

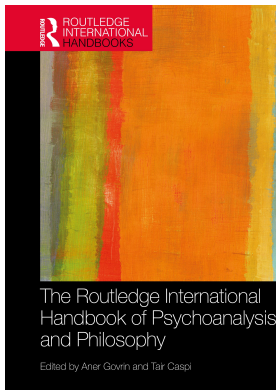
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31

THE MISSING SIGNIFIER AND A MALFUNCTIONING PATERNAL LAW

On the Feminine Third as Vital Portal for Sexual Difference and Emancipatory Democracy

Jill Gentile

Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our “salvation” if we thought it through.

(Luce Irigaray, An Ethics of Sexual Difference, p. 5)

Introduction

As early as 1892, Freud had speculated that “the essentially repressed element is always what is feminine” (p. 250), hinting at the close alliance between the feminine and the (traumatic) Real. Though he was unable to state the problem as directly as Lacan later would, he began to surmise that there wasn’t a place, or proper signifier, for the woman in the psychical economy, nominating “passivity” as a (problematic) substitute. This solution, or impasse, has been subject to both a great deal of feminist and, particularly, Lacanian-inflected debate, and a certain dismissal or inattention among much of the rest of the field which has either accepted the lack of signification as valid, or simply doesn’t contend with it. This missing conversation about a missing signifier, or “signifying minus,” perpetually displaces and defers the field’s own contestation with its “master discourses.”¹

Nevertheless, psychoanalysts of all persuasions concur that what eludes naming also eludes knowing, instead remaining inconceivable and linked to trauma, repression, and the unconscious. But how the feminine functions to sustain these links remains opaque, restricting both our theory and our praxis. Bear in mind, on this account, Freud’s (1937) late conviction – rather equally presumed and contested – that the repudiation of the feminine functions as a bedrock principle for both sexes, against which psychoanalysis meets its limits and, we might say, ultimately stands defeated.

Psychoanalysis, on this account, has a great deal to gain, or so I imagine,² by naming a feminine signifier. But the choice to do so (and it is a choice) challenges our theoretical commitments to date, and our allegiances to the brilliance but also to the blindness of our patriarchal

forefathers. If psychoanalysis is to intervene at this time of global flirtation with autocracy, fascism, and pseudo-masculinist discourses, all of which reproduce misogyny, invidious hierarchies, and epochal social inequities, it must address what underlies these devastating effects. Whereas psychoanalysis has begun to grapple with its long disavowed racialized legacies, it must also contend with how it has underwritten misogyny into its theory by insisting upon a perpetual lack of representation and abjected status for the feminine.

Reading across psychoanalysis convinces me it is not equivocal in erasing what we might discern as the *feminine* – the paradoxical missing *sine qua non* of the symbolic order. This erasure in the signifying order functions structurally, I argue, as a proxy for other marginalized, excluded, colonized, racialized and “invisible” (notably, black) peoples, while also collapsing the gap that is constitutive of sexual difference, hence, difference itself. Thus, the field must wrestle with its continued complicity with a monosexual, masculinist symbolic economy, and with what it gains and with what (and whom) it sacrifices on the altar of its phallogocentric and phallophiliac order. My insistence is, of course, something of an ironic charge: Freud’s point was that the formation of human subjectivity is coincident with the psychic acquisition of sexual difference but by placing his chips on the repudiation of the feminine and the acceptance of the castration complex, so that “difference” is constructed based, not on actuality, but on something imagined as “missing.” Moreover, his complex and unwieldy argument, which locates asymmetry in the consequences of the encounter with sexual difference, has produced neither egalitarian nor inclusive effects, at least in part because it fails to articulate a law beyond, or asymmetrical to, paternal law, which thereby can enable the disruptive validity of any psychical constitution of (sexual) difference. If psychoanalysis is to fulfill its radical social and political offer, it must choose to be a theory and praxis not of the One, but also – as Luce Irigaray (1985, p. 26) compellingly framed it – of this sex which is not One. “She resists all adequate definition.” *Other*.

Not the other of the same. Psychoanalytically speaking, we must embrace an economy of the non-self-identical. We must confront sexual difference, and we must grapple with how to signify it if we are to counter our shared vulnerability to repressive forces and commit ourselves to the creation of radically inclusive free speech spaces. This chapter, both an abridged and evolving, partly reconceived, analysis of what I’ve insistently elaborated at length elsewhere (Gentile, 2015a, b, 2016a, b, 2017, 2019, in press), locates itself within this forever displaced, elliptical, “forgotten” but urgently necessary conversation.

