

I

The Cronus Complex
Psychoanalytic Myths of the Future
for Boys and Girls

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HOPE, PROMISE, THREATEN, AND SWEAR

Students of Greek and Latin used to be taught that special rules applied when composing sentences that involved the verbs ‘hope, promise, threaten, and swear’. The quartet is memorably nonsensical, like a stupid jingle you can’t get out of your head; at the same time it seems to suggest a kind of incantatory quality: witches brewing a mixed fate. For what the verbs have minimally in common is their reference to the future—or rather, their constructions, different in each instance, of a particular orientation towards the future.¹ ‘Swear’ has the sense of an oath; it pairs with the ‘promise’ from which it is separated in the set-piece order of words. ‘Hope’ and ‘threaten’ are then left to make a

¹ See e.g. William W. Goodwin, *A Greek Grammar* (2nd edn. 1894; repr. London, 1974), 275: ‘Verbs of *hoping, expecting, promising, swearing*, and a few others, form an intermediate class between verbs which take the infinitive in indirect discourse and those which do not; and though they regularly have the future infinitive, the present and aorist are allowed.’

diametrical semantic contrast between two ways of imagining or imposing future possibilities: positive and negative. All four verbs entail the presence of a second verb: 'I promise *to do* that'; 'I hope he *will*'; 'I swear *to protect* him', and so on.

In Freud the difference of the sexes can be defined through their characteristic orientations towards the future and 'hope, promise, threaten, and swear' are close to the bone. For it is versions of these verbs that supply the templates for the boys and girls of the future. They open up or rule out certain possibilities, according to their syntactical and semantic nature. In particular, a contrast between hopes and threats is fundamental; it is the structuring distinction that gives each sex its typical character. Femininity *hopes* (to be masculine). Masculinity *is threatened* (with the loss of masculinity). Despite appearances, the mode if not the mood of the future is negative in both cases, not just that of being threatened; indeed it is more, not less so for girls. This is because the hoping sex hopes in vain.

The story that leads, in Freud, to sexual separation has been frequently retold. For both boys and girls, a formative, traumatic moment occurs when they realize the meaning of sexual difference in relation to the presence or absence of a penis. Immediately prior to that point, the 'phallic' phase does not distinguish between the value of the sexes. The 'discovery' or 'recognition' (both words are used) of castration—that the boy has something the girl does not, or that the girl lacks what the boy has—does away for ever with this imagined homogeneity. From now on, two sexes will be marked out by their dissymmetrical relationships to the phenomenon of castration. One hopes to remedy it as something that has happened to her; the other is threatened by the possibility that could happen to him, as it visibly has to her. This mood, grammatical and emotional, then governs their different futures; for her in particular it becomes what can only be called a life-sentence—one that Freud repeats many times in the course of his writings on female sexuality:

When the little girl discovers her own deficiency [*Defekt*], from seeing a male genital, it is only with hesitation and reluctance that she accepts the unwelcome [*unerwünschte*] knowledge. As we have seen, she *clings* obstinately to the *expectation* of one

day having a genital of the same kind too, and her *wish* for it survives long after her *hope* has expired.²

The *hope* of some day obtaining a penis in spite of everything and so of becoming like a man may persist to an incredibly late age and may become a motive for strange and otherwise unaccountable actions.³

The second line leads her to *cling* with defiant self-assertiveness to her *threatened* masculinity. To an incredibly late age she *clings to the hope* of getting a penis some time. That *hope* becomes her life's aim.⁴

The girl's *recognition* [*anerkennt*] of the fact of her being without a penis does not by any means imply that she submits to the fact easily. On the contrary, she continues to *hold on* for a long time to the *wish* to get something like it herself and she believes in that possibility for improbably long years.... The wish to get the longed-for penis eventually in spite of everything may contribute to the motives that drive a mature woman to analysis.⁵

The girl appears as the passive protagonist in a distorted fairy tale—one in which wishes, hopes, and tenacity of purpose are not just thwarted, but presented as impossible of fulfilment right from the start. The story is not about a wish that comes true. Instead it begins

² Freud, 'Female Sexuality' (1931), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey et al., 24 vols. (London, 1953–74), xxi, 233; 'Über die weibliche Sexualität', in *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie und verwandte Schriften* (1905) (Frankfurt am Main), 176. Except where specified, English translations of texts by Freud are all quoted from the *Standard Edition*, hereafter *SE*, followed by volume number. In this and in further quotations, italics are added unless otherwise stated.

³ Freud, 'Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes' (1925), *SE*, xix, 253; 'Einige psychische Folgen des anatomischen Geschlechtsunterschieds', in *Drei Abhandlungen*, 163.

⁴ Freud, 'Female Sexuality', 229–30; 'Über die weibliche Sexualität', 173.

⁵ Freud, 'Femininity' (1933), *SE*, xxii, 125; 'Die Weiblichkeit', *Studienausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main, 1969–75), i, 556.

in mid-wishing with a negative fulfilment, and it tails off without an end into an indefinite future of wishing for what the unwished-for knowledge has rendered unobtainable, unwishable. At the beginning, she gets something defined as that which she does not wish for, the 'unwelcome'—*unerwünschte*, literally 'unwished for'—knowledge. She clings and clings to the hope or wish for what she cannot have; the same verb, *festhalten*—hold tight, hold fast—renders 'cling' all three times as well as 'hold on' in the passages above. She wishes against all the odds that 'in spite of everything' (*doch noch einmal*), 'one day' (*einmal*), 'some day... in spite of everything' (*doch noch einmal*), 'some time' (*noch einmal*), 'eventually' (*endlich*), her penis will come. Continuing in this way 'to an incredibly late age', or for 'improbably long years', the girl lives out a tale that like all fairy tales, good and bad, is unbelievable and unlikely; it does not seem to involve a real, or realistic life. The princess simply grows old in her hopeless hoping and impossible wishing; hope and wish take her place as the active subjects: 'That hope [*Hoffnung*] becomes her life's aim [*Lebenszweck*]; 'her wish for it survives long after her hope has expired' (*der Wunsch danach überlebt die Hoffnung noch um lange Zeit*).

