

Psychoanalysis and politics

Juliet Mitchell then and now

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‘Well, I’ll think about women then’, Juliet Mitchell proposed in 1963, suggesting a topic to research as she sat, the lone woman, on the editorial board of *New Left Review* – alongside her husband, Perry Anderson, the freshly minted editor of the journal. The inevitable response greeted Mitchell’s startling proposal in such circles at that time: ‘there was silence’.¹ A decade later and Mitchell’s next move seemed just as eccentric, at least to many of the women who had by then raced in to erase that earlier embarrassed silence on the ‘second’ sex once and for all – during the passionate early years of Women’s Liberation. She turned, increasingly, towards psychoanalysis for assistance with her *political* task. The challenge, obviously, was not just the serene sovereignty of male domination, sexism and misogyny, which had reigned over every domain in the 1960s, but the infeasibility of disclosing its elemental presence using the prevailing political languages of the Left: of class, colonialism, or imperial aggression.

Juliet Mitchell would appear to be the ideal authority to turn to if one wants to discuss the fraught issue of psychoanalysis and politics. This is not only because her book *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* was seminal for so many women radicals in the 1970s, busy attending their Marx and Freud reading groups.² It is also because she has consistently insisted that she remains steadfastly attached to being political – even in these very different times, when many have discarded their former ideals as yesterday’s folly. *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, she has recalled, ‘was asking if we could use psychoanalysis to bring feminism into the socialist project. That project has to take off from there.’³ Or, as she put it elsewhere: ‘The question for me in that book was that if patriarchy is so entrenched, there must be *historical* circumstances which a politics could work

on, where that entrenchment could be undermined and eroded in some way.’⁴ Today, it is Mitchell herself who worries that psychoanalysis, and in particular feminism’s embrace of it, may have served to displace politics. ‘Does [psychoanalysis’s] self-described, non-political discourse draw all potentially radical use of it into the apolitical?’, she recently queried. Or conversely, and perhaps more surprisingly, she wonders: ‘does the recurrent demise of feminism ... turn a radical investigatory mode which is psychoanalysis into an apolitical discourse?’⁵ Good questions. Her worries are just the ones we need to address if we want to ponder the conjunction of psychoanalysis and feminism over the last three decades. The first question, at least, expresses some of my own misgivings.

Yet, oddly, while regularly fielding the right questions, Mitchell’s replies are equivocal and puzzling. Her theoretical and professional engagement in psychoanalysis, although critical and creative, does not itself direct us to any particular social, let alone historical, circumstances which she seeks either to erode, or only to change, in order to further her feminist goal of increasing the cultural power, agency and personal happiness of women. On the contrary, she has consistently dismissed ‘the sociologizing of psychoanalysis’ by theorists like Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin, who stress the impact of the particularities of culture – especially the shifting dynamics of parenting – in the psychological domain.⁶ Mitchell’s own resolute, now less than fashionable, universalizing of psychoanalytic explanations of the structural/symbolic origins of sexual difference seem more symptomatic of what many have seen as the obstinacy of a psychoanalysis which works to fix or naturalize, rather than to diminish, coercive sexual and gender binaries. Psychoanalytic insights, in my

view, can be used – often *must* be used – to help us grasp aspects of the political moment and, especially, the belligerence and dread so often greeting change in the personal and sexual arena. Yet, as Freud's most compelling feminist, Foucauldian and newly born Deleuzian critics all insist, its traditional dilemma is that in practice psychoanalysis has routinely been deployed, and often still serves, to reinforce a coercive normalizing of heterosexual, reproductive sexuality and identity, rather than calling them into question. This is most apparent in the arena where it is routinely invoked, in sexual and gender politics, as I think we can see in the work of Juliet Mitchell.

Sexual binarism or gender ambiguity?