Tracing the Feminine and the Paradoxical Role of the Missing Signifier

Though Freud continually flirted with naming the feminine signifier (turning to dream symbols, proxies, and slang), the absence of a proper signifier for woman remains intriguingly unsettled. Not only was the feminine sex unacknowledged as valid, but its consequences for the turn to language were decisive. Only a phallic signifier was admitted into the symbolic order, relegating the feminine to a phenomenology of lack and inferiority insofar as she can’t find Symbolic anchorage.

Both Freud and later Lacan, whose influence was especially profound on this point, have been indicted for injecting a misogynistic and patriarchal premise into psychoanalysis, with injurious effects most obviously for women. These indictments, it is countered, fail to recognize the rich complexity introduced, however paradoxically, by the enigmatic if absent feminine signifier which (at least in part) prompts and propels psychoanalysis’s signifying mission. Paul Verhaeghe (1996) illuminatingly describes this mission as an hysterical, “drawn-out search for a signifier which simply wasn’t there” (p. 63). Further, and not insignificantly, if paradoxically and insufficiently, the location of Woman in the Real (beyond the symbolic), per Lacan and as developed

by in post-Lacanian thought, also offers her partial recuperation: a proximity to the sensuous textures of the maternal body, to truths and enigmas which elude symbolic capture, and offer possibilities beyond confinement within a categorical phallic identity.

At any rate, despite an implicit acknowledgment of the feminine's mobilizing force in free association, and an explicit pointing to "the gap" as the impossible of free association, Freud would never reconcile these notions, failing to recognize that the gap of free association was co-extensive with the truth-revealing, desire-inspiring action of the missing feminine gap (Gen- tile, 2015b, 2016a, b, c). Not to be rendered utterly mute, its enigmatic and relentless subterranean motions animated his otherwise phallogocentric theorizing, which reveals a trail of signifiers orbiting around the female genital. Most famously, if also subject to psychoanalytic repression (mirroring his insights), he deciphered the uncanny (1919) as a revisitation of the female sexed body, the birth canal, a literal but also metonymic feminine gap, one we'd all encountered and known, and repressed, even as it antedates repression.³ And the "missing" genital (1925) was credited with enough force to derail the child's, especially the boy's, reality-testing and to inspire infantile sexual theories.

Lacan's thought, preoccupied as it was in its earlier stages with his prioritization of the phal- lus, later returned to the uncanny effects issuing from Freud's. In this later turn, Lacan made a fuss over the missing signifier: the feminine sign was no mere omission. Its non-signification was the point; it pointed to the gap in the signifying order, to the contradiction, by means of the unconscious, in the structure of knowledge. Yet, even as the signification of the missing sign gains status, its feminine origins, it would seem, were siphoned off, abjected, repressed. The consequences became a two-sided coin: master signifier and missing signifier or "*objet petit a*."

Before turning to this elision of the feminine (which would later reassert itself in Lacan's conception of feminine jouissance), let me elaborate a bit on the reversal between his early and later thinking. Verhaeghe (1996, 2009) reminds us that Lacan's early thought, recognized as his return to Freud, involved the idea that human knowledge has a phallic underpinning because the unconscious is structured as a language, and there is only one signifier – the phallus – for both sexes. This signifier, the basis for the subject's division (from itself, and from a wordless, illimitable Real, from the body of the mother), creates differential effects for boys and girls who must rely on it in their quest to acquire a desire of their own. The castration fantasy (which interprets the girl's "lack" in phallic terms) tries to bridge the gap between what is "missing" and what is "seen," between the Real and the Symbolic. Lacan posits that by means of the father's symbolic function, *The-Name-of-the-Father*, the child becomes accountable to language and subject to law prohibiting incest, thereby setting a limit to the dual unity of mother-child. Lacking a proper signifier for femininity and because of her vulnerability to hysteria owing to its repression, the girl faces a more significant challenge than does the boy because she too must rely on the phallic signifier to locate her desire.

Lacan's later thought, however, marks something of a reversal because, at this stage, he came to more fully contemplate incompleteness of the Symbolic order, its structural gap or contradiction. This would have consequences for his conception of the father's symbolic function. A shift in emphasis revealed the master signifier "phallus" as figuring an illusory completeness, in effect signifying the contradiction: the totality of the symbolic order and its impossibility and lack. Hence, the *Name-of-the-Father* becomes the agent of *symbolic castration*; the phallus/master signifier functioning in effect as its own ironic critique of phallogocentrism.