This post-castrational story of a woman's life evokes all kinds of features that seem to imply particular kinds of narrative outcome, none of which is actually fulfilled. There are hopes and wishes but no happy ending on the horizon; there are unlikely phenomena leading to 'strange and otherwise unaccountable actions', but no disaster or final revelation ensues. Nothing really happens as life passes the woman by. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud refers to 'the uneventfulness of her emotional life'.⁶ Years later in the development of psychoanalysis, and years earlier in the development of the little girl, this extended eventlessness would acquire a partial counterpart in the pre-Oedipal period of exclusive attachment to the mother, stressed for the first time in the 1931 essay 'Female Sexuality'. This is another time in the girl's life that seems to go on for ever, without significant changes taking place.

⁶ Freud, *Totem and Taboo* [1913], SE, xiii. 15; *Totem und Tabu* (Frankfurt am Main, 1956), 22.

THE GIRL'S TRAGEDY

But between the two periods of indeterminacy, the girl is briefly and precipitately at the centre of a dramatic action, what is nothing less than the end-point of a tragedy. The traumatic 'discovery' of her castration involves the fulfilment of a negative destiny; in true Aristotelian style, there is an anagnorisis and a peripeteia: recognition and complete reversal. The girl's pride is revealed retrospectively as having been the hubris of a mistakenly confident masculinity on the part of one who was never going to be a hero at all. Castration is her sudden downfall, in wretched realization of a destiny she did not know to be hers.

Unlike the blur of the post-castrational non-story, the tragedy of the girl's castration involves one sharply telescoped event, her seeing herself as lacking. Tragic ideas of fall, destiny, recognition, knowledge, and discovery are regularly associated with this moment as Freud recounts it. The last two occur for instance in the first passage of the four quoted above, in which 'the little girl discovers her own deficiency', and reluctantly 'accepts the unwelcome knowledge'. What the girl 'learns' (*erfahren* is the discovery verb here) is not in question; it is knowledge. This applies equally to 'the girl's recognition [*anerkennt*] of the fact of her being without a penis',⁷ inseparable from the drop in status that accompanies it: 'She acknowledges [*anerkennt*] the fact of her castration and with it, too, the superiority of the male and her own inferiority.'⁸ The event is sometimes grandly marked:

a momentous discovery [*Entdeckung*] which little girls are *destined* [*beschieden*] to make. They notice the penis of a brother or playmate, strikingly visible and of large proportions, at once recognize [*erkennt*] it as the superior counterpart of their own small and inconspicuous organ, and from that time forward fall a victim [*verfallen*] to envy for the penis.⁹

⁷ Freud, 'Femininity', 125; 'Die Weiblichkeit', 556.

⁸ Freud, 'Female Sexuality' 229; 'Über die weibliche Sexualität', 173.

⁹ Freud, 'Some Psychical Consequences', 252; 'Einige psychische Folgen', 162.

The discovery (*Entdeckung*) of her castration is a turning-point in a girl's growth.¹⁰ But though this critical moment stands out as a tragic event, it is not really an ending or denouement. It does not resolve a pre-existing conflict; instead it creates an indefinitely prolonged and futile struggle for the future. It is as a result of her unfortunate 'discovery' that—and Freud uses the phrase more than once—the girl will 'fall a victim to' penis envy.¹¹ The verb *verfallen* carries an idea of addiction as well as decline: unheroically, she 'sinks into' penis envy. In classic Greek tragedy, the recognition typically makes explicit to the characters some fact or action of their past, or some aspect of their identity of which up till then they were unaware. Oedipus, in Aristotle's paradigmatic example, is forced to see that he is Jocasta's son and Laius's murderer. That recognition is brought about wholly by the force of words. In other cases, regarded with suspicion by Aristotle, the recognition involves tangible objects: in Euripides' *Ion*, for instance, the visible presence of the identifiable accoutrements of the baby abandoned at birth. The effect of a recognition in a tragedy need not be, as it is in *Oedipus*, destructive; in *Ion* it produces what is primarily a happy reunion of mother and son. In Freud's tragic story, however, the recognition of sexual difference is unequivocally negative. For girls, it does not resolve a conflict but creates one: penis envy is a protest, a rebellion, against what is simultaneously 'recognized' as true. All is changed. All that is left is a contradictory future: the tension of a wish that arises out of its being ruled out.

THE BOY'S *BILDUNGSROMAN*

The Freudian girl is thus caught up in the end of a tragedy that is followed by fragments of an unresolved fairy tale. In the boy's case, though the story likewise centres on the same decisive 'turning-point' of seeing the girl as castrated, the sequence of events and the genres in which they take place are very different. Being under

¹⁰ Freud, 'Femininity' 126; 'Die Weiblichkeit', 557.

¹¹ As well as in the passage quoted above, the verb occurs in this context in 'Femininity', 125; 'Die Weiblichkeit', 556.

threat provokes a radical change; instead of being condemned to 'cling' to previous attachments, the boy is able to leave the mythical sphere of family and childhood and move on out into a wider, modern world. For girls, it is the recognition of castration that pushes them into the Oedipal situation. In search of the penis, they turn from the mother to the father; from this no subsequent life-changing event will ever definitively release them. For boys the possibility of castration—the existence of defective 'girls'—is just as traumatic a realization as it is for girls, but it resolves, rather than instigating, the Oedipus complex: in deference to the threat they give up their erotic wishes in relation to the loved mother and their rivalry with the father.

