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The Sexual Sinthome

Geneviève Morel
(*Psychanalyste*)

Roland K. Végső
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, rvegso2@unl.edu

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THE SEXUAL SITHOME

geneviève morel

I. IS IT POSSIBLE TO SPEAK OF SEX IN PSYCHOANALYSIS WITHOUT REFERENCE TO THE DIFFERENCE OF THE SEXES?

In Psychoanalytic Praxis

Let us imagine the following fictive scenario, loosely based on the "test of Turing."¹ An analyst receives a person whose appearance does not allow the analyst to determine whether this person is a man or a woman, whose voice is disguised, and who adopts a language in which gender agreements are randomly masculine or feminine. Simply by listening to this person, could this analyst tell whether he or she is dealing with a man or a woman? It appears to me that sometimes it is possible, although we have to know why and in what sense. Let us consider the following two examples.

First example: A young man consults me because he has a strong wish to sleep with the best friend of his girlfriend, with whom he is, nevertheless, sincerely in love. In itself, this is not really pathological, but he is suffering like a martyr because of this temptation whose satisfaction he denies himself because it goes against his familial and social ideals. He was brought up on the Antilles in a very close family, and he remained involved with the Creole community of Paris, to which his girlfriend and her friend also belong. This desire for the friend poses as an obstacle to his plans of marriage and the return to the country. At this first session he tells an anecdote: one day, when his girlfriend was away, he hurried to the friend to speak to her about the situation and they all but made love. In spite of his desire, he broke away from her embraces and returned home in a hurry, with the excuse that his older brother, who was visiting at the time, could have noticed his absence at night. Furthermore, he is the youngest of the family after an older brother and an older sister, fifteen years his senior: "I had two fathers and two mothers," he observed. This situation appeared unquestionably masculine and can easily be inscribed in the Freudian Oedipal situation: the young man encounters the mother as an obstacle to the investment in another woman (the reduplication of the object); but the blade of castration appears all of a sudden and, at the moment of the sexual act, inhibits such an investment (the brother is the substitute of the castrating father). We are in the terrain of the Freudian psychology of the male object choice.²

Second example: A beautiful woman—quite happily married, mother of three children and satisfied with both her professional and social life—comes to see me, in spite of all, due to her suffering from an inexplicable emptiness that haunts her, which she carefully distinguishes from anxiety. Laughing at herself, she can only compare it with a love that transcends the one she has known (she never hesitated to cheat on her husband), a sort of divine love. In this case, it is not difficult to discern Lacan’s feminine “not-all,” whose sign is the unlimited of a jouissance that the phallus, still manifestly present, does not reabsorb.³

In these two examples, I could tell from the very first session—based solely on their discourses, without having to rely on other clues—that I am dealing with a Freudian man and a Lacanian woman. Finally, I recognized them as a man and a woman based on the way in which their desire and their jouissance inscribed themselves in the psychoanalytic frames of reference, the Freudian Oedipus and the Lacanian formulas of sexualization. We are dealing here with “classic” cases which we can recognize because they inscribe themselves in familiar paradigms. But I also meet subjects who are difficult for me to arrange in these paradigms, whose sexualization (whether or not it explicitly poses a problem for them) does not necessarily rely on the phallus which is, let me emphasize, the center of these paradigms. These are either cases of sexual ambiguity or subjects whose sexualization does not construct itself in the service of the phallus (nor castration, which is its reverse). This is why I think that my test inspired by Turing would not always work in psychoanalysis: even after years of analysis, there are subjects that socially conform to their so-called gender whom, following these paradigms, I would be hard pressed to categorize as belonging to either. This should incite us to seek out other paradigms.

In Psychoanalytic Theory

From a Freudian point of view, it would be difficult to speak of sexuality without reference to the difference of the sexes—except when girls are treated as boys, as they were by Freud until 1925. If one takes account of his work after “Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes,” in order to refer to sexual difference, one must articulate subjective development in relation to anatomy. In Freud, certain concepts and a priori universals, are sexed, like the “masculine” libido. At the same time, as we all know, he did not ascribe great meaning or content to notions of the masculine and the feminine.

From a Lacanian point of view, it is certain that a number of concepts (many of which are taken from Freud) are not sexed, even if they serve as tools for defining sexuality.⁴ Such is the case with the four fundamental concepts—the unconscious, repetition, transference, and the drive—as well as with the mathemes⁵: the subject of the signifier, the object *a*, cause of desire or surplus jouissance; as well as the symptom, fantasy, desire, love, and jouissance. As for the

last four, Lacan happens to use both adjectives, “feminine” and “masculine.” We have to note that these qualifiers are always mediated by the phallus: even if feminine jouissance is said to be “beyond” the phallus, the latter nevertheless remains the reference. There is “masculine” or “feminine” only in relation to the phallus, which is, at the same time, progressively separated from its anatomical reference in order to become a signifier and, later, a propositional function. But even in its most mathematical form, the phallic function is also the function of castration, and it would be impossible to make use of it in a clinical setting without searching for a connection, somewhere in the history of the subject, with the castration complex. Otherwise, this phallic function would have no other meaning and we could apply it to everything as “lack” or “loss” (which can evidently be found throughout history), by losing all specificity about what this “lack” or this “loss” might designate.

