



PROJECT MUSE®

Oedipal Promiscuity

Leo Bersani

The Undecidable Unconscious: A Journal of Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis,
Volume 1, 2014, pp. 103-106 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ujd.2014.0009>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/572073>

Oedipal Promiscuity

LEO BERSANI

The Freudian text frequently demolishes its own arguments. I'm thinking especially of the fragile nature of the dualisms to which Freud always remained attached: for example, the invasion of the death drive by the pleasure principle in the very text that was meant to demonstrate that there is something "beyond the pleasure principle," and the collapsing of the central opposition between sexuality and aggressiveness, while that opposition is being elaborated, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. There is also the tenuous nature of the differences between presumably distinct drives or psychic categories, especially between sadism and masochism, and the always threatened merging of those drives into narcissism. Language comes too late; it depends on distinctions and intervals of which the fundamental subject of psychoanalysis, as well as the psychoanalytic subject, is ignorant. The heroically impossible project of psychoanalysis is to theorize an untheorizable psyche, and the exceptional nature of the Freudian (and, I would add, Lacanian) texts in the history of psychoanalysis is that they allow unreadable pressures to infiltrate the readable, thus creating a type of readability at odds with how we have been taught to read while also accounting for that which, in the psychic structure, is anterior to all readable accounting for. The Freudian text performs the blockages, the mergings, the incoherence inherent in the "discipline" Freud invented.

Freud's work is a profound—and profoundly troubled—re-

flection on the passage from the sexuality and sociality of the couple to the sexuality and sociality of the group. In Freud's thought, the prohibition of an incestuous monogamous passion is given as the precondition of an exogamous monogamy later on. But oedipal desire is an ambiguous model for adult monogamy. In chapter 3 of *The Ego and the Id*, Freud complicates his theory of "the simple Oedipus complex in a boy" in ways that nearly destroy its descriptive usefulness. Everyone lives both the positive and the negative Oedipus complex. This means that in the little boy there is one desiring subject that takes the mother as the primary object of love and will end by identifying with a father originally (pre-oedipally) loved but then perceived as a rival, and another subject that desires the father and will identify with the rival mother.

Interestingly, however, it turns out that identification with the parent of the other sex may not be the resolution of oedipal rivalry but may instead be largely due to what Freud considers as our constitutional bisexuality. "The relative intensity of the two [parental] identifications in any individual," Freud writes, "will reflect the preponderance in him of one of the two sexual dispositions [masculine and feminine]" (1923, 34). In the Oedipus complex we identify with the lost love-object instead of with our rival for the other parent's love (an identification Freud usually explains as a way to retain an object we have loved but have lost or had to renounce) only if we have the same sexual disposition as that object. We become again that which we are already. This is particularly surprising given Freud's frequently reiterated skepticism about the validity of the masculine-feminine distinction. Even in the passage I've been discussing, he qualifies his confident statement that the little girl's identifying with her loved father "will clearly depend" on the strength of her masculine disposition by adding: "whatever that may consist in." "For psychology," Freud adds, "the contrast between the sexes fades away into one between activity and passivity, in which we far too readily identify activity with maleness and passivity with femaleness, a view which is by no means universally confirmed in the animal

kingdom" (36). The outcome of the Oedipus complex depends, apparently, on the existence of sexual dispositions which, Freud suggests, may be meaningless, and yet nothing is presumably more important than "the relative strength of the masculine and feminine dispositions" in each of us in the determination of our lifelong sexual identity.

Not only that: the oedipal situation, as Freud describes it, is an agitated movement among various couples: the male child with the beloved mother, the male child with the father who must be internalized as Law, the so-called feminine male child with the loved father, the feminine male child with the rival mother. The oedipal "triangle" is a misnomer; it always contains at least four people, and this doesn't take into accounts the shifts in the parents' identities as a result of the shifting sexual dispositions—masculine and feminine—that model the child's relation to them. There are not only the masculine boy and the feminine boy; there are also the desired father and the law-giving father, as well as the desired mother and the threatening mother, which gives us six oedipal identities. Furthermore, since adult sexual behavior always includes both traces of our bisexuality as well as a motivating memory of our oedipal fantasies of sexual intimacy (includes, that is, the memory of a presence summoning us away from that intimacy), each partner sees the other not only as two desired objects (male and female) but also as two possibilities of interdiction and identification. With ten figures, the "memory" of the oedipal triangle in our adult intimacies becomes a fantastic fantasmatic orgy. Freud's oedipal stage is a whirlwind of desiring mobility; it enacts a multiplicity of desiring positions and identities in which the couple is a unit in continuous dissolution.

Monogamy disciplines the orgies of childhood; psychoanalytically, it is inconceivable except as something that blocks circuits of desires. Monogamy perhaps thrives on our fascination with the other, with one other, as what Jean Laplanche has called an enigmatic signifier and Proust has represented as an at once narcissistic and paranoid pursuit of the other's presumed

secrets. Monogamy would be the arrested deployment of desire's appetites and curiosities—appetites and curiosities cherished and enacted, most notably, in gay male promiscuity and put to rest, entombed, just, alas, as notably, within the peculiar ideal of gay marriage.

REFERENCES

Freud, Sigmund. 1923. *The Ego and the Id*. *Standard Edition*, 19:1–66.