

## Kate Millett

*As a Columbia University graduate student, Kate Millett was active in a number of women's liberation groups in New York City. Her book Sexual Politics, published in 1969, was written originally as a doctoral dissertation. Millett's thesis was that "sex has a frequently neglected political aspect." Doubleday's cover for the book was a severe white, black, and red design with bold typography used for the title and author's name. In much smaller letters, almost giving the appearance of the charts used by optometrists, was the statement in capital letters:*

A  
SURPRISING  
EXAMINATION  
OF  
SOCIETY'S  
MOST  
ARBITRARY  
FOLLY

*In Sexual Politics, Millett took on the writings of Sigmund Freud, D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Jean Genet in order to expose these authors' insidious patriarchal biases. Her intense scrutiny of their texts suggested dissection rather than analysis. Millett's book aroused a storm of controversy that intensified the debate started by other outspoken authors such as Betty Friedan and the Australian radical feminist Germaine Greer, whose The Female Eunuch was also a bestseller in 1969.*

## FROM SEXUAL POLITICS

FREUD ASSUMED that the female's discovery of her sex is, in and of itself, a catastrophe of such vast proportions that it haunts a woman all through life and accounts for most aspects of her temperament. His entire psychology of women, from which all modern psychology and psychoanalysis derives heavily, is built upon an original tragic experience—born female. Purportedly, Freud is here only relaying the information supplied by women themselves, the patients who furnished his clinical data, the basis of his later generalities about all women. It was in this way, Freud believed, he had been permitted to see how women accepted the idea that to be born female is to be born "castrated":

As we learn from psycho-analytic work, women regard themselves as wronged from infancy, as undeservedly cut short and set back; and the embitterment of so many daughters against their mothers derives, in the last analysis, from the reproach against her of having brought them into the world as women instead of as men.<sup>1</sup>

Assuming that this were true, the crucial question, manifestly, is to ask why this might be so. Either maleness is indeed an *inherently* superior phenomenon, and in which case its "betterness" could be empirically proved and demonstrated, or the female misapprehends and reasons erroneously that she is inferior. And again, one must ask why. What forces in her experience, her society and socialization have led her to see herself as an inferior being? The answer would seem to lie in the conditions of patriarchal society and the inferior position of women within this society. But Freud did not choose to pursue such a line of reasoning, preferring instead an etiology of childhood experience based upon the biological fact of anatomical differences.

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My critique of Freud's notions of women is indebted to an unpublished summary by Frances Kamm.

1. Freud, "Some Character Types Met With in Psycho-Analysis Work" (1915). *Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud*, edited by Joan Riviere (New York: Basic Books, 1959), Vol. IV, p. 323.

While it is supremely unfortunate that Freud should prefer to bypass the more likely social hypothesis to concentrate upon the distortions of infantile subjectivity, his analysis might yet have made considerable sense were he sufficiently objective to acknowledge that woman is born female in a masculine-dominated culture which is bent upon extending its values even to anatomy and is therefore capable of investing biological phenomena with symbolic force. In much the same manner we perceive that the traumatizing circumstance of being born black in a white racist society invests skin color with symbolic value while telling us nothing about racial traits as such.

In dismissing the wider cultural context of feminine dissatisfaction and isolating it in early childhood experience, Freud again ignored the social context of childhood by locating a literal feminine "castration" complex in the child's discovery of the anatomical differentiation between the sexes. Freud believed he had found the key to feminine experience—in that moment when girls discover they are "castrated"—a "momentous discovery which little girls are destined to make":

They notice the penis of a brother or playmate, strikingly visible and of large proportions, at once recognize it as the superior counterpart of their own small and inconspicuous organ, and from that time forward fall a victim to envy for the penis.<sup>2</sup>

There are several unexplained assumptions here: why is the girl instantly struck by the proposition that bigger is better? Might she just as easily, reasoning from the naïveté of childish narcissism, imagine the penis is an excrescence and take her own body as norm? Boys clearly do, as Freud makes clear, and in doing so respond to sexual enlightenment not with the reflection that their own bodies are peculiar, but, far otherwise, with a "horror of the mutilated creature or triumphant contempt for her."<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the superiority of this "superior counterpart," which the girl is said to "recognize at once" in the penis, is assumed to relate to the autoerotic satisfactions of childhood; but here again the child's experience provides no support for such an assumption.

2. Freud, "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" (1925), *Collected Papers*, Vol. V, p. 190.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

Much of Freudian theory rests upon this moment of discovery and one is struck how, in the case of the female, to recapitulate the peculiar drama of penis envy is to rehearse again the fable of the Fall, a Fall that is Eve's alone.<sup>4</sup> As children, male and female first inhabit a paradisiacal playground where roles are interchangeable, active and passive, masculine and feminine. Until the awesome lapsarian moment when the female discovers her inferiority, her castration, we are asked to believe that she had assumed her clitoris a penis. One wonders why. Freud believes it is because she masturbated with it, and he assumes that she will conclude that what is best for such purposes must be a penis.<sup>5</sup> Freud insists upon calling the period of clitoral autoeroticism "phallic" in girls.