This is precisely what takes us to a first paradox in the logic of Lacan’s “formulas of sexualization.” If for Freud anatomy is destiny, it is only normal that there are only two sexes (it is known that he absolutely refused the idea of a third sex). But, from the point of view of a logic of jouissance, it is more difficult to admit that it would have only two modes in its reference to the phallus—which is what Lacan claims. With the exception of the case, as I have just mentioned, when we reserve the anatomical reference of the phallic function for an “anatomical” moment of the development of the subject. In that case, however, these formulas are no longer parts of a pure logic independent of anatomy and remain much more dependent on Freud than one would have thought.⁶

A second aporia concerns the clinic of the formulas of sexualization. In fact, these formulas define the logical contours of the jouissance of each sex through characteristic properties: the jouissance of a woman is unlimited with regard to its inclusion in the phallic function, while that of a man encounters a limit upon which it founders, and which is its point of exception, the castrating father. Lacan, thereby, sought to distinguish himself from the Aristotelian logic of classes defined by a common trait, which leads to a naturalistic classification (for example, the definition of the sexes by an anatomical trait). Similarly, in these formulas, we are not dealing with “performative” classes convoked by a signifier which gathers them together by naming them (like the “patrons” in syndicalism or “women” for feminism), since for such classes no property preexists the act of nomination. Instead, we are dealing with real multiplicities or what Jean-Claude Milner calls “paradoxical classes” (that is, a “mass” [*amas*] of cases that resist being grouped into a community based on the possession of a shared property⁷), to the degree that what interests us in this “mass” is precisely the reason why each element remains “radically inassimilable to any other” in a set of heteroclitic singularities that only share a logical function. As soon as we try to generally and concretely characterize what is at the heart of these formulas, the not-all of jouissance, we inevitably fall back on types: the mystical woman, the frigid woman without knowledge—these are Lacan’s examples which we transform into very restrictive common traits. In short, we find

again precisely what we were supposed to avoid. However, if we want to remain faithful to this logic of sexualization, we are led to a clinic that privileges the case and that emphasizes its singularity rather than the elements it has in common with others.

Hence the significance of the Lacanian concept of the “sinthome,” which concentrates in itself the singularity of the case and the universality of a structure that belongs to all.⁸ Furthermore, to respond to my opening question, it allows us to speak of sex without primordial reference to the difference of the sexes (and therefore, in the classic sense, without reference to the phallus).

II. THE SEXUAL SINTHOMES

The Definition of the Sinthome

The sinthome is a neologism that Lacan used in 1975 to describe Joyce’s art based on a new concept of the symptom he introduced the previous year in his seminar entitled *RSI*.⁹ The sinthome is opposed to the *multiplicity* of symptoms that everyone suffers from, and of which one eventually comes to complain in analysis. The sinthome is that which ties together, in a knot, R (the real, jouissance), S (the symbolic, language and speech), and I (the imaginary, the body, the senses, and images), and therefore supports reality. It is, therefore, what helps us avoid madness, which is to say, a problem in the knot can lead to a crisis of madness. The sinthome, therefore, implies a new theory of madness. In the case of R, S, I, together with the sinthome, we are dealing with a new quadruplicity with universal validity, since the three registers of the Real, Symbolic, and the Imaginary are themselves universal. At the same time, the instance that ties them together, the sinthome, possesses a more complex status: the sinthome can exist for everyone, but its existence must be demonstrated in each case in a singular fashion, since there is no generic sinthome. The sinthome, therefore, necessitates recourse to what takes place on the empirical level in psychoanalysis, that is to say, recourse to the clinic.

Properties of the Sinthome

1. Minimalism:

The sinthome can be obtained by way of a reduction of the multiplicity of symptoms and not by construction (in the sense of Freud’s “Construction in Analysis”). It is the minimum that holds together the real, the symbolic, and imaginary. This is why it is possible for the symptom to be deduced from successive symptomatic reductions obtained in an analysis by deciphering or through interpretation, as certain cases make abundantly clear, without psychoanalysis. The sinthome is unique, but results from initial symptoms by transformation and creation. Therefore, due to its transformational character, it cannot be considered a structuralist notion. It is necessary for what “holds together” reality.

2. *The Not-all, the Equivocation of the Sinthome:*

The sinthome is rooted in the mother tongue. The child who learns to speak remains marked for the rest of his or her life both by the words and the jouissance of the mother (or her substitute).¹⁰ This leads to a subjectivation to her demand, desire, and jouissance, “the law of the mother,” from which one should separate him- or herself.¹¹ The law of the mother inherits the properties of the feminine “not-all” jouissance: it is an unlimited law. The “not-all” character of the woman’s jouissance, therefore, displaces itself onto the symptoms of the child. This “not-all” of jouissance is redoubled by the fact that the mother language, in which these primordial tales are offered, is itself “not-all” (that is, uniquely constituted by equivocations) and unlimited.¹² This is a theoretically important point: the “not-all” is not exclusively reserved for women in the sense that everyone’s sinthome, rooted in the mother tongue, is also “not-all” for him.¹³ Jean-Claude Milner, in his latest work, calls modern society “not-all” to the degree that it is unlimited in the demands of its minorities.¹⁴ This appears to be a justifiable claim, given that society can be considered a collection of subjects whose symptoms require transformations.