With this revision, philosopher Alenka Zupančič (2017) explains, the missing signifier or, alternately, the "signifying minus," gains a new status. Whereas, initially, Lacan had credited the phallic signifier with inaugurating "the entire human 'dialectics,' and its contradictions," now it is "an *absence* at the very heart of this presence, namely, a gap that appears together with the

signifying order, as built into it” (2017, p. 47). Zupančič’s emphasizes how this shift powerfully reframes the stakes, by revealing the revolutionary character – of the missing signifier:

Human (hi)story begins not with the very emergence of the signifier, but with *one signifier “gone missing.”* We could indeed say that nature is already full of signifiers . . . and that at some point one signifier “falls out,” goes missing. . . . This temporal way of putting it (“gone missing”) is an expression of what would be better formulated as the signifying structure emerging not simply without one signifier, but rather *with-without* one signifier – since this “hole” has consequences, and determines what gets structured around it.

Andre Green (1997, p. 1081) arrives at a not dissimilar conviction. Noting that Bion, Winnicott, and Lacan each “use[s] absence as a precondition for [Freud’s conception of] representation,” he mused: “all these absences can be condensed in the idea of a gap. But that gap, instead of referring to a simple void or to something which is missing, becomes the substrate for what is real. Winnicott says the only real thing is the gap.”

The paradoxical signifying function of the gap remains obscured but also freshly illuminated in the later Lacan. Sexual difference, sex, and the unconscious (the lack built into the structure of knowledge) are “absolutely, and irreducibly, linked” to this gap in the signifying order, “and not something beyond or outside this order” (Zupančič, 2017, p. 46). Lacanian theorist Joan Copjec (2016, p. 108) is similarly forceful on this point, indicting psychoanalysis’s turn to gender theory as a means of neutering itself by exchanging sex with gender, a move which masks the “irreducible antagonism” constitutive of sex and the sexed subject (who is never at one with herself). But there is a further consensus: feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (1994, p. 209), for example, too recognizes the gap’s intimate co-implication with sexual difference: “sexual difference is the horizon that cannot appear in its own terms, but is implied.”

Honoring Grosz’s “horizon” – or Irigaray’s “interval” or Zupančič’s (2017, p. 44) “crack in being” – would enable feminism as an emancipatory, even “explosive” political movement, countering the patriarchal elimination, exclusion, and repression not only of this or that identity group, but of the antagonism of sexual difference itself (Zupančič, pp. 36–37). Put differently, in Irigarayan terms, patriarchy’s move is to sustain “*the sexual indifference* that subtends it” (Irigaray, 1977, p. 72) and to render invisible the feminine’s “disruptive excess” (p. 78). Consequently, as Irigaray would directly assert (1984, p. 5): “Sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age.”

Irigaray’s ardent proclamation remains valid, perhaps not just for her age, or our age, but for any age. Zupančič’s intervention, by rescuing the latent power of Lacan’s missing signifier, reinvigorates and joins Irigaray’s quest. Yet, it seems to me that the intransigence of patriarchy issues to us a further challenge: if we wish to render sexual difference a more robust political force, signifying the missing signifier – a contradictory and, on first impression, a possibly misguided quest – is required. Specifically, signifying the missing signifier would be to recognize its feminine dimension, thereby joining the missing signifier with sexual difference. This pursuit would *enable* the ontological crack of sexual difference (Zupančič’s mission) by pointing to the infinity of missing signs – while also granting the feminine (at least in part) a symbolic foothold.

As I will describe more fully below, my claim is that the feminine functions paradoxically, as both missing/absent and present. It lies at the cusp where the unsignifiable Real meets the symbolic, figuring a “space between” wherein novel signs and replenishing drive energies cross a porous border, enabling symbolic freedom. By recognizing the gap of the feminine—i.e., the vaginal—as coextensive with the gap of the signifying order, the gap of *sexual difference* is constituted, rendered

usable. As such, signifying the feminine gap may help us to reclaim and revivify the social and political (dis)order. Let's explore this proposal more fully below.

To Name or Not to Name?

Commenting on Lacan's treatment of sexual difference and his acknowledgment, beyond the phallic order, of a feminine sexuality, a "supplementary jouissance" that "escapes his linguistic model," Dana Birksted-Breen (1983, p. 493), writing some forty years ago, identified "the problem which has dominated the psychoanalytic debate on feminine sexuality to date: how to hold on to Freud's most radical insight that sexual difference is a symbolic construct; how to retrieve femininity from a total subordination to the effects of that construction."