In talks and interviews delivered in the 1990s, Mitchell suggests that the depoliticizing of both feminism and psychoanalysis in recent decades has something to do with the increasing academic interest in sexuality and representation at the expense of kinship, ideology and the reproduction of society around sexual difference. The former, she suggests, attempts to valorize motherhood and the pre-Oedipal as an alternative female and feminine sphere. In contrast, she argues, it is only attention to kinship and ideology which can explain how and why women and men are positioned differently in 'patriarchal' kinship structures.⁷ Despite her clinical training in psychoanalytic object-relations and the Independent School, which followed her theoretical schooling in Freud and Lacan, Mitchell seems to remain, by and large, faithful to the claim she made in the early 1980s, following Lacan (and along with Jacqueline Rose), that 'the strength' which psychoanalysis brings to feminism resides in its claim that the category 'women' is an empty one: women are 'defined exactly as – and only as – their difference from men'. There is no positive content to be given to women, or to femininity. Only from here, Mitchell suggested then, can we begin to think psychoanalytically, can we begin to see 'how gender is constructed and how sexual differences are lived'.⁸

Mitchell is well aware that any such emphasis on structural determinants, like kinship, and the ineluctable hold of the classic Oedipal narrative, is precisely *not* the direction taken by those – non-Lacanian – feminist clinicians who have been most engaged in critically using psychoanalysis as a tool for reworking notions of gender. I am thinking, in particular, of the New York analysts (not one of whom is mentioned in Mitchell's latest book) such as Jessica Benjamin, Muriel Dimen, Virginia Goldner and Arlene Harris, who in 1996 helped found the journal *Gender and Psychoanalysis*, relaunched this year as *Studies in*

Gender and Sexuality.⁹ They all emphasize that sexed identity is never internalized as a single entity (positively or a negatively), but operates subjectively within an array of always conflictual mental representations and self-perceptions. These are sedimented out of the unique identifications each child makes with its own parents, siblings and significant others, however much these interactions are always already permeated with the polarizing effects of symbolic phallogentrism and the still prevailing – though increasingly diverse and disputed – social and familial patterns of male dominance.

A somewhat different account, although not dissimilar in its consequences for the psychic formation of sexual difference, comes from those influenced by the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche (promoted most comprehensively in Britain by John Fletcher).¹⁰ Laplanche explains the inevitable installation of the unconscious in the child as not so much the effect of the child's identifications as, from the outside, the implantation of an always unique bundle of enigmatic signifiers or untranslatable messages coming from the unconscious desires of the mother, or other significant adults – via what he terms 'seduction'.

Either way, it can be argued that while the child is imbued with unconscious sexual desires through its interactions with the seductive and desired attention and ministrations of adult others, there is no *primordial* sexual binarism in the unconscious. Indeed, this is precisely why gendered and sexual identifications are so confusing, and so chronically in danger of collapsing under the weight of their own contradictions. From this perspective, the psychoanalytic message and goal of treatment is not so much the achievement of an appropriate gendered or sexual identity, as the ability 'to tolerate the ambiguity and instability of gender categories'.¹¹ Here, the acceptance of gender ambiguity and instability signals mental health. These more recent psychoanalytic trajectories rethinking gender and sexual difference often express the Foucauldian and Derridean influences authorizing queer theory's account of the inevitable instability and fluidity of identities and desire, with Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick still its reigning – if at times reluctant – theoreticians.¹²

Mitchell obviously knows, as well as Freud, Lacan or any other reflective clinician, that 'masculinity' and 'femininity' have no clear or certain content. She is all too aware of what the Lacanian Moustafa Safouan sums up as 'simply the state of affairs confirmed by all analysis': 'that the energy with which the subject declares himself [*sic*] man or woman is proportional to that with which the reverse is stated in

the unconscious.¹³ Indeed, Mitchell would add, that is the whole point of psychoanalysis: to understand how ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ become ‘differentiated out from sameness’. But, she goes on, when feminist psychoanalysts see only gender ambiguity and uncertainty, ‘they forget the problem of engendering’.¹⁴ It is this which, for Mitchell, as for Freud, binds sexuality and sexual difference to a reproductive, heterosexual teleology: ‘for generation there *has to be* a categorical difference’. And from this assertion, she swiftly legitimizes all the ingredients of the normative Oedipal developmental narrative. Thus Mitchell explains: ‘The infant must come to acknowledge that it was born of two parents in their sexual desire. Sexuality is the process that enables one to find the gendered other as different from oneself so that she or he can be used as other for the purposes of engendering.’¹⁵ What is surely most striking here is that Mitchell falls back on the very reproductive biologism she once turned to Lacan to avoid.