3. *The Sinthome is a Separator:*

The separation from an other (or, to be more precise, from the mother) implies that one takes into consideration his or her own jouissance and his and her own desire that are, nevertheless, from the beginning rooted in this other. This is a difficult process for which Freud only offers us identification, as the sole means of mourning or assuming its loss: the subject introjects the lost object and separates him- or herself from it, at the same time retaining some of its traits. The Freudian instance of separation from the mother is the Oedipal father, taken up by Lacan in the 1950s as a supreme court, “the Other of the Other,” the Name-of-the-Father.¹⁵ The theory of the sinthome proposes an alternative to the Name-of-the-Father by generalizing the power of separation that has been conceptually reserved for it. The sinthome permits the child to separate itself from the law of the mother by relying on something contingent, which can, of course, be the father (his law or a trait modeled on him), but it can also be an element borrowed from society. The original insertion within the law of the mother implies some unbearable symptoms whose transformation into a sinthome allows the separation from the mother.¹⁶

4. *Transmission Between Generations:*

We tend to think of the transmission that takes place between different generations on the basis of the child’s identification with the parents.¹⁷ But the theory of the sinthome shows that it is not only identification that is in play in transmission. Lacan speaks of the “prolongation of the symptom” in connection with Joyce and his daughter Lucia, who was a schizophrenic: she fabricates a symptom which is not the same as her father’s (she believes herself to be telepathic

when Joyce makes the seed of “imposed speech” the matrix of his art-sinthome), but which is its logical and aggravated consequence from a psychiatric point of view. We could also approach this “prolongation of the symptom” through what Jonathan Franzen describes in his novel *The Corrections*: the children perceive the symptoms of their parents and want to avoid them. But they are obliged to rely on them in order to change them and, as a result, they fabricate a new, unexpected symptom, and undergo a “correction.”¹⁸

5. *The Sinthome “fills in for” the Name-of-the-Father:*

The third and fourth properties turn the sinthome into a concept which theoretically “fills in for” the Name-of-the-Father, to the degree that the latter, conceived as a transcendental law for the subject that belongs to the “symbolic order,” loses its central position in his theory.¹⁹ Nevertheless, in a contingent manner, the father and the paternal law can help produce a separating symptom (as in the case of little Hans), but this is neither the rule nor the norm. Above all, the Name-of-the-Father retains a clinical interest: it is no more than a particular modality of the sinthome. The only principle that one must continue to admit is the incest taboo, to the degree that it is clinically verified that subjectivation to the mother is pathological and that the subject seeks to escape it. Moreover, thanks to the notion of the prolongation of the symptom, the Name-of-the-Father is no longer the only possible vector of the parent/child transmission through primary identification with the father.

The phallus, whose arrival accompanied the Name-of-the-Father in the “paternal metaphor” (according to the classic Lacanian rewriting of the Freudian Oedipus), also becomes a contingent signifier of jouissance: it is not at all evident whether the subject is obliged to inscribe itself in the phallic function in order to subsume its relation to sex and sexuation (transsexuality).²⁰

This theory certainly upsets our way of imagining the clinical structures of psychoanalysis (neurosis, psychosis, and perversion), since it proposes a new approach to madness. This is not to say that these structures are useless or that we have to replace the “old” paradigm of the Name-of-the-Father by the “new” paradigm of the sinthome, because these structures are still valid in relation to the classic signs, the Name-of-the-Father and the phallus, which remain important in a number of cases. But the contingency of these signs requires a case study which, instead of general classifications, privileges the singularity of the symptoms and their transformation into a sinthome. If we relativize the absolute value of this classic frame of reference and the prejudices which accompany it, we encounter a large number of exceptional cases that fit very poorly in its bounds. We are thus required to lend sustained attention to contingent elements which contribute to the sinthome, which might be social and not only familial. Similarly, the difference of the sexes—in as much as psychoanalysis since Freud judged it according to the measure of the phallus—has to be conceived differently.

6. *The Sinthome is Sexual:*

Lacan centers his Borromean theory on the impossibility of a relation: above all, but not exclusively, on the impossibility of the sexual relation, since the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic do not have relations to each other either, except when an “error” occurs in a given structure. The impossibility of the sexual relation signifies, on the one hand, that no pre-established natural harmony can be achieved between the sexes (as it would be in the case of animal instinct); on the other hand, it also shows that conventional human laws that would allow everyone to recognize him or herself (thanks to marriage, filiation or some other private contract, for example) cannot be instituted. The sinthome, then, becomes the unique term that establishes a link: that between R, S, and I, which holds reality together, but also the link to the other, the social bond, and finally, the link with the sexual partner. Based on the fact that the sinthome unites disparate and heteroclitic terms, we could call it in itself *hetero*.²¹ Finally, it does not necessarily require recourse to the phallus in order to define the sexual position and sexuation. At the same time, in cases when the phallus remains useful, the concepts of classical psychoanalysis remain equally valid, although in a new referential framework, and open up new perspectives.

The idea that the univocal naming of the real by the symbolic does not exist radically refutes the notion that *the sexuation of a subject would be fixed once and for all by the Name-of-the-Father*. Nevertheless, we do encounter this last thesis by certain Lacanian psychoanalysts. Its correlate is that sexuation is never fully established in psychosis, since the Name-of-the-Father does not function there. In this way psychosis would be outside sex [*hors-sexé*]. But the fact that the phallus and castration do not play any symbolic role here does not at all prevent the subject from choosing a sex by other sinthomatic means. Moreover, even in neurosis and perversion (if we place ourselves in the framework of the Lacanian theory of 1958), the signification of the phallus produced by the paternal metaphor does not necessarily determine either the sexual position or the sexual identity of the subject. The relation of the neurotic to castration might well turn the phallus into the privileged tool of his or her sexuation (as Lacan’s “formulas of sexuation” also suggest). But we are concerned with the answer to the question: “*How to situate yourself as a girl (or a boy)?*” The “choice” of sex is to be situated at another level, where a kind of unconscious decision is made. Instead of a hypothetical univocal nomination of sexuation by the Name-of-the-Father, we are led towards an equivocal nomination by the signifiers, often modeled on the maternal discourse, what I have called “imposed equivocation,” and which is the subject’s task to interpret. Such equivocations give their exterior form to the subject’s symptom, possibly by means of an intermediary fantasy. As much in neurosis as in psychosis, sexual ambiguity often dwells in the place where the subject interprets maternal desire.