As we have seen, these "pressing" concerns have been recently gaining renewed consideration. The missing signifier, per Freud and Lacan, remains *unnamed*, subordinated. Further, if we follow Zupančič's thesis, the fact that it is *unsignified* (and in contradiction to the phallic signifier) is precisely what enables the crack in being constitutive of subjectivity and of sexual difference. Thus, naming would install it in the Symbolic order and render it subject to patriarchal exclusions. The idea of naming the missing signifier would seem to violate the entirety of its function, actually negating its radical social potential.

Notwithstanding these wise and cautionary notes, the political force of the feminine is urgently needed to counter the contemporary rise of brute, antidemocratic, masculinist movements. Might it not be, actually, that what mitigates the disruptive effects of the "crack in being" is, as Irigaray (1985, p. 260) observed, that "[w]omen's genitals are simply absent, masked, sewn back up inside their 'crack'"? If so, any risks attendant to naming the feminine signifier are worth taking⁴. Moreover, failing to do so serves patriarchy's ends – by not only abetting the degradation of the feminine and other marginalized peoples, but by obscuring the very social antagonism or gap itself. Further, it may be possible and not simply theoretically naïve to name the signifier *and* to retain an intricate and valid theory. A quixotic quest perhaps. But I suggest that the risks of undermining the gap (by means of its naming) are substantially mitigated by its paradoxical status and specificity of the feminine signifier.

To explore this conjecture, let's return to Irigaray's groundbreaking contributions in greater detail. Irigaray mounted a passionate and often scathing critique of Freud's (1931, 1933) bequest of a phallic representational economy which effectively colonized the girl's memory and desire. Male "desire – discourse – law" (Irigaray, 1974, p. 53) would be not only propped up by the girl or woman but the sole means by which she constituted herself. Irigaray proposed a symbolic intervention: "two lips" to figure the carnality, indeterminacy, liminality, of the feminine ("She is neither one nor two"; Irigaray, 1985, p. 26). Though Irigaray's two lips, both vaginal and of the mouth, has been subject to essentialist critique, I'm persuaded by Diana Fuss,⁵ who argued that the two lips are "neither literal nor metaphoric but metonymic," and that moreover they "operate as metaphor for metonymy" – for the perpetual contiguity and liminality of the feminine. Fuss enables us to read (by means of Bianchi, 2014, p. 105) Irigaray's two lips as contravening any false coherence or facile symmetry between feminine and phallic signifiers.⁶

Whereas Freud's and Lacan's masculinist economy immobilizes the feminine as reproduction of the same, Irigaray's feminine "must be deciphered as inter-dict; within the signs or between them, between the realized meanings, between the lines" (1974, p. 22). This figuration of an "interval," or space between, enables displacement to exceed fixed place, and for what Emma Bianchi (2014) discerns as the aleatory, restless motions of the non-unitary feminine (who was, for Irigaray [1977, p. 38] "indefinitely other in herself") to emerge as a subterranean, antipatriarchal political force.

Irigaray's non-unitary feminine finds resonance in Julia Kristeva's theorizing of maternal heterogeneity and alterity, which precedes and disrupts an identitarian symbolic. Per Kristeva, who too has recently insisted on the priority of sexual difference for displacing patriarchy (Kristeva, 2019), sensations and motions of a maternal *chora* or *semiotic*, an "infoling" of body and language (Ziarek, 1992, p. 93), remain forever resistant to symbolic inscription. Kristeva's "abject" is infused with this feminine liminality, coming to signify "what is on the border [but] what *doesn't* respect borders. It is "ambiguous," "in between" (Oliver, 1993, p. 56, citing Kristeva, 1980a, p. 4). By means of this liminality and disruptive abjection, Kristeva (2019) conjures an antipatriarchal and antihegemonic "detotalizing open structure of the feminine."

Joining these interventions, I have suggested that psychoanalysis recognize the proliferation of spatializing metaphors within its discourse as insistent manifestations of the deferred search for a feminine signifier (Gentile, 2015b, 2016a). Such metaphors, once perceived, are hiding in plain sight. Further, by figuring the *betweenness* of symbolic and enigmatic dimensions, these spatializing metaphors enable psychoanalysis's unwritten *feminine law* (etched in the Real) and its vital function in both shepherding the diasporic migration of novel elements and vibrational drive energies across the threshold of the Real, and in enshrining ambiguity and heterogeneity in the symbolic order. Put differently, feminine law functions to sustain a vitalizing *precolonized* lawful space (or spacetime) of *no* rule – perhaps what Jean-Luc Nancy (1988, p. 145) refers to as a "spacing essence of freedom." Contra Freud's pessimistic rock of castration, feminine law enables us to discern psychoanalysis's paradoxical *spatializing* "bedrock."