Freud stresses the sharpness and neatness of the boy's Oedipal situation as a point of distinction between the sexes. In several ways, his is a much more classic tragedy than the girl's. First, there is a clear conflict that arises from the realization of the possibility of castration: 'If the satisfaction of love in the field of the Oedipus complex is to cost the child his penis [through the threatened punishment of castration] a *conflict* [*Konflikt*] is bound to arise.'¹² This conflict is seconded by the force of the passionate love triangle:

It is only in the male child that we find the fateful combination [*schicksalhafte Beziehung*] of love for the one parent and simultaneous hatred for the other as a rival. In his case it is the discovery [*Entdeckung*] of the possibility of castration, as proved by the sight of the female genitals, which forces on him [*erzwingt*] the transformation [*Umbildung*] of his Oedipus complex, and which leads to the creation of his super-ego and thus initiates all the processes that are designed to make the individual find a place in the cultural community [*Kulturgemeinschaft*].¹³

The characters of this drama are clearly differentiated according to the motives and emotions that structure the conflict. Love and hate and the disposition of roles produce the 'fateful combination' that can be identified as such. There is a radical and forced (*erzwingt*) upheaval (*Umbildung*). A hero is brought down to a human level.

¹² Freud, 'The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex' (1924), *SE*, xix. 176; 'Der Untergang des Ödipuscomplexes', *Studienausgabe*, v. 248.

¹³ Freud, 'Female Sexuality', 229; 'Über die weibliche Sexualität', 172.

This passage also brings out the teleological and reformulating aspects of the boy's post-Oedipal development: 'all the processes designed to...'. In the German, the aspects of purpose and placement come out more strongly. The processes directly 'aim' (*abzielen*). Finding a place is *Einreihung*: the man is not merely put somewhere, but is subject to a 'classification' in which his individuality is irrelevant. It is a movement from uniqueness and exclusivity to equality and the sharing of 'community': a social revolution following a shake-up (*Umbildung*) of the existing autocratic regime. 'His Majesty the Baby', in Freud's immortal characterization of infantile omnipotence, was the centre of his kingdom and the invulnerable source of royal commands and wishes. He has to give up his unique position and give way to a community of citizens in which each person, himself among them, has a place. The boy is from now on involved in a very different kind of subjective universe from the one that sustained his Oedipal wishes—one in which there are contracts and conditions, promises and oaths.

Emotionally, the same motive forces are present for both sexes but they too are reversed in the temporal order, contributing to the very different stories. The boy starts off, Oedipally, in a situation of 'hopeless longing' (*hoffnungslose Neigung*)¹⁴ in relation to his mother, but he gets away from it; reversing the order, this state of longing is where the girl arrives as she belatedly enters her own version of the Oedipus complex after the traumatic recognition of her castration. Then the girl too is subject to threats of various kinds, but these are presented as being of a lesser order than those that apply to the boy: they do not have the same determining force. The girl's 'threatened masculinity' (*bedrohten Männlichkeit*)¹⁵ appears at the point at which she has just found out that she is without masculinity in any case: when the difference of masculine and feminine has just arisen, for the first time giving masculinity, for both sexes, the quality of threatenedness. In boys, crucially, the threat is combined with fear. But the girl has nothing to lose and hence nothing to fear, so again the threat appears as relatively small:

¹⁴ Freud, 'Dissolution', 173; 'Der Untergang', 245.

¹⁵ Freud, 'Female Sexuality', 376; 'Über die weibliche Sexualität', 173.

The fear of castration being thus excluded in the little girl, a powerful motive also drops out for the setting-up of a super-ego and for the breaking-off of the infantile genital organization. In her, far more than in the boy, these changes seem to be the result of upbringing and of intimidation from outside which threatens her with a loss of love.¹⁶

There is no big story, and no elementary emotions: 'a powerful motive drops out', is missing from the plot. You cannot have a proper tragedy without the force of fear (Aristotle's *phobos*). As a threat, 'loss of love' is much vaguer than castration. The girl's Oedipal situation, implicitly, lacks the sharp outline and hence the certainty of a 'fateful combination' that will bring about the *Umbildung*, an upheaval unbuilding followed by reconstruction, to which the boy is subject. Thus during the early phase of her attachment to her mother, the girl's father does represent 'a troublesome rival', but still 'her hostility towards him never reaches the pitch which is characteristic of boys' in their Oedipus complex.¹⁷ For the girl, the story whose traumatic turning-point is the realization of castration is in other respects, before and after that crisis, a domestic tale. In the passage above, 'changes' come about as 'the result of upbringing' and their outcome will be her staying indefinitely at home. Instead of forcing her beyond the Oedipal wishes that stay in the family, the discovery of her castration encourages them. Thus there are 'women who cling [*festhalten*] with especial intensity and tenacity [*Zähigkeit*] to the attachment to their father [*Vaterbindung*] and to the wish in which it culminates of having a child by him'.¹⁸ As in the previous examples of the girl's later orientations, clinging and wishing seem to be ends in themselves; the women 'cling', over-cling ('with especial intensity and tenacity') to 'the attachment' to the father: they clingingly cling to clinging.

THE MYTH OF CASTRATION

In the outline story of male development, the boy is able to move forward from a pre-civilized, myth-making state, into a reasonable

¹⁶ Freud, 'Dissolution', 321; 'Der Untergang', 250.

¹⁷ Freud, 'Female Sexuality', 226; 'Über die weibliche Sexualität', 170.

