus complex, which he makes no mention of here.

### ***Gender subversion?***

Lacan puts forward the following formula, of gender and not of sexuation: "For the boy, when he reaches adulthood, it is about man-making"<sup>55</sup> and he goes on: "beckoning the women that one is."<sup>56</sup> "The male is most often the agent of the display, but the female is not absent from it since she is precisely the subject that is affected by this display."<sup>57</sup> It was already a question of this display in "The Signification of the Phallus" (1958): "The fact that femininity finds refuge in this mask, by virtue of the *Verdrängung* inherent in desire's phallic mark, has the curious consequence of making virile display in human beings seem feminine."<sup>58</sup> The conclusion of the signification of the phallus, a text that some knew to regard as metaphysical, quite unexpectedly opens onto a de-essentializing and subversive horizon that is brought on by the function of the mask which redistributes the cards.

The man and woman's positions are seriously complicated in the comedy of the sexes that is being played between display and masquerade, giving rise to a completely unexpected blurring of genders that Lacan highlights. The identity positions find themselves hardly untangleable and less ontologically stable than ever. The phallus's insignia, as a mark of desire

for both sexes, immediately complicates the order and place of men and women in the intersubjective space of a veiled comedy. Lacan notes that if humans are inspired by animal display, what distinguishes them is “this semblance conveyed in a discourse.”<sup>59</sup> The same Lacan in a session of the seminar *On a discourse that Might not be a Semblance* entitled “The Man and the Woman” also proclaimed:

*This is what is important. Gender identity is nothing other than what I have just expressed in these terms: the man and the woman. It is clear that the question is not asked as to what prematurely emerges from this, that, when they reach adulthood, it is the fate of speaking beings to divide themselves up into men and woman and that in order to understand the emphasis placed on these things, on this authority, one must realize that the man is defined by his relation to the woman and vice versa. Nothing allows us to abstract these definitions of the man and of the woman from complete demonstrative experience up to and including the institutions in which they are expressed, namely marriage.<sup>60</sup>*

How is one to understand these lines? Even if one must never underestimate the insidious power of Lacanian irony, the outrageousness of their blaring heteronormativity is contradicted by the function of the semblance and the process of identification which, according to Lacan, point out the gender identity of a subject, whose mechanisms we attempted to show, and which might be called “semblance identity” in accordance with Luis Izcovich’s expression.<sup>61</sup> The category of fate, which Freud had mobilized in his time in order to qualify the psychosexual becoming of the individual, makes a return under Lacan’s pen; however, it is inflected here—or even diverted from its course—by the interference comprised by speech. Lacan takes care to specify that the fate in question is that of speaking beings. Yet, speech produces effects of discontinuity and diversion in the ordering of needs. The masculine display is in no way comparable to display in the animal kingdom because, even when it is silent, it is structured by the effects of speech. The *fatum* of the sexual uncovered by Freud is, for Lacan, based in language; its necessity is therefore everything but natural. As for the Lacanian phrase “the man and the woman,” it can only be understood through the contrastive value of the copula “and.” The definition of the sexes and its expression in the modalities of gender are, for Lacan, comparative. On this point, Lacan is—just this once, Saussurian: gender is constructed in difference, its valence is contrastive, not essential. Especially since the meaning of gender is entirely in language and results from the effects of language between the sexes. Gender, for

Lacan, hinges upon a beckoning, a beckoning of the Other's desire from oneself, a masked comedy that lets a body, traversed by the effects of speech or the traits of what it does not have, shimmer beneath the folds of its clothes and its makeup.

For Lacan, the gender identity of a subject is fashioned by the function of the semblance and not by its fate-given anatomy. With respect to gender, Lacan guards himself from all nominalism: "I mean that the name of something is not plastered onto the real for no reason."<sup>62</sup> Nominalism is the philosophical doctrine according to which general ideas or concepts don't have any existence except in the words that are used to express them. The nominalist thinks that general ideas are only words, as opposed to the realist who maintains that general ideas imply something real. Lacan, from this point of view, is not Butlerian *avant la lettre* inasmuch as Judith Butler understands gender as the result of a series of scenes of interpellation, the first instance of which is the delivery doctor saying, "it's a girl."<sup>63</sup> The effects of language from which gender proceeds, for Lacan, do not hinge upon plastering a man or woman predicate onto the real of the body. It is nevertheless interesting to observe that the Butlerian scene of the girl's naming is a scene of uncovering of the real of the discovered and named body whereas the comedy of the sexes that Lacan discusses implies adornments and coatings.

The real of the body—at the end of the January 20, 1971 session, Lacan briefly mentions violence between bodies, and even rape—for all that, is not denied, but it is brought back to the authority of speech and of the symbolic order in a way that is not immediately performative. The definition of the real that Lacan gives in the process is illuminating: "The real is that which makes a hole in this semblance."<sup>64</sup> The—sexuated and sexual—body does not exist in itself, not without the effects of language which it is taken into and which it gives support to. These effects, as symbolic as they are imaginary, rest, for the subject, on an intersubjective logic that proves to be mentally fundamental. The performativity of the comedy of the sexes has a double effect: it produces a subject inseparable from its gender identity. The comedy of gender, whether *marivaudage* or melodrama, is therefore of crucial importance. For Lacan, however, relationships with the other sex are conceived of as intersubjective relations and not as a confrontation that seeks recognition from the outsiders that constitute the social body. The comedy of the sexes is dual—even if it is mediated by an invisible third term. The assertion: "there is no sexual relation"—which Lacan gently reformulates in 1971<sup>65</sup>—becomes clearer when viewed from a performative and theatrical conception of gender. There really is a relation, but it is not just located between the sexes: it

is that each sexuated subject holds a third authority that constitutes its gender identity and that is the basis for the cause of its desire.