More specifically yet, I've nominated the *vaginal* (inclusive, as well, of the *vulva*) as the "proper" feminine signifier. Naming the vaginal, beyond mere sexed body part, rescues the feminine genital from the plight of nonrepresentation, aiding the enfranchisement of all (gendered and sexed) subjects in the (otherwise, exclusively phallic) symbolic order, but it does so mischievously, because it insinuates its contradictory (both of the Real and symbolic) non-unitary status, ever-partially into the Symbolic realm, thereby anchoring sexual difference as a $+/-$ symbolic-and-not (contradictory) construction. In turn, the vaginal preserves, or assists in the labor, by which an irreducible gap comes into being. This double-sidedness (a Vaginal signifier that is both of and beyond the symbolic, with a foothold in the Real) enables a migrancy of drive energies that perpetually elude and exceed patriarchal surveillance, while also enriching and antagonizing the symbolic-phallic economy.

To put this differently, the feminine signifier functions metaphorically, opening symbolic spaces for representation, mediation, inclusivity, and difference, while gesturing towards what lies beneath the radar of the symbolic, at the limits of repression *and* prior to it. By means of a vaginal signifier, the symbolic intervenes in – and is disrupted by – a liminal traumatic Real but also by the unassimilable, untranslatable excesses of that Real, perhaps the force of a disruptive and surprisingly democratizing telos of *eros* (Gentile, 2016a, 2019).

As the precedent and asymmetrical counterpart to the phallic signifier, the vaginal aids the latter's function in the constitution of subjectivity for all subjects, regardless of sex or gender. Functioning uncannily, it sets up the conditions for dismantling a false binary, while instantiating a certain parity, which enables the pursuit of an egalitarian social order for differently situated, singular, sexed subjects, insofar as we now have two sexed signifiers, one which operates strictly in the symbolic plane, whereas the other functions *between* the symbolic and the Real. Taken together, they open up the possibilities for third, contradictory, nonbinary choices and effects.

It should also be noted that, per Lacan, the phallic signifier has an exceptional status – it is the sole signifier to escape lack insofar as it appropriates the missing signifier (the feminine depends upon the phallic signifier for symbolic anchorage). We might, however, ascribe a corollary exceptional status to the vaginal signifier. Because it figures the gap (and hence,

of sexual difference), it also bridges that gap, operating *both* as metaphor and metonymy, signified and “missing.” The remainder, the infinite “totality” of missing signifiers, or signifying minuses, retain their dispossession – lest the symbolic intervenes, and/or lest they migrate, and are grasped, possessed, named. In this way, the feminine signifier traffics in, and points to, an heterogeneous, ineluctable unconscious.

In effect, the phallic is to paternal law as the vaginal is to feminine law.

The Redistribution of Signifying Effects

I next explore the signifying impact that naming of the sexed feminine might have for the symbolic world and social discourse.

But first, let’s consider the impact of Lacan’s later interventions in which the missing signifier gains new status for the once imperious phallus. Though, intuitively, we might anticipate that it has now suffered a loss of some signifying privilege, what is revealed is that, as the (sole) phallic signifier (the missing signifier is, after all, missing), it has now amassed a more expansive purview. Whereas earlier, it had signified the totality of the symbolic order, (as if that were not sufficient!), Lacan now emphasizes the phallus’s *posturing* as the master signifier, insofar as it not only signifies *completeness* but also *lack* (which would seem the domain of the missing signifier but for its reliance on the phallic signifier for its constitution), and hence, also *difference* (implying phallic or non-phallic), and *desire* (which finds its origin in the subject’s symbolic castration, i.e., reliance on the phallic signifier in the acquisition of language). From there, Lacan posits that, insofar as there is no other than the phallus (p. 157), the phallus (as symbolic Name-of-the-Father) is the founding exception of the symbolic order, essentially transcending its function as a signifier (subject to division/lack), because it instead grounds the Other (the locus of all signifiers). Hence, the phallus becomes the basis of *law* and *the foundational signifier* of the entire symbolic order. Completion, lack, castration, difference, law, desire, and the opening of the entire symbolic order: the phallic has been tasked with some heavy lifting to do.⁷

How might signifying the feminine contravene the signifying burden of the phallus? First, we can surmise that because what is “missing” gains signifying “presence,” it emerges as a promising candidate to signify *lack* and Real (not symbolic) castration. What’s more, as the marker of Freud’s uncanny, it would seem as well to stake a legitimate claim as the signifier of *difference*, to which the phallus, by means of its appropriative, hegemonizing impulse can only aspire with hypocrisy and cynicism. And because the vaginal both marks the origins of human life itself and signifies the signifying gap itself – and so, it would seem, births the signifying order – it (again intuitively) recommends itself as standing for the primal conditions of human subjectivity, just as it existed before human subjectivity. As such, we might add that insofar as the signifying gap is governed by the spatializing (non)essence of feminine law, it also figures “space,” a space(time) which births *desire* and its unpredictable, pluri-temporal trajectory and opening to *futurity*.