The fifth and sixth properties define, therefore, a new quadruplicity which allows us to think the quadruplicity of reference (the relations of man/woman, parent/child) without relying either on the Name-of-the-Father or the phallus.

III. HOW DOES SEXUATION AND SEXUAL DIFFERENCE DWELL IN THE SINTHOME?

I have selected two examples of sinthomatic reduction that illustrate some of the properties described above: based on the case of Mrs. P., we can illustrate 1, 2, 3, and 6—reduction, the law of the mother inscribed in an equivocal phrase, separation and sexualization; and in the case of Ilse, we can illustrate 1, 3, and 6—the creation of the sinthome, separation and sexualization. Mrs. P. used medical discourse to “fill in for” the Name-of-the-Father. Ilse, on the other hand, completely dispenses with the phallus that she rejects. The cases of Mrs. P. and Ilse show that the external form of the symptom borrows considerably from society and its signifying masters.

A. *The “Messenger of Death”*

Mrs. P.’s whole life is organized around a fundamental fantasy that can be deduced from her analysis, which she began eight years ago: she is in possession of a power of life and death over her fellow humans. An anesthetic nurse in a surgical institution, Mrs. P.’s work consists of putting to sleep and reawakening patients before and after very difficult operations which carry vital risks. Obsessed by the death of others, she incessantly posed the following question in analysis: Wouldn’t it be better to help some people die rather than to help them live? Especially when it comes to elderly patients who were operated on for problems that rendered them disabled, about whom she says that “it would be better to let them die in peace.” She militates against the therapeutic fury of our societies which, according to her, is a mistaken prolongation of suffering.

Mrs. P. began her analysis when one of her older brothers died for whom she felt responsible, since he called her that morning to describe cardiac pains, and she reassured him. A number of anecdotes show that she has the tendency to fantasmatically assume responsibility for the death of others. In addition, she has the misfortune of belonging to a family whose members die at a frightening rate: in eight years, she lost her brothers, her brother-in-law, and her parents.

Mrs. P. comes from a modest family of farmers. At the time of her premature birth, her mother was told to place her in an incubator, but she chose to keep the baby with her, and made fatalistic statements that were often repeated to Mrs. P.: “We’ll see if she is still alive tomorrow.” She was put, half-dead, in a shoebox filled with cotton: “They couldn’t tell if I was heading towards death or life.” After eight years of analysis, Mrs. P. understands that she fixated herself on an ambiguous point of maternal desire that is hidden in these sentences repeated countless times by her mother. The ambiguity resides in the mother’s refusal to hand her over to doctors so that she can take care of the baby herself. Mrs. P. keeps asking herself whether this was mere thoughtlessness caused by an excess of maternal love or, on the contrary, a death wish? At the time when the series of deaths occurred in her family, she scrutinized her mother, convinced that she “enjoyed her mourning.” In this family of farmers, boys were always privileged. Mrs. P. was the first daughter after two sons: “They counted less on girls”; “I told myself that since I am

a girl, I was not desired by my mother.” Furthermore, her premature birth was attributed to the presence of a dead twin in the uterus who was kept until the end of the mother’s pregnancy. As we will see, the idea of having a dead masculine double is crucial for Mrs. P.

The circumstances of her birth led her to believe that she was born with two “defects”: being a girl (and not a boy) and being sick (and not healthy). Her assumption of these two “defects” (articulated as phallic defects) signals her neurosis: as a sick girl she was worth less for her parents than a healthy boy. Since her childhood, she wages a “war of the sexes” in a hysterical and vengeful mode.

Between the age of three and four, Mrs. P. slept in her parents room, therefore she was present, as she concludes, at her sister’s conception. At the birth of this sister, the father threatened to hang himself, which confirmed Mrs. P. in her negative interpretation of her parents’ desire with regard to girls.

Shortly after the birth of this sister, her mother contracted a very grave illness. Mrs. P. was taken to an aunt for three months, where she spent every day in agony expecting the news of her mother’s death. Although the mother recovered, Mrs. P. started to have reoccurring nightmares that stayed with her until the age of eleven: “I take the hand of my mother to go for a walk. Suddenly, a fault opens up in the earth and I fall into it. Then, I let go of her hand.” This loss of the mother is inextricably tied here to the loss of the self. As we could expect, the death of the mother forms a certain “quilting point” in Mrs. P.’s analysis: the material organized itself, belatedly, around this point of separation which tied together her own loss, the loss of the mother, and the (real or fantasmatic) loss of others. The occasion was provided by a conversation with her sister about their mother’s coffin. Her sister said: “When I think that she carried me for nine months!” Mrs. P. then thought *in petto*: “But she only carried me for seven.” This is when she realized the ambivalence of her relation to her mother, which consisted, on the one hand, of a profound resentment caused by the circumstances of her birth and, on the other hand, of a passionate love that awakened in her very early, at the time of the mother’s illness, her interest in the vocation of nursing, with the intention of caring for her mother. This ambivalence is concentrated on her elderly patients whom she wished to protect from the discomforts of old age by accelerating their death (fortunately, this remained fantasmatic). At this point, she understands the ambiguity of this form of good will for others which she called “help to death” and, finally, distances herself from this torturing fantasy.

Her mother died around the time of her birthday. On this day, she presented me with a piece of jewelry. As I called her attention to the fact that she gave me a present for *her* birthday, she responded that she would have liked to receive one from her mother, but it was now impossible. She thereby showed the stake of the transference: the precious object that she would have liked to be in her parents’ desire, above all, for her mother. Her father was an alcoholic, a “womanizer”

always ready with a few bawdy pleasantries, to which the mother always reproached him for his infidelities. This apparently victimized mother, however, was in fact the head of the family. As Mrs. P. observed: “My father applied maternal repression.” Since her childhood, Mrs. P. always took her mother’s side against him, and lent a complaisant ear to her mother’s complaints who advised her daughters never to marry, nor have children, but to have cats or dogs instead.

