

# THE ARCHAIC MATERNAL SUPEREGO

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The experience of some particular clinical problems and the theme of the 1995 Annual Conference of CEREDA (Centre de Recherche sur l'Enfant dans le Discours Analytique, Paris) – 'The gluttony of the superego' - led me to re-examine the concept of the archaic maternal superego.

It is possible to argue that the concept is somehow in a latent state, under other names, in works that concern its clinical and theoretical area of interest or related matters. The sense in which I employ the term here is to designate a set of problems which are both clinical and theoretical, not the name for a supposed meta-psychological agency whose theoretical necessity would be questionable. This is so because - anticipating the argument that I will develop - the archaic maternal superego is a function of the superego, the superego pure and simple which, qua agency in the way Freud defined it, attends to more than one function.

'Archaic maternal superego': the expression is the slight alteration of the term used by Lacan as the sub-title of a paragraph in his article on the family published in the 1938 edition of the *Encyclopédie française*; in my translation: 'Maternal origins of the archaic superego'. It is worthwhile to return to this text of 1938. In all probability, in later years Lacan himself would have smiled at certain things he wrote in the article, which retrospectively we could now regard as naive, pre-Lacanian or simply anti-Lacanian; but the same could be said of other and more recent works by Lacan. For instance, the genetic or developmental point of view that could be interpreted as being implied in the term 'archaic' (although in my view the historical and mythical connotations of the word are primary) disappears from Lacan's later work. However, the distinction between different structural moments of the Oedipus complex remains.

The text of La famille already shows clearly the rigour which is characteristic of Lacan's more recent texts. It precedes by almost twenty years the Lacanian theory of the signifier (if we take, more or less arbitrarily, The agency of the letter as a reference point), and in this connection is perhaps more pre-Lacanian than in others. Yet it contains the most pertinent conceptual developments regarding the later theory of *jouissance* (or *jouissances*, as Jacques-Alain Miller has proposed). Furthermore, La famille retains its relevance as a psychoanalytic approach to the familial institution.

In his review of Lacan's trajectory on the question of the superego, J.-A. Miller points out that:

"The superego is an enigma in Lacan's teaching. While his critique of the ego is a well-known point [...] there is nothing equivalent in that teaching on the function of the superego."

There are nevertheless very precise propositions and references to the superego in Lacan's works, even if these are not systematised, as well as elaborations in which the functions of the superego are implicit or involved in some way or other. I will not

attempt to refer to all these elaborations by Lacan, but will confine myself to those that are directly relevant to the question of the archaic maternal superego.

In his conference on the clinic of the superego at Buenos Aires, J.-A. Miller remarks that the superego “is the first Freudian concept that Lacan retained, the concept that engaged him in Freudian theory”. The first methodical use of Freudian theory by Jacques Lacan, then a young psychiatrist, concerns in a prominent, although not exclusive, way precisely the concept of the superego. The analysis of the Aimée case, included in his doctoral thesis of 1932, culminates with the proposal of a new clinical category: self-punishment paranoia, a form of psychosis in which the structuration of the delusion is dominated by a superego demand, a demand for punishment that satisfies what Lacan then called the self-punishment drive (pulsion d'autopunition), thus establishing an equivalence between the superego and a particular modality of the drive. It should be noted here, as Miller does in his conference, that from the very start of his psychoanalytic career Lacan considers that the division against itself is the very essence of the subject: in this case, a division that opposes the superego to the rest of the subject. This was nine years after the publication of The ego and the id by Freud, the work that introduced the term ‘superego’ into psychoanalysis - although the reference to a psychological agency with superego functions was already present in a number of works by Freud, under different names, practically since the beginnings of psychoanalysis.

In 1938, the year of publication of Lacan’s article on the family, the Kleinian doctrine started to become dominant in the psychoanalytic world. The superego was precisely one of the main points in the controversy between Melanie Klein and the leader of the then incipient ego psychology, Anna Freud. Melanie Klein criticised Freud for what she considered his hesitancy in relation to the superego, for not having extracted from the discovery of the eminently destructive character of that agency all the possible theoretical and clinical consequences - as if Freud had retreated in horror in the face of the evidence of the insidious presence of the death drive inside the subject.

In contradistinction with ego psychology, Kleinian analysis could be characterised as an analysis of the superego. This has its positive and its negative aspects. Positive: in that in accentuating the analysis of the superego Klein rescued for psychoanalysis the subject’s self-destructiveness, both at the theoretical and clinical levels. Negative: in that Kleinian analysis has the tendency to situate the analyst in the position of semblant of the superego agency. This occurs insidiously, it is not explicitly articulated by Melanie Klein. Yet it is present and manifests itself in the Kleinian practice of interpretation, which provides the patient constantly with significations (translations of the “material” produced by the patient in terms of its supposed unconscious meaning), that is to say, of *jouissance* under the shape of sense - which is a subtle (sometimes not so subtle) form of demand of *jouissance* on the part of the analyst. This is sense as Jouis-sens, the superego’s demand to enjoy being conveyed by the interpretation itself: “Enjoy this interpretation that tells you what you really mean!”