Hysteria: the Law of the Mother

This reading of the Oedipal narrative underpins Mitchell’s latest account of hysteria, although – to be sure – it is augmented by an expanded and compelling analysis of the potentially catastrophic effect of sibling envy and displacement within the more familiar drama. Overall, her description of hysteria is, as usual, innovative and subtle. She tellingly emphasizes the ideological slippage that falsely collapses into the ‘feminine’ the dreaded passivity and helplessness of infancy, the consuming envy, the ceaseless longing and the feelings of emptiness or non-existence that are symptomatic of the hysterical condition: ‘it would appear that women and hysteria are found synonymously unattractive, so a hysterical man is “feminine”’.¹⁶ In her reclaiming of hysteria, Mitchell is at her most persuasive in the charting of the process which turns hysteria into ‘femininity’. Freud’s mistake, she explains, was to see as a universal repudiation of femininity what he should have seen as a repudiation of the hysterical condition. She is equally convincing as she explores the banishing or dissolving of hysteria (in her view, an inevitable feature of the human condition) into its component categories – whether of anorexia or other conversion symptoms. My misgivings all arise from her theoretical denouement on the *origins* of hysteria. It is there that we learn, in line with reproductive normativities, that the pathology of hysteria always returns us to the rejection of sexual polarity: ‘Hysteria ... is *essentially* bisexual.’¹⁷

The hysteric, who, when faced with unbearable fears of self-annihilation, regresses to the helplessness

of infancy, is the man or woman who has been unable to find his or her place within a future *where they are positioned differently in relation to procreation*. Thus we learn: ‘what the hysteric unconsciously cannot face is sexual reproduction as opposed to parthenogenetic procreation’.¹⁸ Mitchell now wants to add a new universal prohibition, which she calls ‘The Law of the Mother’, to sit beside the more orthodox ‘Law of the Father’. The Law of the Mother decrees: ‘you [the child] cannot be a mother now, but you, a girl, can grow up to be one, and you, a boy, cannot.’ The Law of the Father refers to the role of ‘the Father’s Phallus’ in defining the object of the mother’s desire: neither the boy nor the girl can possess the phallus, but you, a boy, can align yourself with the position of the father, with the fantasy of having the phallus, but you, a girl, cannot! The old law, of course, installs the castration complex. The new law, the maternal prohibition, if successfully surmounted, will allow the girl, but forbid the boy, to grow up to be ‘in the position of the mother (in whatever way – actual or symbolic – she may use it)’.¹⁹ The hysteric is the person – male or female – who refuses this Law of the Mother.

With her accounts of parthenogenetic fantasies – often triggered by the birth of a sibling – keeping the male as well as the female child perpetually allied to the mother, Mitchell provides many suggestive vignettes of hysterical symptoms, especially in men. But I am not convinced by her obedience to a psychoanalytic imagination and an explanatory framework which can only lock identity and sexuality into normative reproductive discourses, assumptions and prescriptions. Indeed, her examples do not seem to me to justify any such conclusion. We can look at one of the first and fullest she offers, of a woman suffering from multiple hysterical and suicidal symptoms drawn from Enid Balint’s case study of Sarah, ‘On Being Empty of Oneself’, reported in 1963. Sarah is empty of herself because ‘her mother has never recognized her’, refusing ‘all the messages her daughter sent out for recognition’. Furthermore, at six or seven, Sarah’s older brother began having sexual intercourse with her, a practice which continued for the next five years. Sarah’s father is reported to be a violent man, ‘without any self control’. As a child Sarah ‘had lain awake at nights terrified of death, too scared to call out, imagining that something was going to crash on her head’.²⁰ Sarah’s ‘rampant’ adult sexual experiences were bisexual. Reflecting upon this case history, Mitchell rightly criticized Enid Balint’s work for (in line with that of Donald Winnicott and other psychoanalytic mentors of her day) locating Sarah’s mental illness solely with the mother, rather than