¹⁸ Freud, 'Some Psychical Consequences', 251; 'Einige psychische Folgen', 162.

world of social responsibility in which infantile expectations of heroic centrality have been abandoned and forgotten. Mythical, ancient thinking is superseded by modern, rational thinking. Fear of castration is the plot-clinching device that makes the break between the early and mature phases, between mythological and social orientations: the prince is forced to become a citizen, held in place from now on by the understanding that his masculinity is not invulnerable. Thus the boy is pushed beyond the familial scene of passionate struggle, and into a new order of rules and measures. The threat of castration is the precondition for his post-mythological subjectivity; it is a marked turning-point. But it also remains as the back-up to a newly circumscribed masculinity: it does not altogether disappear from the psychological scene once its catalytic role has been fulfilled.

In this respect, the castration complex differs sharply from the explicitly mythological scenario of the boy's development, the Oedipus complex. This, Freud says in 1924, should ideally be seen no more once the aftermath of the castration complex has done away with it; 'the process . . . is equivalent, if it is ideally carried out, to a destruction [*Zerstörung*] and an abolition [*Aufhebung*] of the complex.'¹⁹ In the following year this is put even more forcefully, making *Zerstörung* and *Aufhebung* sound like calm philosophical abstractions by comparison: 'the complex is not simply repressed, it is literally smashed to pieces [*er zerschellte formlich*] by the shock of threatened castration.' The complex goes out with a bang; and Freud concludes that 'in ideal cases, the Oedipus complex exists no longer, even in the unconscious'. This dramatic destruction radically re-forms the grounds of the boy's existence: '[T]he catastrophe to the Oedipus complex (the abandonment of incest and the institution of conscience and morality) may be regarded as a victory of the race over the individual.'²⁰ What is explicitly derived from myth, the Oedipus complex, is surmounted. By contrast, the castration complex survives as basic to the possible paths and the impasses of adult subjectivity.

¹⁹ Freud, 'Dissolution', 319; 'Der Untergang', 248.

²⁰ Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences', 257; 'Einige psychische Folge', 167.

For the most part, the episode of the castration complex in children's development is presented without reference to any stories or facts that might independently suggest or support it. There is no equivalent to the overtly mythological scaffolding, built and destroyed after use, that is attached to the idea of the Oedipus complex. In that connection Freud many times reminds his readers of the 'legend' represented in Sophocles' play. His claim for the universality of the experience is based directly on an appeal to the power of the Oedipal themes of incest and parricide to move an audience. The castration complex, on the other hand, appears to be independent of mythical or ancient roots.

Yet castration does have its Greek myth, and Freud does refer to it on a number of occasions. Behind the more developed mythology from which the story of Oedipus is derived lurk the gods Uranus and Cronus, father and son; Cronus is the father of Zeus. Freud brings them up as a pair or trio several times. Their paternal and filial exploits, sometimes involving Zeus and sometimes not, include multiple infanticide and father-castration: Zeus may have castrated his father Cronos, and Cronus did the same to *his* father, Uranus. The Freudian Oedipus wishes to murder his father, and the mythical Oedipus does so by accident; a Cronus, mythical or Freudian, simply gets on and does it, and not for any secondary motive such as gaining possession of a mother.

Zeus provides the pivot or dividing point between different orders of legend. Cronus and Uranus, his father and grandfather, are not the subjects of multifarious or elaborate narratives but are confined to some pretty elementary pre-human acts: eating their children and castrating their fathers. As fathers, they don't exactly do the family thing. Freud's statement that the supersession of the Oedipus complex implies the victory of the 'race' over the individual applies, *a fortiori*, to the movement of mythology beyond these monstrous fathers, absolute and obsolete individuals who seek to annihilate both their offspring and their own fathers. Tellingly, the word translated by 'race' is '*Generation*'. Zeus, at first sight, does not quite seem to fit in these connections; his other links, beyond his progenitors, make him an unlikely pater-emasculator. Yet his position is always to some extent that of one situated ambiguously 'between' different orders of divine existence. He mostly belongs

to the newer world of gods who have relationships and enter into the plots and affairs of both the immortal and the mortal worlds. Zeus is both a participant and an arbiter; he has the ruling power, and is supposed to be aloof and neutral in his role as judge; and yet he is one among other gods, and not indifferent to mortal attractions and issues. He takes sides, although he also stands apart from strife, divine and human. Thus Zeus's normal transitional or straddling place, between two incommensurable orders, is further confused by his alleged perpetuation of his father's and grandfather's anti-legacy: unfathering.

Freud himself hesitated between the legend which made Zeus a father-castrator like Cronus himself, and the one which reported no such thing, and thus clarified Zeus's separation from those old gods. It was the second of these that Freud usually took to be the more authentic, but he hesitates and checks himself. Almost every time that Cronus comes up in his writings, the issue is raised, and once specifically in relation to the possible significance of making a mistake about the story in this charged father-son connection. In the chapter on 'errors' (*Irrtümer*) in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud considers two passages from *The Interpretation of Dreams* in which—as he would also do many years later, as we shall see—he had made Zeus a father-castrator too, like his own father Kronos: 'I state that Zeus emasculated [*entmannt*] his father Kronos and dethroned him. I was, however, erroneously carrying this atrocity a generation [*Generation*] forward; according to Greek mythology it was Kronos who committed it on his father Uranus.'²¹ Freud assumes, in identifying his mistake, that the event of castration was necessarily a unique one—not, for instance, the son repeating what the father had done.

Freud then asks how it was that he came to get this wrong—why, as he strikingly puts it, 'my memory provided me at these points with what was incorrect (*mein Gedächtnis in diesen Punkten Ungetreues lieferte*)', a formulation which makes the error into something like a useful resource. He explains it in connection with his own family history. He was the son of his father's second marriage;

²¹ Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1905), SE, vi. 218; *Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens* (Frankfurt am Main, 1973), 185.

a much older half-brother, son of the first marriage, himself had a son, Freud's (half-)nephew, who was Freud's own age. After getting to know this brother on a visit to his home in England, 'my relationship [*Verhältnis*] with my father was changed' because the meeting with the brother had prompted 'phantasies of how different things would have been if I had been born the son not of my father but of my brother'. This then Freud sees as the source of 'my error in advancing by a generation the mythological atrocities of the Greek pantheon'.