The choice of her husband, a doctor, obeys the logic of the same fantasy. When she met him, she treated him harshly, attempted to “castrate” him and, in accordance with the maternal principles, refused all interaction with him. One day, depressed because of a failure in his career, he made a serious suicide attempt. In order to save him, a risky operation had to be attempted which could have resulted in a permanent disability, so Mrs. P.’s opinion was sought. First she said no, which would have meant certain death, but later she accepted that the operation had to be attempted. The man eventually recovered, and only then did she agree to marry him and to have a child with him. We have already encountered Mrs. P.’s fantasy of being the one who decides over life and death and not only with her patients but also with those close to her (just as her mother did for her at her birth, as she believed). We saw an example of this when her brother died, and a similar anecdote involved the sick child of her sister: she calls these situations “being the messenger of death,” since her fantasy concerns not only her power over life and death but also her particular knowledge, the prediction of the death of the other. For her husband she chose an almost-dead masculine double (who evokes her dead twin), a man who is, thanks to her, brought back to life, but who then constantly menaces her by repeating the suicide. The link between her deadly fantasy and her sexuality is demonstrated by the presence of precise dreams about the jouissance to death of his two brothers, which shock her and make her feel guilty. Her condition of jouissance is truly the “dead man.”²²

Thanks to the analysis, Mrs. P.’s fundamental fantasy is thereby rendered legible. If we wanted to parody Freud, and find the “sentence” behind the fantasy, we could say that “a child is being killed.” But if the central object is surely the subject, the agent would be the mother. This fantasy is constructed from an equivocation of maternal desire interpreted as having a right of death or life over the children, and which emerges in the form of an oracle: “Who knows if she spends the night?” This is what became the law of Mrs. P.’s being, who incessantly realizes this sentence: she effectively exhibits, as in a macabre scenario, the cause of her desire—the dead man—on a daily basis in her professional and private life.

Her fundamental fantasy could be deciphered based on the symptomatic compartments in which it incarnates itself, without which neither she nor I would have pronounced a sentence like “A child is being killed.” Furthermore, her fantasy, whose agent appears to be maternal, does not have the same structure as the Freudian fantasy of incest with the father, and it would be forcing it to insist on introducing the latter into the framework of this theory. At the same time, the subject’s original interpretation of the maternal sentence, the law of the mother, articulates

both her and her mother's desire. Mrs. P. had to return to the equivocal point of maternal desire in order to separate herself from it, the moment of analysis when she perceived the difference between what she was for the Other and what she would have liked to be. At this point, it is not a mistake to speak of a traversing of the fantasy. After this turn of the cure, Mrs. P. had dreams in which the signifiers of life and death were reversed. In her work, she no longer had the same lethal obsessions as before. Furthermore, she no longer devoted herself to the constant anticipation of the death of her friends or her family, nor did she offer her services as a nurse or a mourner. The "messenger of death" was no more.

In the final analysis, what is important is Mrs. P.'s phallic interpretation of her mother's words and desire. We could call this interpretation her fundamental fantasy, that which is inscribed in her behavior. This is what forms her life, at least until the analysis removes its fateful force. Based on this fact, I emphasized the inscription in her life of her interpretation of maternal desire, by considering it as the symptom by which Mrs. P. attempts to separate herself from the law of the mother.

Moreover, the connection Mrs. P.'s establishes between her preoccupation with the life and death of her contemporaries and euthanasia and palliative care is remarkable for what it shows of the social and cultural form of her symptom. This preoccupation could have led her to place herself outside the law, this time in the sense of the law of the State: cases of murderous nurses are well-known. The fantasy of the "dead man," which emerges from her symptom, allowed Mrs. P. to entertain, if ever so tenuously, a relation with a man and have a child by him: her partner is, therefore, himself a participant in her symptom who temporarily eases the absence of the sexual relation. I think that we can claim that this symptom has to do with a *sinthome*, now that Mrs. P. relieved herself of a great part of the suffering that it contained. In fact, it ties together the real of death, the symbolic entrance of the subject into language (maternal speeches), and her imaginary representation of the castrated or dead man. Finally, it supports the link to the sexual partner.

The originality of this case is that the symptom borrows little from the father and a great deal from the mother. But we should not forget the role of medicine in its determination: medical discourse is for Mrs. P. the master signifier with which she identifies or against which she fights (and did we not hear the medical verdict behind the initial maternal words?). This discourse "fills in for" the Name-of-the-Father. The strong phallic charge of the fantasy and the symptom, in the end, lends a hysteric character to the case.

B. The Sinthome as the Invention of a Relation: To Be or Not to Be...a Parent

The actualization of a *sinthome* can consist of a new relation to the classification of the sexes and to filiation. In order to achieve this, Ilse relied on new forms of parenthood in our societies.

Ilse came to see me because of her difficulties with her female partners. She had recently left her first analyst because the evocation of certain memories about her father, harmless in themselves, caused her unbearable anxiety. Consisting of ideas of incest and rape, these memories turned out to be fantasmatic. Her condition was approaching a delirious outbreak but was appeased when she reconstructed in analysis the stages of her history and the manner in which she considered the two sexes in her childhood.