considering either the role of the violent father (who had wanted only sons) or the older sibling (who had drawn her into premature incestuous sex). It seems to me, however, that of the many overdeterminations of Sarah's adult pathologies, the argument that she has refused fully to accept the normative, procreative position is somewhat superfluous.

In my view, the imposition of such an overarching blueprint, or any set of laws mandating the production of healthy human development, is not only superfluous, but can operate to diminish the potential of psychoanalytic thought for embracing psychic complexity. In line with its predominantly conservative history, it also serves to suppress the potential subversiveness of psychoanalysis in the sexual and gender domain. Let us imagine another vignette, based on a person I have studied particularly closely for many long years. This woman (call her X) has all her life closely identified with, and always worked hard to impress, her mother. Her father seemed to have little direct impact on her emotional life, as a chronically child-like, endlessly demanding, habitually angry, promiscuous adulterer – whom her mother appeared to regard only with embittered contempt. X has never had the least difficulty in identifying herself as 'feminine', in successfully pursuing heterosexual relationships and giving birth to a son. Has X therefore come to terms with herself as a woman, and avoided neurotic feelings of worthlessness through acceptance of the normative procreative position? Not at all. The mother with whom X identified was, in contrast to her daughter, completely invested in her own father and older brother (both of whom strongly identified with

her as a particularly successful child and sister). She had only contempt for her own mother. In line with the intensely patriarchal repudiations of femininity of her day, X's mother could find worth only in men and 'masculinity'. X, identified with and receiving all her mother's repudiations of femininity, will always have problems with her own self-worth as a woman, despite being heterosexual, procreative and all too aware of her own feminine identity.

The point is this: while Mitchell is nowadays willing and able to provide telling descriptions of psychic experience, she often seems to have little interest in social context, other than to posit structural determinants of a very normative kind. Thus she cannot address her own queries on how psychoanalysis (with its account of the life-long significance of intra-familial dynamics and generational haunting) might serve as any sort of feminist or radical *political* tool for combating the still pervasive denigration of women, whether as hags, whores or hysterics. For this she would need to do more than merely inform us, as she does, that there *is* a 'tension that haunts feminism even now between wanting to be equal to men and different from men'.²¹ Of course there is. But what one might hope is that Mitchell would have more to say on how women might best continue, even now, to work to ensure that the awareness we have of our difference from men would *no longer* tie us to images which are socially repudiated, to something which is already marked as inferior. Yet in the 350 pages of *Mad Men and Medusas*, she abstains from any such reflection. Her own tale of the necessary acceptance of sexual difference in terms of gender-differentiating

laws of procreation significantly contracts the diverse ways in which we live our embodiments as women or men, to one particular form of hitherto patriarchal kinship structure: the very structure many feminists have for some time been calling into question, not attempting to shore up.

Moreover, Mitchell is reinforcing reproductive, heterosexual normativities precisely at a time when one would have thought there are many other options open to her. The point of the Oedipal triad (of the child recognizing that it cannot have babies), like the point of symbolic castration, is that this little creature must sooner or later – preferably sooner rather than later – detach itself from its earliest, most original object of desire: from the mother or her substitute(s). It must renounce the supposed plenitude of its fantasized auto-erotic libidinal union with that original primordial other. Fair enough. But from where do these Oedipalized Laws arise which *alone* guarantee the psychic separation of the child from the mother, which ensure the child's awareness that it is not the sole object of the m/other's desire. Where is it writ that the independent or (as it is usually called) 'third' term which interrupts the libidinal dyad of mother and child must be imagined as the biological Father? (Now with the addition of a specifically procreative prohibition from Mother.)