Freud's 'correct' version of the myth keeps Zeus apart from the sins of his fathers, and thus more clearly confirms Zeus's place as inaugurating a civilized order—one anchored in both the separation and the continuity of 'generation'.²² In fantasy, Freud's own difference in age from his father (and half-brother) gives realistic support to making the father redundant, or relegating him to the role of grandfather. In his explanation of how he came to make the Cronus mistake, he recalls a significant utterance on the part of his half-brother:

One of my brother's admonitions lingered long in my memory. 'One thing,' he had said to me, 'that you must not forget is that as far as the conduct of your life is concerned you really belong not to the second but to the third generation in relation to your father.' Our father had married again in later life and was therefore much older than his children by his second marriage.²³

The solemn, almost oracular tone of the 'admonitions' (*Mahnungen*) links a carefully preserved memory to specific constructions for the future. *Mahnungen* are also reminders; as surely as the brother enjoined the young man 'that you must not forget', so the sayings 'lingered long in my memory', a source of authority and a granting of permission to bypass the father on the part of the one who has himself replaced that father. Freud took his lead, he seems to be saying, from his older brother, in setting himself at a distance from an old-world father; and also, as he doesn't quite say, in making

²² In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, the complete breakdown of the social and familial order is suggested by the blurring of the generations and the associated overlapping of kinship categories like 'mother wife' or 'sister daughter' that ought to be mutually exclusive. (See lines 1406–8.)

²³ Freud, *Psychopathology*, 220; *Zur Psychopathologie*, 186–7.

himself analogous to Zeus. This Zeus represents justice, leadership, and the beginning of a new era. But the stretching out of generations, enabling Freud to appear in the place of Zeus, has also, so it is implied, caused a muddle of another kind: if three is really two, then 'Zeus' is not so far apart after all, and is seen like his father as a perpetrator of mythological 'atrocities'.

Everything that has to do with the castration myths seems to be subject to this kind of blur and indistinction. Even Freud's self-correction turns out to need recorection, or at least qualification. Having stated that he was wrong to include Zeus among the unfilial sons, he puts in a footnote that begins, self-mockingly, '*Kein voller Irrtum!*', 'not entirely a mistake!', and goes on to cite the Orphic version 'which has Zeus repeat the process of emasculation on his father Kronos.'²⁴ A further example of indistinction is that fathers and sons in the Cronus story do not stay generationally separate; instead each one is driven only and simply to do away with putative progeny and fathers. In the myth of Uranus whom Freud never mentions other than in connection with the castrating Cronus, the confusions are even more extreme. Uranus (the sky), the son of Gaia (the earth), has children with his mother but makes her swallow them back; one of them, Cronus, castrates his father, at her instigation—and she is the mother of both parties, father and son.

PSYCHOANALYTIC MYTHOLOGIES

Unlike Oedipus, Cronus and Uranus are rarely mentioned by Freud. But it happens that they, and not Oedipus, appear in a passage where Freud raises general questions about the relationship of psychoanalytic theory to mythology. The passage is worth considering in some detail, as it is fundamental to the issues of knowledge and story presented in relation to castration and sexual difference.

In *The Question of Lay Analysis*, Freud offers his sceptical imaginary interlocutor an analogy with Greek mythology; this is meant as a way of making the extraordinary psychoanalytic description of infant sexuality seem less outlandish. He first appeals

²⁴ Freud, *Psychopathology*, 218 (tr. mod.); *Zur Psychopathologie*, 185.

to memories of the classical myths taught at school, mentioning as an example the one about the god Cronus swallowing his children: 'How strange this must have sounded to you when you first heard it! But I suppose none of us thought about it at the time.' The strangeness is initially both taken for granted and unexplored, not a matter for thought. But now, Freud goes on, a meaning is clear: 'Today we can also call to mind a number of fairy tales in which some ravenous animal like a wolf appears, and we shall recognize it as a disguise of the father.' Thus myths and fairy tales tell the same story, which can be interpreted at another level to which, as 'disguises', they are subordinate. Here the gods of mythology and the animals of fairy tales converge in the same picture of the father. Psychoanalytic theory has provided an explanation: '[I]t was only through the knowledge of infantile sexuality that it became possible to understand mythology and the world of fairy tales. Here then something has been gained as a by-product of analytic studies.'²⁵

Freud then moves from a devouring to a castrating father, and makes a slightly different point about the relationship between mythological and analytic understanding. And once more Cronus is brought on as evidence:

You will be no less surprised to hear that male children suffer from a fear of being robbed of their sexual organ by their father, so that this fear of being castrated has a most powerful influence on the development of their character and in deciding the direction to be followed by their sexuality. And here again mythology may give you the courage to believe psychoanalysis. The same Kronos who swallowed his children also emasculated his father Uranus, and was afterwards himself emasculated in revenge by his son Zeus, who had been rescued through his mother's cunning [*List*].²⁶

Whereas in the first example the myth is strange but can be made comprehensible through psychoanalytic understanding, here the myth is taken as read; its familiarity provides the grounds for believing an otherwise astonishing ('you will be no less surprised') psychoanalytic story. Previously, psychoanalysis gave credence to

²⁵ Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis* (1926), SE, xx, 211; *Die Frage der Laienanalyse*, Studienausgabe, iv, 302.