The Representation of Man and Woman: Two Separate Worlds

Two worlds faced each other. The world of men was characterized by cruelty. The father, “a monstrous, foolish king,” incarnated absolute power in the home. In a dream, he is seated in front of Ilse on a throne, exhibiting an enormous sexual organ which is “disproportionate” and which she finds ridiculous. She recalls the instances when he beat her brothers and, on one occasion, her mother. At the same time, her father also assumed a protective role. He transmitted to her a certain professional ambition which was, however, damaged by the contradiction between the respect he showed towards the girl and the contempt he showed for the mother. It was a case of silent transmission, without words. Ilse chose the same profession as her father.

On the opposite side, the world of women was represented essentially by her mother. While she was still a young girl, she was “abandoned” by a fiancé “because she refused to have sex.” So she threw herself at Ilse’s father and, in order not to lose him, she got pregnant. The father constantly interrupted her wife and never let her speak her mind. The mother confided to Ilse that she did not feel respected and incessantly told her terrible things about her father and other men. Ilse got the idea that the female sex was “mutilated.” Although she showed compassion for her mother, her submission to her spouse revolted Ilse. Consequently, she refused the feminine model incarnated by her mother—that of a woman who did not do anything “but” make babies; who was dependent on her own mother and then on her husband; and who once again, in spite of all her sacrifices, found herself abandoned as a result of her divorce. In short, Ilse rejected the model of the “mutilated” sex and attempted to place herself on the side of boys. But there was an obstacle: the male sex as the emblem of violence.

Nevertheless, by relying on an imaginary identification with her brothers, she could achieve this goal. At the age of six, with short hair, she was admitted into their world and recognized as one of them. From age fourteen, without success, she had attempted to constitute a female identity in homosexual relations, often platonic, by identifying with her friends. She had a name for these substitute relations, and called them relations of “simile–couples,” which she opposed to the relations of couples, more difficult to sustain, as we shall see.

We can begin to see the outlines of the only possible relation between these two separate and closed worlds of men and women (on the one side, the mutilated sex, on the other, male power). It is rape: is this not what appeared, at the breaking point of delirium, in the case of her initial analysis with a man who reminded her of her father? Her mother transmitted to her the fear of men and the idea that “one” cannot defend herself from them. Ilse aspired to detach herself from this maternal suffering and, in fact, her place in this feminine world was untenable.

Feminine Relations

As soon as she has sexual partners, Ilse’s position becomes critical, since the imaginary identification with her brothers no longer suffices to insure a relation to a woman. She had the tendency to fantasmatically place herself in the position of her father in relation to a woman who appeared to her as her dismembered mother whom she should have wanted to satisfy. In reality, however, this gave to her partners suffocating and untenable relations.

There was hardly any alternative between these two mirroring worlds: facing men, Ilse was steeped, speechlessly, in the first world of the violated; and, facing women, defending her own body, she risked inhabiting that of the violators. Thanks to her analysis, Ilse developed a certain distance with regard to the impasse that she dramatically repeated in each relation and, appeased, met a new friend, Marie, with whom relations were different. The relation took a more sexual turn, in a reciprocal fashion, which displaced the face-to-face of the two mirroring worlds. Ilse loved Marie’s body, and spoke at our sessions about her relation to her body and her sexuality. In a dream, she bathed with an amorous young man, and the voice of her mother told her to be suspicious. She interpreted the dream as a sexual inhibition coming from the mother to which she no longer was obliged to conform. “I can feel an opening,” she said. Ilse thought that she left the “separated worlds” and their alienating signification.

The Fecund Father

Marie, however, wanted to have a baby. After some reflection, consultation with different lesbian groups, and some profound study of the question, Ilse and Marie decided to have Marie artificially inseminated in a European country which, contrary to France, allows IAD (artificial insemination with donor sperm) for lesbian couples. Ilse never planned to be the biological mother of a child but, after their mutual decision, the project of Marie’s insemination suited her: “I want to make a decision that definitively binds me,” she said without further specifying the coordinates of this bond. At the same time, the decision strongly destabilizes her, as two dreams of “conception” reveal, which she related to me just before their trip to the first consultation at the center specializing on IAD.

If we read these two dreams together, it becomes clear that, first, the father made a child with Marie on Ilse's behalf; and, second, that he also made a child with his own daughter. He therefore took the place of the real father, the anonymous donor, and he fertilized both women at the same time with one and the same infant. In this case, the father intervened as the third (a hyphen between the two women, a *deus ex machina*, or liaison officer) to make the *same child* for both.

Let us recall that Ilse's encounter with the analyst, C., led to the resurgence of ideas of paternal incest, which could have evoked the onset of psychosis. Curiously, this time the father was convoked, as a third, to a symbolic place in order to make, in an imaginary fashion, a real child for a couple of women without the appearance of any delirium. To the contrary, the actual situation was accompanied for Ilse by a certain stabilization, since it signaled the end of a tormenting sexual division of the world from which she was excluded.

We could conclude that there is, in Ilse's case, a foreclosure that bears more on the phallus and its link to the male sex than on the Name-of-the-Father as symbolic instance. The rejected signifier is the phallus as the imaginary emblem of rape and massacre, a signifier of a despised power that Ilse's feminist culture intimately tied to the masculine sex without tempering this common idea of our times by a neurotic dialectic. On the contrary, the father as agent of generation is idealized as "he who loves women," at the moment when he is invoked to unconsciously "explain" the conception of the child. There are two independent and split paternal images (the rapist and the lover of women), as if we could put things to rest without further ado, as if a definitive cut had materialized itself. On the women's side, castration is realized and not symbolized and, by mirroring rape, it merges with the frightening idea of a mutilated sex and a massacre of women. At the center of this sinister field, we find the mother, who incessantly risks dragging in her daughter as well.

