

**This paper should be referred to as:**

Verhaeghe P., The Riddle of Castration Anxiety: Lacan beyond Freud, in: The Letter. Lacanian Perspectives on Psychoanalysis, 6, Spring 1996, pp. 44 - 54. Paper originally presented at the second annual congress of the APPI: "Anxiety and its coordinates", Dublin, Nov. 95.

**The Riddle of Castration Anxiety: Lacan beyond Freud.**

"Mind the gap. Mind the gap. Mind the gap..."<sup>1</sup>

Paul Verhaeghe

One of the most obvious observations that can be made about castration anxiety is that it is very difficult to observe. Indeed, in clinical practice it is very hard to find a subject that comes to us complaining about his or her castration anxiety. To my knowledge, the eventual castratophobia does not exist.

This clinical fact is endorsed by an historical one: the concept of castration anxiety itself only received its general character at a rather late stage of Freud's theory. For example, as late as 1914, Freud equates the castration complex with 'masculine protest' and states explicitly that there are neuroses in which this element does not appear at all.<sup>2</sup> Twenty years later, in 1933, castration anxiety is transformed into the ultimate stumbling block of psychoanalysis, both in theory as in clinical practice. Indeed, in *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* Freud describes castration anxiety as the biological bedrock on which every psychological treatment must necessarily fail and where every psychological theory meets its limit. Biology is also held responsible for the two different forms, neatly distributed along the gender line: castration anxiety for the male, penis envy for the female. Moreover, as this idea is formulated by way of conclusion of this very important paper, it receives all the characteristics of a postulate, expressing a "nec plus ultra". Other than that, we only have recourse to other theories (biology, genetics, etc...) and to another practice, of which Marie Bonaparte was the historical example and which can nowadays be found to be reappearing in Donna Haraway's ideas about cyborgs.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, in Freud's mind, castration is always linked to something biological, anatomical. The Freudian clinic of castration is in this sense very embarrassing (cf. the Lacanian notion of "Embarras" in his seminar on anxiety) for his modern followers, as it is far too real and excessively visually oriented. It tells the story of a real penis that can really be cut of involves the visual confrontation with the lack of a penis, resulting in envy. When some of his pupils tried to alleviate matters by extending castration to a more general principle of separation (birth, oral and anal

---

1. Continuous warning, courtesy of the London subway.

2. S.Freud, on Narcissism (1914c), S.E. XIV, pp. 92 - 93.

3 For M.Bonaparte, see: C. Millot, La Princesse Marie Bonaparte, in : *L'Ane, le Magasin Freudien*, mai-juin 1983, p.26. For the idea of modern female cyborg, see Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women. The Reinvention of Women.*

separation), Freud's reaction was loud and clear: the idea of castration was to be restricted to the loss of the penis, and that was that.<sup>4</sup>

No wonder that in the postfreudian period, the idea tended either to disappear or to become plainly ridiculous. An example of its disappearance can be found in the work of Kernberg, in which the ideas of Oedipus and castration are completely lacking; an example of the caricature can be found in a paper by Bell for who, obviously, the bell has told, as she states explicitly that castration does not concern the penis but the balls, and that male anxiety has to be reconsidered accordingly.<sup>5</sup>

Companied to this postfreudian absence in Lacan's work the concept is omnipresent, and, in contrast to Freud's naturalism, it is a very abstract concept. Indeed, the all-too-concrete penis is replaced by the phallus, of which we even have an imaginary and a symbolic version, each of these denoted by highly suggestive Greek characters. With the postlacanians, the concept becomes ever more abstract, even to the point where it becomes confused with the idea of a constitutional or existential lack, synonymous with "la condition humaine".

My proposition today differs both from the postfreudian and from the postlacanian position. It runs as follows: **the idea of castration is in the first place a defense against anxiety, and in that sense it is a secondary formation.** I hasten to add that this thesis is not a purely theoretical one, but also highly clinical with important repercussions for diagnostics and treatment. In matters of theory, it implies a transcendence of the biological level; on the practical level, it obliges us to rethink the end of the treatment.