My point is not to create parallel “monopolies” for feminine and masculine signifiers but to recognize that each sexed signifier stakes legitimate signifying claims, thereby prompting further questions of their shared, if asymmetrical, and *not completely arbitrary*, roles in figuring sexual difference. Further, to refuse signification of the feminine, at least from a psychoanalytic perspective that is not One but multiple, not only creates a monopolistic phallocratic symbolic economy but requires considerable mental and semiological gymnastics to fulfill all that Lacan asks the phallic signifier to carry. The labor of the feminine has always been underappreciated, of course, and that this would be the case with respect to its signifying labor is unsurprising and very much to my point. If we wish to make an emancipatory – and ethical – political intervention, the matter of signifying that which currently is rendered invisible (and which reveals

otherwise obscured social contradiction) would seem compelling and urgent. Only then can we contend with the troubling yet potentially transformative effects that issue from the Real by means of a paradoxical signifier, heterogeneous to paternal law, insofar as it is subject, at least in part, to an/other, feminine, law which, *when honored*, disrupts the assimilative and appropriative inclinations of a patriarchal symbolic. Instead, the signification of the feminine – beyond grounding all subjects in shared reality insofar as, in fact, there is nothing missing in the real (body) – also functions as a vital portal (by instantiating the “missing signifier” into, or on the cusp, of the signifying order) by means of which radically inclusive free speech and democratized spaces for the movement of desire’s heterogeneity come into being, themselves forever disrupted by *s/excessive* unconscious elements.

A Malfunctioning Paternal Metaphor: The Necessity of the Feminine Third

Insofar as the feminine signifier promises a gap, it dislocates an hegemonizing patriarchy, pre-figuring the contradictory thirdness, hence sexual difference – a function which Lacan ascribes to the phallic signifier which subordinates that, for Freud, difference was inaugurated by the unrepresentable, uncanny feminine. Further, beyond the province of the phallus, the feminine signifier orients the subject to a contradictory, unassimilable dimension of psychical life that points to the unconscious and its disjunctive, untranslatable excesses.

Charles Saunders Peirce (1891/1992) introduced the concept of thirdness, situating semiosis beyond action-reaction pairing (“secondness”) in a realm of shared or consensual reality. It is psychoanalysis’s distinctive addition, now axiomatic, to name the father, or the paternal metaphor, as the signifier of this symbolic third. Rigorous challenges to a too facile coherence between thirdness and paternal law (e.g., Benjamin, 1995; Kristeva, 1980b, 1984), reinforced by substantial evidence for (triadic) intersubjectivity in the early mother-infant dyad (Muller, 1996, Winnicott, 1971), have not dismantled adherence to this seamless equation: The father’s role, as (not necessarily gendered)⁸ signifier of a third or “Other,” in enabling the child’s “early triangulation” and separation process (Abelin, 1975), reverberates across contemporary theorizing, usually, though not always, credited to Lacan’s innovations (Barratt, 2015; Birksted-Breen, 1996, 2016; Britton, 1989; Diamond, 2017; Green, 2004; Greenspan, 1982; McDougall, 1989; Ogden, 1989, 2004; Perelberg, 2013), amounting to as near a consensus as just about any psychoanalytic concept that one might *name*.

This axiom finds its roots in Freud’s fanciful mytho-historical treatise, *Totem and Taboo* (1912–13), which conjured notions of a primal horde riven by incestuous murderous and sexual impulses who committed parricide. Though Freud, it seems, conceived of this primal parricide as a real historical event, he posited (by means of the conjecture of Lamarckian inheritance) that it yielded a dead but now symbolic father whose function served to regulate incest, expiate guilt, and enable the survival of lawful sociality and cultural achievement.