If Lacan relies on the Freudian discovery of the castration complex, his theory of difference between the sexes is more subversive than Freudian theory could let itself foresee. His deliberately non-tragic interpretation of the Freudian fate of the sexes is not so much about the conditions of childhood psychogenesis as it is about the start of play for gender identity from adolescence to adulthood. Lacan definitively abandons the Freudian thesis of *Penisneid*.<sup>66</sup>

If Lacanian gender theory only counts two genders, feminine and masculine, that are contrastively defined in relation to each other—which *de facto* excludes the possibility of the neutral—the masquerade of desire from which it proceeds does open onto a multiplicity of possible performances in which identity is not dictated by nature, it is turned to fiction and performed starting from the riddle and the impasse represented by the every subject's discovery of the sexual.

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*Translated from French by Jackson B. Smith*

## NOTES

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4. Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. W.J.H. Sprott (London: Hogarth Press, 1937), p. 146.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 148-149.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
13. "Perhaps it is not superfluous to give an assurance that, in this description of the feminine form of erotic life, no tendency to depreciate women has any part [...] that tendentiousness is alien to me." (*General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*), ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), p. 57.
14. "It must be admitted that women have but little sense of justice, and this is no doubt connected with the preponderance of envy in their mental life" (*ibid.*, p. 172).
15. Anne-Emmanuelle Berger in *Subversion lacanienne des théories du genre*, dir. F. Fajnwaks and C. Leguil (Éditions Michèle, 2015, p. 109).
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17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, p. 151.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 166
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26. *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, p. 172-173.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
28. "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes," p. 253.
29. "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 19, *op. cit.*, p. 178.
30. "As regards the relation between the Oedipus and castration complexes there is a fundamental contrast between the two sexes. Whereas in boys the Oedipus complex is destroyed by the castration complex, in girls it is made possible and led up to by the castration complex. This contradiction is cleared up if we reflect that the castration complex always operates in the sense implied in its subject-matter: it inhibits and limits masculinity and encourages femininity. The difference between the sexual development of males and females at the stage we have been considering is an intelligible consequence of the anatomical distinction between their genitals and of the psychical situation involved in it; it corresponds to the difference between a castration that has been carried out and one that has merely been threatened. In their essentials, therefore, our findings are self-evident and it should have been possible to foresee them." (*Ibid.*, p. 256-257).
31. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
32. "In girls the motive for the demolition of the Oedipus complex is lacking.", *Ibid.*, p. 257.
33. Isabelle Alfandary, "Pour compliquer un peu le complexe d'Édipe," in *Lettres de la Société de Psychanalyse Freudienne*, p. 35, 2016, p. 50-61.
34. Jacques Lacan, "The Splendor of Antigone" in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 243-256.
35. "It is on the basis of this wager—which I place at the crux of the commentary on

Freud's work I have been pursuing for seven years—that I have been led to certain results.” [Jacques Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), p. 577-578.]

36. “It cannot be solved by reducing things to biological data,” *ibid.*, p. 575. In *The Seminar XVIII*, Lacan will go so far as to recognize Freudian “stumbles”: “Whatever stumbles of this kind he might have yielded to, that which Freud reveals in the Unconscious has nothing biological about it,” *Livre XVIII: D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007), p. 30.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 582.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Le Grand Théâtre du genre : identités, sexualités et féminisme*, Paris, Éditions Belin, 2013. Or, in English: *The Queer Turn in Feminism: Identities, Sexualities, and the Theater of Gender*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

40. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre VIII : Le transfert*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001), p. 46.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 338.

43. Jacques Lacan, *D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant, op. cit.*, p. 31.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

45. Sigmund Freud, “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18, (London: The Hogart Press, 1955), p. 105.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

49. Freud quotes himself here. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

50. *D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant, op.cit.*, p. 34.

51. “The Signification of the Phallus,” *op. cit.*, p. 583.

52. Joan Rivière, “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” in *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 1929, Vol. 9, p. 303-313.

53. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire : livre IV. La relation d’objet*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1994), p. 155.

54. "For men, the girl is the phallus, that is what castrates them" (*D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, *op.cit.*, p. 32); "For women, the boy is the phallus, but they only acquire the penis and this castrates them" (*ibid.*, p. 34).
55. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
56. *Ibid.*
57. *Ibid.*
58. "The Signification of the Phallus," *op. cit.*, p. 584.
59. *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 31-32.
61. Luis Izcovich, (2008). "L'identité sexuelle et l'impossible". in *L'en-je lacanien* 10, (1), p. 84.
62. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XVIII: D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, p. 28.
63. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, (New York: Routledge, 1997).
64. *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
65. "Il n'y a pas d'acte sexuel," *ibid.*, p. 33.
66. See Gilbert Diaktine, "Le Séminaire, X: l'angoisse de Jacques Lacan," in *Revue Française de Psychanalyse*, (Paris: Éditions des Presses Universitaires de France, 2005, 3, vol. 69), p. 628.