In order to endorse my thesis, I'd like to start with a number of *clinical* phenomena. If one studies the Freudian clinic on anxiety, it very soon becomes obvious that its focus is not on castration but on traumatic anxiety. During what I like to call his "clinical years", Freud will make a differentiation between traumatic or automatic anxiety on the one hand, and signal or expectancy anxiety on the other hand. The most important clinical difference between those two is that the traumatic anxiety concerns something that cannot be "bound", which is a Freudian metapsychological expression meaning that it cannot be adequately verbalised and consequently cannot be abreacted; signal anxiety, by contrast, is linked to verbal associations and, hence, can be discharged. Signal anxiety belongs to a further developmental stage of the psyche and has as its function the signalling of the ever-threatening presence of traumatic anxiety. From a metapsychological point of view, the latter is with primal repression, while signal anxiety belongs to what Freud calls literally the "after repression", *Nachdrängung*. Along the same line of thought, Freud will develop the idea of repetition compulsion as being a fruitless attempt of the subject to install a signifier where words were originally lacking. Throughout this development, Freud's main preoccupation concerns the relationship between libido and anxiety. Apparently, there is little space given over to the discussion of castration anxiety in the proper sense of the word. Wherever he explicitly mentions this form

---

4. S. Freud, Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy (1909b), S.E. x, p.8, n.2, added in 1923.

5. Anita I.Bell, Male anxiety during sleep, *Int.J.Psycho-Anal.*, 1975, 56, 455 - 464.

of anxiety, it almost invariably appears in a fairly typical disguise, that is, instead of the feared loss of the penis, it concerns the feared loss of the eyes, Oedipus in Kolonos being a typical example. Oedipus is blinded as a punishment for his incestuous relationship with his mother. That he tore out his eyes himself, is considered an embarrassing detail, as it does not tally with the general idea of fear. Moreover, with regard to the threat of castration, there is a very peculiar recurrent observation to be made in Freud's case studies: in clinical reality, the threats of castration are formulated by women, mostly by the mother; this does not match with the general theory, in which the threat is expected from the paternal side. Obviously, the patients themselves are of the same opinion, as they transfer their anxiety from the mother to their father in this respect. This is indeed a very remarkable thing, especially in view of the fact that Freud will generalise it into a principle: the Father is obviously the necessary central figure.<sup>6</sup>

Next, we come to the postfreudian clinic, in which we find a not unimportant extension, made by analysts working in altogether different clinical settings than the ones in which Freud would have worked, for example clinical work with children or psychotic patients. The analysis of children demonstrates a typical form of primary anxiety: the fear of being devoured, of being incorporated by witches, giants or hungry parents; the same idea can also be found back with psychotic patients who often enough describe states of fusion, immixture with an important other, although the accompanying fears which children. The most important characteristic of this phenomenon from our point of view (that is, castration anxiety) is that there is no sexual differentiation involved, there are no boys or girls as such involved.

Besides the work of the psychoanalytical clinic, we have the general psychological theories on anxiety. As you probably know, today there is a big fuss about the differentiation of panic disorders from phobic disorders. As usual, this is nothing but a retake on older ideas, in this case the opposition between phobical anxiety and what used to be called "free floating anxiety" this latter is in a manner of speaking being on the lookout for a reason to justify itself, that is, for an object; once this object is found, the anxiety is not floating any more but becomes linked to a representation, etc. The modern "panic" disorders are supposed to be biologically determined, in contrast to the more psychological-looking phobias.

So, based on these clinical data, we can formulate at least two conclusions. Firstly: from a clinical point of view, the important differentiation has to do with

---

6. This finds its clearest illustration with the Wolf Man. In spite of the fact that the threats of castration are clearly pronounced by women, the ensuing anxiety will be directed to the father. The fact that this father is rather a weak figure (isn't he always in the Freudian case studies?), adds to the surprise. Freud explains this by using an argument that he had already refuted when Jung used it: "At this point the boy had to fit into a phylogenetic pattern, and he did so, although his personal experiences may not have agreed with it. Although the threats or hints of castration which had come his way had emanated from women, this could not hold up the final result for long. In spite of everything it was his father from whom in the end he came to fear castration. In this respect heredity triumphed over accidental experience; in man's prehistory it was unquestionably the father who practised castration as a punishment and who later softened it down into circumcision." (*History of an Infantile Neurosis* (1918), S.E. XVII, p.86).