For Ilse, the relation to the child of the other woman seems facilitated by this disjunction between, on the one hand, the father of love and the gift and, on the other hand, the phallic father (the potential rapist). This disjunction allows her to avoid certain conflicts and confers on her more social freedom. In a later dream, she dreams of a "sun father." She associates it with the "paternal light" in her life, at the same time saying that she had to break away from her father to find this life.

Being "the Parent"

What position was Ilse going to designate for herself in relation to her partner, the future biological and legal mother? After Marie's successful insemination (who is now pregnant), certain dreams show Ilse with her mother, so Ilse had to reconsider her bipartition of the world. How was she going to situate herself? She told me that she was going to be "the parent" of Marie's child. The parent, as she explained, is neither the mother (who is Marie) nor the father (who is anonymous).

This term, “the parent,” functioned as a sort of neologism, a new concept which, in its neutrality, perfectly named her role in relation to the child about to be born, and this place which “definitively bound her” to Marie and the child. She did not want to be a “second mother” (an often-used expression in similar situations), nor did she want to assume the role of a “father.”

Their couple will not be founded on the bipartition of men and women (which still rules the order of the world), but rather on that of a “parent” and a “mother.” The parent would have a moral authority that, she believed, corresponded well with her character and her qualities. She would have no legal tie to the child, actually to her great regret, since an adoption turned out to be impossible. Nevertheless, she planned to initiate, with Marie’s consent, a mentoring process through a lawyer. This time, as the theme of law emerged, especially in the discussions with her parents, nothing terrible has been awoken in Ilse: no specter of command appeared and no serious uproar occurred. Ilse remained “serene.” No neurotic guilt-awakening debate took place about her rights and duties: Ilse found a solution that did without the permission and benediction of the righteous, and still remained within the limits of legality. She did not move outside the law. She respected the law, but circulated among the threads of the legal network, exploiting the holes in the system. The fact that not even the least psychotic emergence took place, at this point at least, confirms the sinthomatic value of the solution found by Ilse to the problems of generation and sexual difference.

Moreover, Marie’s pregnancy gave her an opportunity to separate herself from her own mother by distancing herself from the painful story that the mother made of her daughter’s birth, which had bound her to an unbearable feeling of guilt. Birth, like the rules, was associated with “massacre” and the “mutilated sex,” and so to the mother’s “will to death” in relation to the fetus. The birth therefore also referred to the foreclosed castration, so it would have been impossible for Ilse. She was grateful to Marie for having spared her this terror by having herself inseminated.

The Invention of a Sinthome

In her analysis, therefore, Ilse presented a sinthome, “the parent.” It consists of the invention of a new relation to woman and filiation. At the beginning, the sexes were divided into two mirroring worlds, separated from each other in a rigid manner: phallic men and rapists against massacred, mutilated women. Ilse had no place here: the imaginary identification with her brothers did not suffice to sustain a relation to women, except in the form of a “simile-couple.” At the same time, it was out of the question to rejoin the clan of female victims whose terrifying emblem appeared to be her mother. After an intense elaboration in analysis, the encounter of a new partner who wanted to have a child disturbs the initial setup by summoning Ilse to form a “couple.” With regard to “mothers with children,” there was no question of arranging herself on the side of “men with the phallus.” Such was the new sexual dichotomy offered to her by her unconscious, to the

degree that the phallus proved to be for her, from the beginning, a foreclosed symbol. By relying on the discourse of homoparentality offered to her by gay and lesbian movements (which she actually discusses), Ilse invented the role of being “the parent” in relation to the future mother. This term has the value of a neologism, since it is charged with what it simultaneously avoids and alludes to: the father and the mother.

The father (the rapist) has become “the paternal light” as a result of an unconscious process that installed it symbolically as a third between two women. It effaced his initial value of being the phallic rapist in order to turn him into simultaneously the real father (in the place of the anonymous sperm donor) and the imaginary father of the same child made conjointly with two women.

The mother (a victim of the man but a potential murderer of the child) is left aside thanks to the arrival of this new being. Ilse separates herself from her. “Being parent,” moreover, abolishes Ilse’s sad coming to the world by “repairing” the terrible reception made by her mother at her birth.

Thus the new arrangement is the following: a “parent” opposite “a mother plus a child” with whom a definitive bond is established; the disappearance of the “man plus phallus”; and, in a corner, “the paternal light” which guides the subject as its guardian angel. This is how the sinthome “being parent” can be written, thanks to which Ilse invents a new mode of filiation without the phallus, but not without a support in the father. We can observe a fourfold structure in which the sinthome is included and which holds together the mother (the real), the child (the imaginary), and the father (the symbolic), by confirming the foreclosure of the phallus. Furthermore, the sinthome also inscribes a possible sexual relation with a woman by relying on the social signifiers of the times.

The sinthome “being parent” concentrates and stabilizes Ilse’s sexual ambiguity: Ilse no longer has to take sides, since it is no longer necessary for her to define herself with the old categories of man and woman, which tormented her so much. She assumed a new (sexual but not sexuated) identity, and she gives it a name. From this point of view, “the parent” plays an analogous role to the phallus in neurosis: it is valid for both of the sexes. The difference from the phallus is that the “parent” does not belong to the universal dialectic of Oedipus. It is Ilse’s singular invention based on a minority discourse.

IV. CONCLUSION

Psychoanalysis, therefore, possesses the means to think the difference of the sexes without relying on the phallus. Lacanian theory of the sinthome offers an alternative by articulating a new quadruplicity (R, S, I, and the sinthome), which allows us to think the relation between the sexes and the generations without necessarily referring to the Name-of-the-Father or the phallus as absolute norms. Thanks to this theory, we can avoid the moral and political prejudices that accompany the grand questions of society posed to us at the dawn of the 21st century: the treatment of “mental health,” the legislation of marriage, filiation, and adoption.