It is not necessary to downplay the persistent, inescapable power of actual mothers and fathers in the psychic life of the child, nor the immense symbolic weight of Mother and Father in cultural narrative, and the continuing purchase of contemporary nuclear family ideology, to suggest that what turns the mother's desire away from the child is not, of necessity, the Father's Phallus. The actual mother, in practice, may desire and passionately invest herself in any manner of others, not just the threatening arrival or existence of siblings. (Margaret Cook, in her autobiography, I seem to remember, sadly recalls her mother's perpetual, loving gaze directed outwards at the cows.) Neither is it necessary, as Jessica Benjamin does, to draw upon more recent research in developmental psychology that depicts the child as already an active, social, interpersonal creature from an early age, with capacities that enable 'an emergent awareness of self and others'.²² As empirical research by child psychologists like Daniel Stern suggests, this is no doubt the case.²³ But here we are not talking of intrapsychic experiences of such traumatic or emotional intensity that they overwhelm the child, threatening its libidinal investment in the

mother, and hence remaining unconscious. The notion of the reproductive Oedipal *triangle* is too simple to encompass the possible permutations of parental or other adult libidinal investments in the child, and vice versa.²⁴

With characteristic, but on this occasion far from foolish, exuberance, Leo Bersani lays out ten permutations of possible desiring positions for the child which may occur *within* the classic Oedipal triad. The basic psychoanalytic account of the Oedipus Complex (including bisexuality, incestuous and murderous impulses), he suggests, distorts 'a more consequential drama' in which the gender identities of the agents are extremely diverse. He also reminds us:

The major function Freud speaks of as the rival father is not to be either a sexual rival or a parent, but rather to redirect the child's attention, to suggest that there are other modes of extension in the world. It doesn't matter if the agent doing that is a real father in the traditional nuclear family, or another woman, or indeed another man when the desired adult is also a man or, finally, the several agents that may compete for the child's interest, re-direct its curiosity, in the single-parent family. The crucial thing is to get the child out of the family, although such a reading may appear to be forestalled by Freud's relegating of that function to the father.²⁵

The child must indeed be able to let go of its first objects of desire. Parents must too, of course; and in particular the mother must let go of the child. But I can see no Laws, other than strictly normative ones (that is, rules), which insist that awareness of sameness and difference, and hence true object-related – as distinct from strictly narcissistic – sexual desire, can and must derive from unconscious acceptance of the biological narrative of procreation; and only from acceptance of such a narrative.

Two Freuds, one Mitchell

Given what we know of the near total collapse of strictly patriarchal kinship laws, as almost 50 per cent of marriages end in divorce, as more women choose (or are forced) to mother without a biological father, or as some try to insist on men's equal involvement in childcare, it seems somewhat perverse (in the non-Freudian sense) nowadays for Mitchell to hold fast to the symbolic and structural positioning of men and women within traditional kinship structures and reproductive ideology. Weirdly, Mitchell is again aware of the problem, even indicating to us some years ago – as others already had – that there are two Freuds

struggling with each other. (More than two, I would suggest!) One she calls the ‘Enlightenment’ Freud (though some may feel this does scant justice to the complexities of Enlightenment thinking), who wrote of the Oedipus and castration complexes: this is the one ‘who was looking backwards, saying something about sexual difference as it has been established’. Almost, she adds, in self-consciously Marxist mode, ‘as if something feudal were still existing within capitalism; something classical still existed in something which was becoming deconstructed within modern life, within late capitalism’. The other Freud, she reflects, used concepts like ‘deferred action’. He is the one who takes us nearer to deconstruction.²⁶

Quite so. But there is only one Juliet Mitchell. And she is the one who has trouble with the second Freud, has trouble with any letting go of the primordial nature of sexual difference and its fundamental role as origin of sexual desire. Remember her original questions. ‘Does [psychoanalysis’s] self-described, non-political discourse draw all potentially radical use of it into the apolitical?’ Not necessarily, but in her hands – as in those of most orthodox psychoanalysts – it often has a decidedly conservative ring. Is it the fault of ‘the recurrent demise of feminism’? I think not. But one aspect of its continuing traditional message appears to be assisted by some rather peculiar ways of deploying it in the service of feminism. Indeed, Mitchell herself might be thought to combine the most patriarchal legacy of Lacan with the most matriarchal leanings in Klein; the worst of both worlds. But then, perhaps, Mitchell is no longer the thinker to turn to if we want to use psychoanalytic insights to assist feminist or other political goals.