"signification", that is the question. Secondly: the link with castration anxiety is not made explicit, to say the least. This differentiation between what is signified and what is not, is so important that it even appears in the psychoanalytic as well as in the general clinic, on condition that one is not too naive. In case of the modern naive DSM-clinic, one will probably focus merely on the observed presence of an object and presume that anxiety is either with or without an object. In the case of its absence, anxiety would take the form of panic, which is, precisely because of this absence, very uncanny, and thus probably biologically based (obviously, biology always comes in very handy, whenever we are in need of an excuse); in the case of an object which is actually present, the anxiety is psychologically understandable. This is a very naive conception. I won't go further into it, suffice it to say that from a Lacanian point of view, panic or traumatic anxiety arises precisely where we are confronted with an object, with the irrevocable Object that has no name, that is just waiting around the corner, unseen, unnamed, but very present: Lacan calls this the **imminency** of the object (just think of the nightmare: we are awakened a split second before we would see or experience "it"). In the case of a phobia, the subject is confronted with a phobic signifier or series of signifiers through which his anxiety becomes more and more elaborated and thus more and more tolerable. The object is rather trivial to the matter: whenever one is really afraid of a real object, there is probably no phobia present at all.

Thus, clinical practice teaches us a lot about anxiety, but castration anxiety as such remains rather rare. If we turn now to the *conceptual level*, it is surprising to see that Freud has worked for years without this concept, and even there where we would surely expect it, it is missing: I am referring to the myth of the primal father and his herd.<sup>7</sup> Instead, all emphasis is put on a very ambiguous father figure. The ambiguity resides in the fact that on the one hand, he is described as a ferocious dictator, on the other hand as a necessary guarantee. And when the concept is finally elaborated in 1937, it confronts us with a deadlock – perhaps I should say, a dead rock, in view of Freud's metaphor – which gave the paper its pessimistic title: *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*. We will go into that now.

The rock of castration is gender-differentiated: in boys, it gives rise to castration anxiety, in girls to penis envy. Nevertheless, Freud remarks that there is a common factor at work: "Something which both sexes have in common has been forced, by the difference between the sexes, into different forms of expression".<sup>8</sup> This common factor is a surprising one: "Ablehnung der Weiblichkeit", repudiation of femininity.<sup>9</sup> Further on in Freud's paper, it becomes clear that this "femininity" is synonymous with "passivity", and Freud even specifies that this passivity has nothing to do with the "social" aspect of femininity, which makes the idea all the more mysterious.<sup>10</sup>

With this elaboration, Freud returns to a problem that was haunting him right

---

7. The idea of castration as a punishment, for the sons exerted by the primal father is only mentioned casually in Totem und Tabu, not as something fundamental, but merely as another possibility besides throwing them out of the herd.

8. S.Freud, *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* (1937c), S.E. XXIII, p.250.

9. *ibid.*

10. O.c., p. 252, n.1.

from the start, and the 1937 formulation is the last verbalisation of a long standing problem. Apparently, castration anxiety is just another name for the flight from femininity, that is, the flight away from passivity. The core of the problem lies with this passivity, dating back to his early studies on traumatism and hysteria and continuing right into his new formulations in the thirties with regard to femininity. I don't have the time to elaborate this evolution now, I will merely articulate it point by point.<sup>11</sup> *Primo*, the problem for Freud is that he does not find a signifier that definitely signifies femininity; the recurring answer is given in the idea of passivity, an answer which never satisfies him. *Secundo*, that what is lacking for woman, is also lacking for the mother. *Tertio*, the lack of the mother, being the first great Other, can be filled in by the child, thereby reducing it to a mere object. And that is the original passive traumatic experience, of which the agent is not the father, as Freud originally thought, but the mother, as he discovers in the thirties.<sup>12</sup> We are confronted with the threatening enjoyment of the Other from which the subject is flees.