Translated by Roland Végső



1. Alan Turing, *The Essential Turing: Seminal Writings in Computing, Logic, Philosophy, Artificial Intelligence, and Artificial Life plus The Secrets of Enigma*, ed. B. Jack Copeland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
2. Sigmund Freud, "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement In the Sphere of Love," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 11:179-190.
3. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998).
4. Although there are certainly other possible psychoanalytic positions, I restrict myself here to Freud and Lacan, who really invented something new. Of course, Freud inspired theories opposing or agreeing with his own, among which we find most notably the very important Freudian and post-Freudian theories (Ferenczi, Jones, Horney, Deutsch, Klein, and so on), but there also exist a number of fascinating Lacanian works that I do not cite here.
5. Condensed forms of writing intended to transmit knowledge in the form of mathematical formulas.
6. The example of the "push-to-the-woman" [*pousse-à-la-femme*] in psychosis is instructive. It is what obviously dominates the sexuation of the subject who is its victim, regardless of biological sex. We have to read it with a part of the feminine side of the formulas, but not both. Thus, from a Lacanian point of view, the subject seized by the "push-to-the-woman" is neither a man nor a woman. Nevertheless, it is still not necessarily an angel! The formulas of sexuation are, therefore, not sufficient to cover the whole field of possible sexuations. They remain a paradigmatic reference which is only typical. See also Geneviève Morel, *Ambiguïtés sexuelles: Sexuation et psychose* (Paris: Anthropos, 2000).
7. Jean-Claude Milner, *Les noms indistincts* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), 116-119.
8. As a matter of fact, the word is taken from an archaic version of the symptom, which dates back to before the 15th century. See Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan, livre XXIII: Le sinthome (1975-1976)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2005). Alain Badiou also posited the necessity of a singular "function of humanity" defined as "that which supports the infinite singularity of truths that inscribe themselves in these types [science, politics, art, and love]," which is at the heart of "the disjunction between the positions of 'man' and 'woman,'" and which could be related to Lacan's sinthome. See Alain Badiou, *Conditions* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), 259.
9. The basic idea is to rely on the Borromean knot of three or four folds, whose characteristic property is that it unties itself if any of the circles are cut. See Lacan, *RSI (1974-1975)*, unpublished seminar.
10. I speak of the mother in order to simplify things, since it is the most common case. A man can obviously also serve as the mother and he can also transmit the not-all of language.
11. Lacan, *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan, livre V: Les formations de l'inconscient (1957-1958)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 188.
12. Language is unlimited because nothing provides its limit by constituting an exception to a common rule which would define language. In fact, there is no superior principle, a metalanguage which would allow us to settle equivocations in an a priori fashion. Furthermore, there is no univocal nomination of the real by the symbolic either.
13. Let us be more precise: "not-all" is opposed to "all" in the sense that the all is limited by a boundary which forms an exception, while the not-all has no boundary and is, therefore, unlimited (which is not the same as infinite). Jean-Claude Milner gives the example of a game of checkers for the not-all and finite: there is

a finite number of pieces and, thus, a finite number of possible Kings, but it does not matter which piece actually becomes a King, so the process is without exception and therefore not-all. The same is true of Don Juan: there is a finite number of women in the world, but each without exception is susceptible of becoming his mistress, so the process is not-all. The phallic not-all of feminine jouissance signifies that she is “somewhere” in herself not phallic, but that this “somewhere” is indeterminate since this woman also inscribes herself without exception in the phallic function. The not-all of language reemerges from a different form of the unlimited (see previous note). In the child’s symptom, these two kinds of not-all (that of feminine jouissance and that of the mother tongue) superimpose on and overlap each other.

14. Jean-Claude Milner, *Les penchants criminels de l'Europe démocratique* (Paris: Verdier, 2003), Chapter 1.
15. The “paternal metaphor” realizes the substitution of the Name-of-the-Father for the mother’s desire, which is followed by an effect of phallic signification (1958).
16. See, Geneviève Morel, “Pathologies de la loi,” in *L'enfant devant la loi: Savoirs et cliniques*, Revue de psychanalyse 4 (February 2004).
17. Hence a multitude of false problems concerning homoparentality: for example, how could the daughter of two homosexual partners have access to the feminine? The problem is posed incorrectly, since femininity does not transmit itself by the identification with the mother. Psychoanalysts have sometimes taken an unlucky position in public debates concerning the juridical questions of filiation and marriage, wanting to be the guardians of orthodoxy and the defenders of moral order that they sometimes project on their discipline. For these contemporary debates, see *Au-delà du PaCS, L'expertise familiale à l'épreuve de l'homosexualité*, ed. Daniel Borillo, Éric Fassin, and Marcela Iacub (Paris: PUF, 1999); Marcela Iacub, *Le crime était presque sexuel* (Paris: EPEL, 2001); and Elizabeth Roudinesco, *La famille en désordre* (Paris: Fayard, 2002).
18. Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (New York: Picador, 2002).
19. Jacques Lacan, “Joyce le symptôme I,” in *Joyce avec Lacan* (Paris: Navarin, 1987), 28.
20. See Pierre-Henri Castel, *La métamorphose impensable: Essai sur le transsexualisme et l'identité personnelle* (Paris: Galimard, 2003), final chapter.
21. Also included in this is cases in which a link is established between homosexual subjects.
22. Jacques Lacan, “Guiding Remarks for a Convention on Female Sexuality,” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink. (New York: Norton, 2006), 610-620.
23. That which is definitively rejected outside the symbolic.