Moreover, the revelation which Freud imagined would poison female life is probably, in most cases, a glimpse of a male playmate urinating or having a bath. It is never explained how the girl child makes the logical jump from the sight of bathing or urination to knowledge that the boy masturbates with this novel article. Even should her first sight of the penis occur in masturbatory games, Freud's supposition that she could judge this foreign item to be more conducive to autoerotic pleasure than her own clitoris (she having no possible experience of penile autoeroticism as males have none of clitoral) is groundless. Yet Freud believed that female autoeroticism declines as a result of enlightenment, finding in this "yet another surprising effect of penis-envy, or of the discovery of the inferiority of the clitoris."<sup>6</sup> Here, as is so often the case, one cannot separate Freud's account of how a child reasons from how Freud himself reasons, and his own

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4. Not only has Adam grace within his loins to assure him he belongs to a superior species, but even his later fears of castration which come to him after a glimpse of the "mutilated creature" cause him to repress his Oedipal desires (out of fear of a castrating father's revenge) and in the process develop the strong super-ego which Freud believes accounts for what he took to be the male's inevitable and transcendent moral and cultural superiority.
  5. Because she feels free, equal, and active then, Freud says "the little girl is a little man." "Femininity," p. 118. So strong is Freud's masculine bias here that it has obliterated linguistic integrity: the autoerotic state might as well, in both cases, be called "clitoral" for all the light shed by these terms. Freud's usage is predicated on the belief that masturbation is the active pursuit of pleasure, and activity masculine *per se*. "We are entitled to keep to our view that in the phallic phase of girls the clitoris is the leading erotogenic zone." *Ibid*.
  6. "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," p. 193.

language, invariably pejorative, tends to confuse the issue irremediably. Indeed, since he has no objective proof of any consequence to offer in support of his notion of penis envy or of a female castration complex,<sup>7</sup> one is struck by how thoroughly the subjectivity in which all these events are cast tends to be Freud's own, or that of a strong masculine bias, even of a rather gross male-supremacist bias.<sup>8</sup>

This habitual masculine bias of Freud's own terms and diction, and the attitude it implies, is increased and further emphasized by his followers: Deutsch refers to the clitoris as an "inadequate substitute" for the penis; Karl Abraham refers to a "poverty in external genitals" in the female, and all conclude that even bearing children can be but a poor substitute for a constitutional inadequacy.<sup>9</sup> As Klein observes in her critique of Freud, it is a curious hypothesis that "one half of humanity should have biological reasons to feel at a disadvantage for not having what the other half possess (but not vice versa)."<sup>10</sup> It is especially curious to imagine that half the race should attribute their clear and obvious social-status inferiority to the crudest biological reasons when so many more promising social factors are involved.

It would seem that Freud has managed by this highly unlikely hypothesis to assume that young females negate the validity, and even, to some extent, the existence, of female sexual characteristics altogether. Surely the first thing all children must notice is that mother

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7. The entirety of Freud's clinical data always consists of his analysis of patients and his own self-analysis. In the case of penis envy he has remarkably little evidence from patients, and his description of masculine contempt and feminine grief upon the discovery of sexual differences is extraordinarily autobiographical. Little Hans (Freud's own grandson), a five-year-old boy with an obsessive concern for his "widdler," furnishes the rest of the masculine data. Though an admirable topic of precise clinical research, it was and is remarkably difficult for Freud, or anyone else, to make generalizations about how children first come to sexual knowledge, family and cultural patterns being so diverse, further complicated by the host of variable factors within individual experience, such as the number, age, and sex of siblings, the strength and consistency of the nakedness taboo, etc.
  8. Ernest Jones aptly described Freud's attitude here as "phallogentric." There is something behind Freud's assumptions reminiscent of the ancient misogynist postulate that females are but incomplete or imperfect males—e.g., deformed humans, the male being accepted as the norm—a view shared by Augustine, Aquinas, etc.
  9. Karl Abraham, "Manifestations of the Female Castration Complex," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 3, March 1922.
  10. Klein, *op. cit.*, pp. 83–84.

has breasts, while father has none. What is possibly the rather impressive effect of childbirth on young minds is here overlooked, together with the girl's knowledge not only of her clitoris, but her vagina as well.

In formulating the theory of penis envy, Freud not only neglected the possibility of a social explanation for feminine dissatisfaction but precluded it by postulating a literal jealousy of the organ whereby the male is distinguished. As it would appear absurd to charge adult women with these values, the child, and a drastic experience situated far back in childhood, are invoked. Nearly the entirety of feminine development, adjusted or maladjusted, is now to be seen in terms of the cataclysmic moment of discovered castration.