From that point of view, we can reconsider matters in a very fundamental way. The primary anxiety concerns the confrontation with the nameless lack of the first great Other, the *Che Vuoi* of Cazotte or the riddle of the sphinx, during which the subject runs the risk of being reduced to the function of filling in the gap. We already mentioned the clinical manifestations of this anxiety: fear of being devoured, falling into the void, immixture with the other; in short: the fear of disappearing in the enjoyment of the Other. The defense against this primary anxiety consists of denominating the originally nameless lack, sticking a signifier to a part of the Real for which originally there was no signifier. It is on this point that the phallus comes on the scene<sup>13</sup>, together with the father: it is the phallus that is lacking, says the subject, and the one who can procure it is definitely not me, it is the father who should take care of that. From this moment on, the emphasis will be put on the second great Other, the Other of the Law that regulates enjoyment and pleasure.

Thus, the original threat and the ensuing anxiety emanate from the mother as the first great Other. This explains why the threats are coming from her side and why the castration complex is only implemented after the discovery by the child of *her* lack (and not after the discovery of his own lack).<sup>14</sup> The process of denomination implies the transferral onto the paternal side. From this point on the father will receive all investment. This transferral explains his two-fold character. On the one hand, he will inherit the anxiety that was originally directed to the first great Other, which is expressed at its best in those mythical father figures who devour their children. On the other hand, he will function as the father of the treaty, who installs a security-enhancing law. Freud will stress the first aspect in *Totem und Tabu*; the second one will be elaborated in his paper on

---

11. I have done this elsewhere in extenso. See: P.Verhaeghe, *From Hysteria to Femininity. The Theory of the four Discourses*, London, Rebus press, 1996.

12. S.Freud, *Female Sexuality* (1931b), S.E. XXI, pp. 181 - 183 and *Femininity* (1933a), S.E. XXII, pp. 120 - 121.

13. For a historical-anthropological elaboration of this appearance, see: B.Benvenuto, *Considering the Rites of Psychoanalysis. Or the Villa of the Mysteries*.

14. J.Lacan, *Ecrits*, Paris, Seuil, 1966, p. 686.

Moses.

The trouble with Freud is that he is still looking for tangible realities, while the process he is describing has, precisely, everything to do with the surpassing of this very reality. Insofar that one sticks to this reality, one will not only miss the scope of this process, but, together with Freud, one will stay entangled in a discussion about feminism, matriarchy, mothers versus fathers, etc. One will fail to understand that this process creates the very possibility of the *idea* of motherhood, fatherhood and the ensuing rules. Indeed, what is described right here, is the transition from nature to culture, from biology to psychology. In nature, there are only bodies or organisms emanating from other bodies and eventually returning to them. In culture, the symbolic recognition of fatherhood introduces a number of divisions, along the lines of which certain things become possible and others impossible. It installs the demarcation line of generation and gender, that is, the differentiation between father and mother, between son and daughter, between man and woman. The line is demarcated by the incest prohibition, whose original form is directed to the first great Other, now transformed into a mother, and prohibiting her of incorporating again what originally formed part of her, namely her child.

Thus, the nameless, threatening Real is absorbed by the signifier, albeit by a negative one: the phallus that is lacking in the mother and that is supposedly possessed by the father. Through the application of this signifier, the transition is made from the threatening enjoyment of the Other to the phallic pleasure of the divided subject. In the words of Lacan: "Castration means that the enjoyment has to be refused, in order that it could be attained on the reversed scale of the Law of desire".<sup>15</sup> Castration is in this respect nothing but a secondary elaboration of a more primary anxiety, mediated by the father who receives his function right here. Rather than this implicating him as the terrifying, forbidding dictator, as one would expect from Freud's first theory, on the contrary, his function here is to reconcile desire and enjoyment through the Law of which he is the representational instance.