²⁶ Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis*, 211-12; *Die Frage der Laienanalyse*, 302.

mythology ('it was only through the knowledge of infantile sexuality that it became possible to understand mythology'); here, it is the other way round: 'mythology may give you the courage to believe psychoanalysis'.

There follow two further hypotheses about the reader's accreditation of psychoanalysis, the second of which is the one presented as preferable. Here is the first:

If you have felt inclined to suppose that all that psychoanalysis reports about the early sexuality of children is derived from the disordered imagination [*der wüsten Phantasie*] of the analysts, you must at least admit that their imagination has created the same product as the imaginative activities of primitive man, of which myths and fairy tales are the precipitate.

Here analytic knowledge is identified with the 'primitive'; it does not explain it but is 'the same'. It is wild and chaotic (*wüst*) but it is given its low-level validation by the irrefutable identity between the two. Psychoanalytic theory is itself, on *this* theory, a wild story—a fairy tale or myth.

The second hypothesis then raises the stakes by once again situating the analyst of both mythology and infantile sexuality at a distance from the object of study:

The alternative friendlier, and probably also the more pertinent view would be that in the mental life of children today we can still detect the same archaic features which were once dominant generally in the primeval days of human civilization. In his mental development the child would be repeating the history of the race in an abbreviated form, just as embryology has long since recognized was the case with somatic development.²⁷

The translation does not speak of 'recapitulation' here, though on other occasions where the combination of repetition (*wiederholen*) and abbreviation (*abkürzender*) appears, that is the word that is used.²⁸ The last clause leaves no doubt that this is a reference to the

²⁷ Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis*, 212; *Die Frage der Laienanalyse*, 302–3.

²⁸ See e.g. Freud's '“A Child is Being Beaten”' (1919), *SE*, xvii. 188; '“Ein Kind wird geschlagen”', *Studienausgabe*, vii. 240: in the phrase 'recapitulate from the history of mankind', 'recapitulate' translates 'wiederholen' ('repeat'); Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, *SE*, xv. 199; *Vorlesungen*

contemporary scientific theory, and that Freud is endorsing the idea—‘long since recognized’—that ontogeny repeats phylogeny.²⁹ As elsewhere (notably at the end of the ‘Wolf Man’ case history), Freud transfers this theory to psychological development, positing that the child necessarily passes through a series of incommensurable modes of apprehending its world, each with its own characteristic attached stories or basic outlines; chief among these are the ‘primal phantasies’, offering and imposing answers to the child’s questions about sexuality and the origin of babies.

In recapitulation theory proper, each stage of a recapitulation is superseded by the new form that takes its place. In Freud, on the other hand, no ‘stage’ of development is ever fully or finally surpassed. There is always the possibility of a detrimental ‘return’ to a previous one; or, putting this from the other direction, previous dispositions may ‘survive’ in the present as part of a heterogeneously composed psychical entity. But when Freud directly appeals to recapitulation theory, as in the passage cited, this interference inherent to his own model tends to be unstated. Instead, the stress falls on the succession of stages leading towards adulthood, with the earlier ones associated with a ‘primitive’ world that the adult will long since have left behind. Thus in this second hypothesis, the adult is not on a par with the mythologizing child or its phylogenetic analogue, the ‘primeval days (*Urzeiten*) of human civilization’. This ‘friendlier’ (*freundlichere*) hypothesis rescues the theorist from the ancient world of the first one; it is also, for good measure, probably ‘more accurate’ (*zutreffendere*) as well as (in the translation) ‘more pertinent’.

The several interlocking hypotheses that Freud puts forward here offer a spectrum of possibilities about the relation between mythology and knowledge for various classes of thinker who are explicitly or implicitly compared. There is the child as opposed to the

zur Einführung in der Psychoanalyse, Studienausgabe, i. 204, where ‘abbreviated recapitulation’ translates ‘abgekürzt wiederholt’.

²⁹ On recapitulation theory and its use in Freud, see Frank J. Sulloway, *Freud, Biologist of the Mind: Beyond the Psychoanalytic Legend* (1979; London, 1980), *passim*; Lucille B. Ritvo, *Darwin’s Influence on Freud: A Tale of Two Sciences* (New Haven, 1990), 74–98.

adult; primitive as opposed to civilized human beings; and psychoanalysts as opposed to other people. The discussion comes immediately before a passage in which Freud raises the question of sexual difference specifically in relation to the castration complex, but without naming it as such, despite the proximity of the Cronus myth of *Entmannung* and the reference to boys' 'fear of being robbed of their sexual organ by their father': 'Another characteristic of early infantile sexuality is that...[s]tress falls entirely on the male organ, all the child's interest is directed towards the question of whether it is present or not.'³⁰ Thus the issues raised are bound to suggest some further considerations in relation to the asymmetrical 'stories' that attach to the different developments of each sex.

It is the Cronus myth that Freud refers to, in *The Question of Lay Analysis*, as implicitly 'disordered' and chaotic: '*wüst*'. Bodies and body parts are indiscriminately ingested or removed within a caricaturally destructive 'family'. 'How strange [*sonderbar*] this must have sounded to you when you first heard it!' Freud said, referring to the schoolboy understanding of the story that Cronus swallowed his children. Strange, peculiar, weird—but not shocking or shaking. Not a source of disturbance or curiosity then—'But I suppose none of us thought about it at the time'. And easily assimilated now, intellectually, to an available schema: 'Today... we shall recognize it as a disguise of the father.' The Titan stories of the old gods are about extreme acts executed without meditation or delay. There is no narrative suspense, no impending fate: no time of delay in which an oracular promise or threat makes its mark on the characters. The response to them, on the part of both children and adults, is not represented by Freud as resembling the fearful effect produced by the tragedy of Oedipus: 'There must be something which makes a voice within us ready to recognize [*anzuerkennen*] the compelling force of destiny in the *Oedipus*.'³¹ These myths are outside the complex human time where the present is always steeped in its imaginary futures, whether feared or wished for.