So far, Freud has merely pursued a line of reasoning he attributes, rightly or wrongly, to the subjectivity of female youth. Right or wrong, his account purports to be little more than description of what girls erroneously believe. But there is prescription as well in the Freudian account. For while the discovery of her castration is purported to be a universal experience in the female, her response to this fate is the criterion by which her health, her maturity and her future are determined through a rather elaborate series of stages: "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."<sup>11</sup> The female first blames her mother, "who sent her into the world so insufficiently equipped" and who is "almost always held responsible for her lack of a penis."<sup>12</sup> Again, Freud's own language makes no distinction here between fact and feminine fantasy. It is not enough the girl reject her own sex however; if she is to mature, she must redirect her self positively toward a masculine object. This is designated as the beginning of the Oedipal stage in the female. We are told that the girl now gives up the hope of impregnating her mother, an ambition Freud attributes to her. (One wonders how youth has discovered conception, an elaborate and subtle process which children do not discover by them-

11. "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," p. 192.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

selves, and not all primitive adults can fathom.) The girl is said to assume her female parent has mutilated her as a judgment on her general unworthiness, or possibly for the crime of masturbation, and now turns her anxious attention to her father.<sup>13</sup>

At this stage of her childhood the little girl at first expects her father to prove magnanimous and award her a penis. Later, disappointed in this hope, she learns to content herself with the aspiration of bearing his baby. The baby is given out as a curious item; it is actually a penis, not a baby at all: "the girl's libido slips into position by means—there is really no other way to put it—of the equation 'penis-child.'"<sup>14</sup> Although she will never relinquish some hope of acquiring a penis ("we ought to recognize this wish for a penis as being *par excellence* a feminine one")<sup>15</sup> a baby is as close to a penis as the girl shall get. The new penis wish is metamorphosed into a baby, a quaint feminine-coated penis, which has the added merit of being a respectable ambition. (It is interesting that Freud should imagine the young female's fears center about castration rather than rape—a phenomenon which girls are in fact, and with reason, in dread of, since it happens to them and castration does not.) Girls, he informs us, now relinquish some of their anxiety over their castration, but never cease to envy and resent penises<sup>16</sup> and so while "impotent" they remain in the world a constant hazard to the well-provided male. There are overtones here of a faintly capitalist antagonism between the haves and the have nots. This seems to account for the considerable fear of women inherent in Freudian ideology and the force of an accusation of penis envy when leveled at mature women.

The Freudian "family romance," domestic psychodrama more horrific than a soap opera, continues. The archetypal girl is now flung into the Oedipal stage of desire for her father, having been persuaded of the total inadequacy of her clitoris, and therefore of her sex and her self. The boy, meanwhile, is so aghast by the implications of sexual enlightenment that he at first represses the information. Later, he can absorb it only by accompanying the discovery of sexual differenti-

13. The description of female psychological development is from Freud's *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*, "Femininity," "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," and "Female Sexuality."

14. "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," p. 195.

15. "Femininity," p. 128.

16. See "Female Sexuality" (1931), *Collected Works*, Vol. V, pp. 252-72.

ation with an overpowering contempt for the female. It is difficult to understand how, setting aside the social context, as Freud's theory does so firmly, a boy could ever become this convinced of the superiority of the penis. Yet Freud assures us that "as a result of the discovery of women's lack of a penis they [females] are debased in value for girls just as they are for boys and later perhaps for men."<sup>17</sup>

Conflict with the father warns the boy that the castration catastrophe might occur to him as well. He grows wary for his own emblem and surrenders his sexual desires for his mother out of fear.<sup>18</sup> Freud's exegesis of the neurotic excitements of nuclear family life might constitute, in itself, considerable evidence of the damaging effects of this institution, since through the parents, it presents to the very young a set of primary sexual objects who are a pair of adults, with whom intercourse would be incestuous were it even physically possible.

While Freud strongly prescribes that all lingering hopes of acquiring a penis be abandoned and sublimated in maternity, what he recommends is merely a displacement, since even maternal desires rest upon the last vestige of penile aspiration. For, as she continues to mature, we are told, the female never gives up the hope of a penis, now always properly equated with a baby. Thus men grow to love women, or better yet, their idea of women, whereas women grow to love babies.<sup>19</sup> It is said that the female doggedly continues her sad phallic quest in childbirth, never outgrowing her Oedipal circumstance of wanting a penis by having a baby. "Her happiness is great if later on this wish for a baby finds fulfilment in reality, and quite especially so if the baby is a little boy who brings the longed-for penis with him."<sup>20</sup> Freudian logic has succeeded in converting childbirth, an impressive female accomplishment, and the only function its rationale permits her, into nothing more than a hunt for a male organ. It somehow becomes the male prerogative even to give birth, as babies are but surrogate penises. The female is bested at the only function Freudian theory recommends for her, reproduction. Furthermore, her libido is actually said to be too small to qualify her as a constructive agent here, since Freud repeatedly states she has less sexual drive than the male.

17. "Femininity," p. 127.

18. "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" and elsewhere in connection with the Oedipus complex in males.

19. "Femininity," p. 134.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 128.



Woman is thus granted very little validity even within her limited existence and second-rate biological equipment: were she to deliver an entire orphanage of progeny, they would only be so many dildoes.

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