Lacan (1966, 1977; and as traced by Verhaeghe, 2009) would both reproduce Freud’s preoccupation, and extend the father’s symbolic function, most notably through his innovation of the paternal metaphor – the father’s “no” or prohibition of a lawless, unmediated maternal-child duality. As we have already discussed, the child’s subsequent “castration” upon entry to language thereby structures his relationship to symbolic, cultural reality. And though certainly psychoanalysis’s patriarchal foundations have been amply critiqued (Benjamin, 1988; Butler, 1990), we have yet to adequately challenge the persistent and prevailing conundrum: “what is called ‘civilization’ balances tenuously on the shoulders of its patricidal-filicidal discontents” (Barratt, 2015, p. 354, mining Freud). If so, we might again, or once more, ask what remains obscured in the rush to instantiate the indestructible symbolic father. If so-called

paternal/symbolic law is our antidote to patriarchy's antidemocratic force, why is it so utterly failing the culture?

Patriarchy, as several recent analyses posit (see, e.g., Gilligan and Snider, 2018), trades on binaries and hierarchies. It refuses to concede to loss, including those that inaugurate a valid paternal symbolic function. Beyond pointing to the insidious persistence of patriarchy's ways (and its alliance with a rapacious capitalism), this suggests that there is something undertheorized in the paternal function. Most obviously, it would seem, that there is something of a masculinist mythology at play. A vitally needed (transitional) third, along with missing signifier which (in part) sources it, and which has, too, "gone missing."⁹

That missing third, I suggest in the spirit of what philosopher Chiara Bottici (2014, 2021) calls "imaginal feminism," is the *feminine third*, a necessary but discontinuous conduit between patriarchy and a paternal function. A strong precedent for this vision is found in Kristeva's maternal semiotic (see Oliver, 1991), which, by insinuating drive energies heterogeneous to language and a paradoxical logic (of love and alterity) into it, prefigured the paternal symbolic. Taking a further step in this direction, we can add that the figuration of a feminine third is installed via the ever-partial symbolic anchorage of the feminine signifier. Without it, a third contradictory "space between" is annulled, exiling *otherness*, ablating sexual difference.

To put it straightforwardly, paternal law, absent a feminine metaphor, cannot redeem patriarchy because though it postulates a triadic operation, its actual structure remains strictly of the imaginary: self-identical and masculinist. As per Irigaray's (1974, p. 26) charge, sexual difference remains "a derivation of the problematics of sameness." The realm of the father, minus that of the feminine, can't sustain the dialectics of the uncanny contradiction of sexual difference. Left to its own masculinist devices, it can't instantiate sexual difference because it excludes and precludes what (and who) is heterogeneous and discontinuous (with the same).

Our psychoanalytic faith in (the idea of) the father as the sole signifier of triadic relations amounts to an unrecognized psychoanalytic mythologem that abets patriarchy by means of its phallogocentrism. It amounts to a form of collusion with social hegemony at best, and a form of psychoanalytic gaslighting, at worst. But as Andre Green (2004, pp. 128–129) perceptively observes,

In thirdness, there is always one term that is disturbing by virtue of being undesirable or unwanted, or one missing term that changes the triangular structure to form a pair. . . .
But this dualism at the start includes thirdness by inference (the two terms and their relationship as the third one). So it is in life, just as in thought.

Restoring that "missing term" (beyond mere inference) may help to counter patriarchal exemptions and create reparative, democratizing, desperately needed imaginal possibilities for an ailing, suffering, even withering world. If we conceive of a lawful, if uncanny, sexed third as both an aspect of the shared reality of the dyad and that stands apart from it, the vital bridging function of the vaginal signifier becomes perceptible. When destroyed or misrecognized, it is not just the feminine gap and its ethical valence that go missing; the paternal metaphor also atrophies and malfunctions. This eventuates in real castrative effects (in which actual impotence and fantasied omnipotence are two sides of a coin), derailing "successful" symbolic castration (surrender to language and lawful limit). A properly functioning paternal law depends upon a *dispossession* – a surrender to its asymmetrical, spatializing counterpart: feminine law.

Juliet Mitchell (2009, p. xiv) intriguingly observes that "psychoanalysis, like biology, find that it is death that is brought into play with the advent of sexual reproduction. There is no death with asexual reproduction such as cloning." There can be no paternal law or symbolic father if

there is no dead father. Death requires sexual difference. Sexual difference requires a signifying gap, a *feminine* interval, between what can be birthed symbolically and what can't be.

Repetition With a Feminine Difference

Lacanian psychoanalyst Mladen Dolar (2016, p. 35) explicitly takes up the persistent charges of phallogentrism in psychoanalysis, asserting that it is precisely the naming or signification of the phallus, per Lacan, which paradoxically dethrones it, “setting the limit to phallogentrism.” In turn, the problem of sexual difference, “a difference irreducible to any usual difference” is revealed, thereby enabling an approach to the antihegemonic terrain of sexuality and the unconscious.