³⁰ Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis*, 212; *Die Frage der Laienanalyse*, 303.

³¹ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), SE, iv. 262; *Die Traumdeutung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1942), 223.

CRONUS'S LAST APPEARANCE

There is one occasion in Freud's writing when the Cronus story is given a full symbolic weight. In a brief, incomplete paper written at the very end of his life, 'The Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence', the mechanism of disavowal is described in similar terms to those that Freud had used in 1927 in his essay 'Fetishism'. In most cases—'the usual result of the fright of castration' (*Kastrationsschrecks*)—the boy's response is to 'obey the prohibition' (of masturbation) as he 'gives way to the threat'; this is the trade-off that will lead to his incorporation into the social world. But in other instances recognition both does and does not take place and the boy finds a means of having it both ways. He acknowledges, but also fails to acknowledge, the 'castration' he sees in the girl, by creating a fetish or substitute for the missing penis; in relation to her (it does not affect his perception of his own penis) he has then 'transferred the importance of the penis to another part of the body'. This 'ingenious' (*geschickte*) or 'artful' (*kniffig*)³² solution to the problem leaves the boy with a double orientation: on the one hand, the 'apparent boldness and indifference' that defies and ignores the threat, but on the other, 'a symptom which showed that he nevertheless did recognize [*anerkennt*] the danger'.³³ At this juncture the following passage appears:

[H]e developed an intense fear of his father punishing him, which required the whole force of his masculinity to master and overcompensate. This fear of his father, too, was silent on the subject of castration: by the help of regression to an oral phase, it assumed the form of a fear of being eaten by his father. At this point it is impossible to forget a primitive fragment of Greek mythology which tells how Kronos, the old Father God, swallowed his children and sought to swallow his youngest son Zeus like the rest, and how Zeus was saved by the craft [*List*] of his mother and later on castrated his father.³⁴

³² Freud, 'Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence' (1940), *SE*, xxiii. 275, 277; 'Die Ichspaltung im Abwehrvorgang', *Studienausgabe*, iii. 391, 393.

³³ Freud, 'Splitting', 277; 'Die Ichspaltung', 393.

³⁴ Freud, 'Splitting', 277–8; 'Die Ichspaltung', 393–4.

First castration is named as what is either elided or out of the picture here: 'silent on the subject'. Then, in connection with this silence, there enters none other than the arch-castrator, Cronus, here only in connection with his other violent deed, the eating of his children. Zeus, on the other hand, whom Freud had long ago sought to exempt, at least probably, from his father's crime, now appears as the first and only father-castrator.

The example concerns a blurring of the usual psychical developments in relation to the negotiation of the castration complex, and the mixture of myth and theory, Cronus and castration, echoes that same confusion. Cronus, even though he is its primary mythological agent, is dissociated from castration. But then Zeus, who may not have done the deed at all, comes in as if to compensate for the silence. There and not there, recognized and not recognized: the passage moves back and forth in precisely the same way as in the structure of splitting which it is describing. And almost immediately after this passage, the essay fades away (it was unfinished at the time of Freud's death), mentioning another small symptom, this time the boy's aversion to his toes being touched—'as though', says Freud, 'in all the to and fro between disavowal and acknowledgement, it was nevertheless castration that found the clearer expression . . .'.³⁵

This oscillating exposition in the 'Splitting' essay echoes the ambiguities in Freud's theory of castration as that which for boys enables the surpassing of myth. The 'castration complex' is made to play a decisive explanatory role in the psychoanalytic theory of children's development. It traumatically divides boys from girls and launches each sex, now in their respectively wanting or threatened states, on the path of a particular orientation towards the future. For the boy, castration postdates and ideally draws a line under the mythical familial involvements of the Oedipus complex. He is able to make the move denied to the girl, from family to culture—or from myth to *logos*. From this perspective, 'castration' is part of Freud's own theoretical myth of human development.

But castration, as much as Oedipus, has Greek mythological sources, sometimes evoked by Freud, which form the underside of its structuring, humanizing role through the recognition of

³⁵ Freud, 'Splitting', 278; 'Die Ichspaltung', 394; ellipsis in original.

unpleasant but necessary sexual fact. Uranus and Cronus belong to a different age and world from that of Oedipus and Laius, who are themselves superseded in the movement initiated by the castration complex. Far from being to do with clarification or with an admission into sexual and social maturity, the Cronus-related myths are pre-pre-social. There is no narrative or temporal complexity; deeds are done without thought for a future, hoped or feared; progenitors and progeny are destroyed without any sense of generation on the part of the solely self-assertive perpetrator, free of all relations. Castration is embroiled in ur-myths of confusion; what it threatens is the collapse of all 'generational', historical human distinctions.

The possible exception to the pre-Zeus order is the figure of Zeus's rescuing mother, whom Freud twice alludes to, both times to mention her *List* (the same word translating both 'craft' and 'cunning' in the English) in outwitting Cronus's son-swallowing enterprise. No further details are given, either by Freud or in reported versions of the myth. Rhea doesn't save her other offspring. From this it could possibly be argued, *ex post facto*, that her forethought and attachment apply appropriately to the one who is destined for a post-Titanic future in a newer mythic world where the gods intervene in human matters of justice and fate; she would thus be in the vanguard of a civilizing process, her 'cunning' standing out against the gross destructiveness of her Titan husband. But it could also be argued that she is simply a mother, Freudian or otherwise, devoted to her baby son as a part of her self, and over and above her devotion to her husband. Her maternal instincts are useful and even indispensable to the move into culture and generation represented by Zeus, but culture is not her invention. Here the woman/mother is ambiguously placed, on the threshold between old and new orders, and identified with neither.