If we compare the contents of *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* with that of *Mad Men and Medusas*, it is interesting to note that not only does the latter fail to carry through Mitchell’s earlier interest in the vicissitudes of Marxism and capitalism and their critics, but it also displays little interest in the vicissitudes of feminism, or the changing fate of women. What seems constant is an increasingly peculiar commitment to the inevitability of formations of non-pathological subjectivities via acceptance of one’s place within traditional kinship structures and patriarchal ideology. Not quite all one might have hoped from three decades of reflection on the place of psychoanalysis in politics by one of British feminism’s founding figures.

Notes

1. Juliet Mitchell, ‘Twenty Years On’, *New Formations* 26, Autumn 1995, p. 124.
2. See, illustratively, Margot Wadell, ‘Brief Reflections’, *New Formations* 26, Autumn, 1995, pp. 129–33.
3. Toril Moi, ‘Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Politics: A Conversation with Juliet Mitchell’, *Materialist Feminism Issue*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 94, no. 4, Fall 1994, p. 133.
4. Mitchell, ‘Twenty Years On’, p. 125.
5. Juliet Mitchell, ‘Feminism and Psychoanalysis at the Millennium’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, Summer 1999, p. 186.
6. See Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie, ‘Feminine Sexuality: Interview with Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose’, *m/f* 8, 1983, p. 5.
7. See Mitchell, ‘Feminism and Psychoanalysis at the Millennium’, pp. 190–91.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
9. See Virginia Goldner, ‘Reading and Writing, Talking and Listening: Introducing Studies in Gender and Sexuality’, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2000, pp. 1–7; ‘Towards a Critical Relational Theory of Gender’, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1991.
10. See Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, edited with an excellent introduction by John Fletcher, Routledge, London and New York, 1999; John Fletcher and Peter Osborne, ‘The Other Within – Rethinking Psychoanalysis: An Interview with Jean Laplanche’, *Radical Philosophy* 102, July/August 2000, pp. 31–41.
11. Goldner, ‘Towards a Critical Relational Theory of Gender’, p. 249. See also Muriel Dimen, ‘Deconstructing Difference: Gender, Splitting, and Transitional Space’, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 335–52.
12. See, for example, Diana Fuss, ed., *Inside Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, Routledge, London, 1992; ‘More Gender Trouble: Feminism Meets Queer Theory’, *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Summer–Fall 1994.
13. Moustafa Safouan, ‘Is the Oedipus Complex Universal’, Double Issue on Sexuality, *m/f* 5 and 6, 1981, p. 85.
14. Juliet Mitchell, ‘Commentary “Deconstructing Difference: Gender, Splitting, and Transitional Space”’, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1991, p. 357.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria and the Effects of Sibling Relations on the Human Condition*, Allen Lane, London, 2000, p. 321.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 75, emphasis added.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 323.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 344.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 179, 180.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
22. Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination*, Virago, London, 1990, pp. 29–30.
23. Daniel Stern, *The First Relationship: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology*, Basic Books, New York, 1985.
24. See Peter Osborne, ‘In the Beginning Was the Bond: Jessica Benjamin or Jean Laplanche?’, in *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, Verso, London and New York, 1995, pp. 98–104.
25. Leo Bersani, ‘Against Monogamy’, in ‘Beyond Redemption: The Work of Leo Bersani’, *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 20, nos 1–2, pp. 13–14.
26. Juliet Mitchell, ‘Twenty Years On’, p. 127.