By way of conclusion, I want to go briefly into the consequences of this thesis. First of all, it implies that the human world, being a symbolic world, is strictly reduced to a phallic world. The gender differentiation can only be expressed in terms of phallic presence or absence. This is the reason why Lacan considers human reality as "le monde du semblant", the world of make belief, because it does not allow a symbolically determined relationship between two symbolically differentiated sexes.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, for man as well as for woman, the fundamental anxiety or primary anxiety concerns the threatening first Other who becomes incarnated in woman and her enigma. Its fundamental character is such that it can be constantly found, transculturally as well as transhistorically in either its positive aspect (reverence for the woman) or its negative expression (misogyny).<sup>17</sup> This fundamental anxiety is experienced as life-threatening, and it is only in retrospect

---

15. Ibid, p. 827.

16. These ideas gave rise to further, strongly critical elaboration by Luce Irigaray: *The sex which is not One* and *Speculum of the Other Woman*.

17. For the latest elaboration, see Camille Paglia, who identifies in her *Sexual Personae* identifies woman with nature as a terrifying figure; her source of inspiration is obviously Nietzsche.

that it is linked to sexuality and anxiety in sexual matters. This link is installed precisely by the interpretation of the lack of the Other in terms of castration, and in turn this will determine the gender specific forms it takes. In the case of men, this manifestation is rather easy to understand, as it takes the form of a mere defense.<sup>18</sup> That is why in Freud's opinion, castration anxiety and "masculine protest" were synonymous.<sup>19</sup> In our opinion, even penis envy can be considered as a typically masculine manifestation of the complex, as it expresses the masculine feelings of (organ)inferiority towards the almighty first Other. In the case of women, things are a lot more complicated as every woman potentially incarnates what she is afraid of as a subject. That is the reason why the vicissitudes of this original anxiety extend, in the case of women, to the entire process of becoming a woman.

A second consequence lies in the field of psychodiagnostics, that is, the differentiation between different subject structures. The neurotic, psychotic and perverse position differ in the way they handle the original anxiety- provoking situation, that is, the confrontation with the first Other. I won't go into that, suffice it to say that the neurotic and the pervert both defend themselves with the idea of castration, as opposed to the psychotic who does not have the benefit of this idea.<sup>20</sup>

Last but not least, this theory obliges us to rethink the goal of the psychoanalytic treatment. The Lacanian differentiation between imaginary and symbolic castration is all-important in this respect, together with the imaginary father and the symbolic function of the father. In contrast to Freud's pessimism, these notions enable us to surpass the mere biological or anatomical level. In matters of neurosis, this goal could be elaborated as follows. As long as the neurotic subject remains fascinated by the lack of the Other, both by trying to answer it and by fleeing from it at the same time, he will remain immobile, reminding us of the rabbit captivated by the headlights of a car. The goal of psychoanalysis is to create the possibility of leaving this imaginary captivation, and exchanging it for symbolic castration, that is, the assumption of a structurally- defined lack as the necessary primal condition for the existence of the subject.<sup>21</sup> Instead of remaining at the level of biology, we enter with this into the field of ethics and creation. And that in its turn gives rise to another form of interminability. In view of this interminability, I won't go any further into that matter for today.

---

18. This aspect of defense explains why the typical manifestation of castration is tearing out one's eyes. Indeed, the interpretation of the lack of the Other in terms of a lack of the phallus X i.e. castration X is the reassuring interpretation, as it is a signified one. There where this interpretation does not hold anymore, the last line of defense is making the visual confrontation with the threatening lack impossible by blinding oneself; this is what Oedipus does in Kolonos. The more moderated form of this blinding process can be found with the fetishist, who diverts his gaze away from the lack by concentrating on other tangible paraphernalia.

19. He will maintain this idea right to the end, as it is still mentioned in *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*, 1937, S.E. XXIII, p.250.

20. We have elaborated this elsewhere: P.Verhaeghe, *Klinische psychodiagnostiek vanuit Lacans discours theorie* (Clinical psychodiagnostics based on Lacan's Theory of the Four Discourses), Gent, Idesca, 2th edition 1994, pp. 1 - 266.

21. This very fundamental idea on causality X that there is a primal lack that functions as Prime Mover X is elaborated by Lacan in his eleventh seminar with the idea of "béance causale".