THE MAN AND WOMAN OF THIRTY

In another late essay, 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable', the refusal to accept castration becomes the ultimate impasse, for both sexes; Freud speaks of 'the paramount importance of these two themes—in females the wish for a penis and in males the struggle

against passivity', also described as the masculine protest (following Adler) and (Freud's expression) the repudiation of femininity.³⁶ They may be immutable: 'We often have the impression that with the wish for a penis and the masculine protest we have penetrated through all the psychological strata and have reached bedrock [*zum 'gewachsenen Fels' durchgedrungen*], and that thus our activities are at an end.'³⁷

Prior to this, at the end of the 'Femininity' lecture of 1933, the contrast of men's and women's futures that the castration complex installs had been vividly evoked in a picture of modern types. Freud appeals to the same 'impression' as in 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable' as being a commonplace therapeutic perception:

I cannot help mentioning an impression that we are constantly receiving during analytic practice. A man of about thirty strikes us as a youthful, somewhat unformed individual, whom we expect to make powerful use of the possibilities for development opened up to him by analysis. A woman of the same age, however, often frightens [*erschreckt*] us by her psychical rigidity and unchangeability. Her libido has taken up final positions and seems incapable of exchanging them for others. There are no paths open to further development; it is as though the whole process had already run its course and remains thenceforward insusceptible to influence—as though, indeed, the difficult development to femininity had exhausted the possibilities of the person concerned. As therapists we lament this state of things.³⁸

At first sight, this passage seems to lend support to the view that the masculine bias of psychoanalytic theory is simply misogynistic. 'Frightens us' recalls the use of the same word in the context of fetishism for the alarmed reaction of the male to the sight of the

³⁶ On the relationship of repudiation and femininity, see Rachel Bowlby, 'Still Crazy after All These Years: Travels in Feminism and Psychoanalysis', in *Still Crazy after All These Years: Women, Writing and Psychoanalysis* (London, 1992), 131–56.

³⁷ Freud, 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable' (1937), *SE*, xxiii. 251, 252; 'Die endliche und die unendliche Analyse', *Studienausgabe, Ergänzungsband*, 391, 392. The English translation removes the quotation marks that make *gewachsenen Fels* (literally, 'evolved rock') a conspicuous metaphor in the German.

³⁸ Freud, 'Femininity', 134–5; 'Die Weiblichkeit', 564.

female genitals.³⁹ In both cases, a shortcoming seen in the woman is a source of alarm to the man. At the same time, in this passage, the woman's inflexibility—her stiffness (*Starrheit*) and unchangeability (*Unveränderlichkeit*)—is set alongside the patently appealing and attractive figure of the blooming young man, 'youthful, somewhat unformed', who is going to make vigorous (*kräftig*) use of the 'possibilities of development' that analysis 'opens up [*eröffnet*]' to him through therapy; for the woman, in contrast, 'Paths for wider development do not arise [*Wege zu weiterer Entwicklung ergeben sich nicht*]', or 'paths for wider development are there none': in the German, the emphasis falls on the concluding negative, the *nicht* that immediately cancels the ways forward that the sentence has postulated. Here, in real life, as a kind of sad professional secret ('I cannot help mentioning . . .') we are presented with the no-hope women of the theoretical account.

But this is not all that is suggested. The spectacular, stark contrast also prompts regret that the path to femininity has been so draining as to have left the woman in this undesirable state. For the passage clearly deploys a notion of personal development linked in its positive form to change, openness, movement. Freud assumes that change is desirable for persons of either sex; persons are individuals who may or may not be able to go in new directions, to take up different 'possibilities'. From a historical point of view, the surprising assumption in this connection may be that it is regrettable for a woman of 30 to be settled, to have found a final character. Would that the woman, too, he implies, could have the freedom to go on developing—that the woman, too, could be open to change.

Freud granted women one possible sphere of perfect happiness, in mothering a son: 'A mother can transfer to her son the ambition [*Ehrgeiz*] which she has been obliged to suppress in herself, and she can expect [*erwarten*] from him the satisfaction of all that has been left over in her of her masculinity complex.'⁴⁰ For once, the hope or

³⁹ Freud, 'Splitting', 277; 'Die Ichspaltung', 393, quoted above. Cf. 'Probably no man is spared the fright of castration [*Kastrationsschreck*] at the sight of a female genital', 'Fetishism' (1927), *SE*, xxi. 154; 'Fetischismus', *Studienausgabe*, iii. 385.

⁴⁰ Freud, 'Femininity', 133; 'Die Weiblichkeit', 563.

expectation is not unreasonable even though it is compromised by its vicariousness and its dependence on a lost and recovered masculinity. But still the reference to 'the ambition which she has been obliged to suppress in herself' carries the same recognition as noted in the passage about the man and woman of 30. The ambition was rightfully there; it is regrettable that she 'had to suppress it [*bei sich unterdrücken müsste*]'. As before, and even though the ending is a happier one here, there is an assumption of female potential that is undeveloped or thwarted, both psychically and socially.

Since Freud's lifetime, paths of development that were previously closed have been opened up to women in social life, in principle and in practice. This may not have made any difference to the relative states of psychic flexibility or rigidity affecting either sex, as individuals or collectively. Both sexes, though not necessarily in identical ways, are subject to the limitations as well as the opportunities of their place in the 'cultural community', including the obligation to identify as one of two sexes, but not the other; this is what the recognition of 'castration' implies. But given the obsolescence of the social correlates of the Freudian complex—there is no longer so sharp a distinction between the paths available to men and women—it seems anachronistic and needlessly hopeless now to cling to a myth in which women's most fundamental conflicts are determined by the realization that they can never be men. Castration and Cronus are ancient history.