Dolar, fascinatingly, tugs on the metaphor for psychoanalysis bequeathed to us by Anna O: “chimney-sweeping.” Chimney-sweeping, he says, breaks apart the “balanced match” – say between the masculine and the feminine – by means of “the quirky phallic addition” (p. 33), which exposes “a rupture of meaning” (namely, the unconscious), and hence, “aims at the elaboration of sexuality that would escape the phallogentric logic” (p. 36).

Similarly, Joan Copjec (2016, p. 132), drawing from Lacan's (1999, p. 9) claim that “nothing is more compact than a fault,” speculates that compactness is a “space of impossibility, the impossibility of union or encounter, *and at the same time* a space where something out of the ordinary happens: an eruption of *jouissance*.” She, like Dolar, reaches for a metaphor, “that compact space in which lovers, the sexes, . . . ‘hold each other tight’” (p. 134), to describe what lies beyond metaphor, beyond place, beyond time (‘in futurity’), a coming, a feminine *jouissance*.

Alenka Zupančič, closes her challenging text, *What Is Sex?* (which though I have mined and perhaps creatively misread in this chapter for my own purposes bears repeated readings to appreciate its nuance and complexity), referring to Freud's (1900, p. 525) navel as the site of what remains unknown, and which, for Zupančič, registers the ontological crack, the gap in being.

It would seem that we might dare to interpret each of these theorists as reaching to represent not only what eludes signification but the feminine dimension of this loss. We might, just might, dare to signify, contra phallic readings, Dolar's chimney sweeping, Copjec's compact space of impossibility and *jouissance*, and ultimately, per Zupančič, Freud's navel, as displacements for another, primordial, missing feminine signifier, that however lost “forever” can nonetheless, in part, if only in part, be retrieved through its inscription, by naming it.

Patriarchy might just die. A valid symbolic paternal law, beyond an economy of One, might be born. If so, it would mean surrender to feminine law, and to its *space between* traumatic loss and rebirth: the feminine gap and the dis/ordering impossibility of unconscious life.

Notes

- 1 I use his term ‘master discourse’ to signal both the hysterical (per Lacan) aspect of this writing (to challenge the master discourse, to expose its lack, if also the impossibility of this quest). But, more colloquially, my goal is to insist that we must *unsettle* colonizing theoretical impositions in order to produce unsettling vitalizing, anti-patriarchal effects.
- 2 Naming what has insistently remained unnamed perhaps risks an operation of the Imaginary and thereby reproduce patriarchal effects, but because of the feminine's proximity to the real, its naming may produce real and necessary effects.
- 3 Zupančič, by contrast, refutes the signifier's very repression: “This is not a repressed signifier, but a signifier whose non-being is the only thing that makes repression possible, and structurally precedes it” (p. 126), that is, as the crack or non-being that inspires the “existence” of the unconscious (“as the non-existence of the Other inscribed in the Other”) (p. 53). We might wonder whether we have in mind two different signifiers or, as framed by Dolar (2016, p. 31), “two kinds of difference: the signifying

- difference, the pure difference that all signification is based on, and on the other hand the sexual difference, which seems to be the most obvious natural difference, providing a model for all others.” It would seem to me that, practically and theoretically, the feminine signifier bridges the gap between what is repressed and what is missing. It itself is both, and points to both.
- 4 It would seem that the recent devastation of abortion rights have reinforced the palpable need for the vaginal signifier/ symbolic, without which the vagina remains cordoned off to a mere (too easily colonized) body part.
 - 5 Diana Fuss (1989, pp. 68, 69).
 - 6 It is worth noting that the vaginal’s (Irigaray) “two lips” – per “the etymology of lip (*labi*), to slip or fall, to slide from meaning to meaning, to be *labile*” (Bianchi, 2014, p. 103) recalls once more the gap of free association which, in the German *freier Einfall* – “free irruption”, denoted a “a spontaneous and coincidental *falling out* into the open” (Mahony, 1979, p. 21).
 - 7 We might wonder if psychoanalysis’ investment in degrading the feminine doesn’t only function to mask castration fears but also to stoke them and thus, also, “toxic” masculinity.
 - 8 See, e.g., Davies and Eagle (2013) who address the conflation of the paternal function with the role of the father.
 - 9 As cited earlier, Zupančič (2017, p. 47). As she notes, her phrasing suggests a temporal dimension of the missing signifier (‘gone missing’) to mark its function in the constitution of subjectivity.

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