In La famille, without explicitly endorsing the set of Kleinian theses, Lacan favours Klein’s characterisation of the superego as an early, pre-Oedipal agency, whose formation is completed, but does not commence, with the dissolution of the Oedipus complex. Luis Storni, a Kleinian analyst from Buenos Aires, argued in his teaching that although the superego is the heir of the Oedipus complex (according to the Freudian formula), this does not mean that there is no superego as an agency before

the Oedipus complex: the heir is not the same thing as the inheritance (the prince is the heir to the Crown, but he exists before the Crown is transferred onto him; indeed, it is necessary that he exists before the transference, so that he can receive it). It seems to me that in this sense the Kleinian approach is still structural, i.e. does not reduce the Oedipus complex to being a stage in development, as a certain developmental psychology may want it to be. Our field, the Freudian field, is structural, not developmental. Now then, the structural approach requires the recognition of logical moments and sequences in the subject's history. Understood in this sense, the Oedipal crisis justifies our talking of a pre-Oedipal moment of the structure and, correlatively, of a pre-Oedipal superego. As we shall see later, we also have to recognise a dimension of the superego beyond the Oedipus complex.

Of the Kleinian characterisation, Lacan would retain in later works the oral-sadistic traits of the superego, linked to its maternal origins. The fantasy of being devoured by the mother (emphasised in the seminar on the object relation) and the "gluttony" of the superego, to which Lacan refers in Télévision, retain that maternal link underlined by Klein. This is not, however, an originally Kleinian idea: the notion of a maternal dimension in the agency of the superego is already present in Freud's works. It is true that the Freudian superego is eminently paternal, in so far as it represents the subjective internalisation of the law of the father. However, in The ego and the id Freud speaks of the genesis of the ego ideal (term which Freud still employed as synonymous of the superego), behind which lies hidden, he says,

"an individual's first and most important identification, his identification with the father in his own personal prehistory."

To which he adds in a footnote:

"Perhaps it would be safer to say 'with the parents'; for before a child has arrived at definite knowledge of the difference between the sexes, the lack of a penis, it does not distinguish in value between its father and its mother."

We must note here the difference that exists between Freud and Klein in relation to the mother. There is in Freud a difference (later underlined by Lacan) between mother and woman, although Freud was not able to be precise on the question of women's *jouissance*. That difference is de facto obliterated by Kleinian doctrine. Klein speaks, for example, of an initial 'feminine' phase, common to both sexes, based on a primordial identification with the mother; and the question of femininity is solved in the Kleinian doctrine by its reduction to the field of the maternal.

Even before introducing the term 'superego', in his article on a case of paranoia presumably contrary to psychoanalytic theory, Freud refers to a function of the superego that is incarnated by a maternal figure. After proposing to explain the persecutory delusion of the patient as the product of her "intense homosexual attachment", Freud says:

"The patient's attachment to her own sex opposed her attempts to adopt a person of the other sex as a love-object. Her love for her mother had become the spokesman of all those tendencies which, playing the part of a 'conscience' seek to arrest a girl's first step along the new road to normal sexual satisfaction - in many respects a dangerous one; and indeed it succeeded in disturbing her relation with men. When a mother hinders or arrests a daughter's sexual activity, she is fulfilling a normal function whose lines are laid down by events in childhood, which has powerful, unconscious motives, and has received the sanction of society. It is the daughter's business to emancipate herself on broad and rational grounds what her

share of enjoyment or denial of sexual pleasure shall be. [...] The manifestation of the neurotic reaction will always be determined, however, not by her present-day relation to her actual mother but by her infantile relations to her earliest image of her mother. [...] She tried to free herself, to throw off her homosexual attachment; and her disposition [...] enabled this to occur in the form of a paranoid delusion. The mother thus became the hostile and malevolent watcher and persecutor. As such she could have been overcome, had it not been that the mother-complex retained power enough to carry out its purpose of keeping the patient at a distance from men. Thus, at the end of the first phase of the conflict the patient had become estranged from her mother without having definitely gone over to the man.”

This passage announces a number of questions that Freud would study in subsequent years and Lacan would also re-examine. In order not to deviate from the central topic, I leave aside the objection that Lacan made to the Freudian explanation of paranoia articulated in this article. The passage concerns the notion of the maternal superego; then, the question of the pre-Oedipal attachment of the female subject to her mother; in addition, there appears the question of the feminine superego (in the sense of the superego of women), which is the object of some particular formulations by Freud in his discussion of female sexuality, apparently - but only apparently - in contradiction to what he says in 1915 about the severity of the early moral conscience. Finally, Freud foreshadows the question of ‘the thrust towards woman in psychosis’, as well as what I would call ‘the thrust towards the mother’ - the latter over and above the structure of psychosis. All this forms a part of the Freudian foundations of the Lacanian theses on sexualisation and the Other *jouissance*.

It is with the fantasy of castration that Lacan connects the archaic maternal superego in La famille. The fantasy of castration makes the repression of sexuality effective at the moment of the Oedipus complex. The ‘family complexes’ are psychical organisations structured around a loss, a lack (the structuring function of lack is already present in Lacan in 1938): the weaning complex, around the loss of the maternal breast and, beyond the breast, the loss of the mother as Totality (written by Lacan with a capital T: *Tout*); the intrusion complex, around the loss of being that the narcissistic position entails, and which at the same time conceals; the Oedipus complex, around the loss of the primordial object of *jouissance*. These losses perform a structuring function in so far as the crises that they precipitate promote new and more complex psychical organisations. At the same time, they leave behind *remainders* which cannot be assimilated; losses that come to operate as *causes* - lost causes, one could say - whose prototype is the loss of the mother as a result of weaning, which inspires what Lacan calls “the nostalgia for wholeness”, defined as:

“A perfect assimilation of all things to being. In this formula, which appears a little philosophical, we can recognise the nostalgias of humanity: the metaphysical mirage of universal harmony; the mystical abyss of affective fusion; the social Utopia of totalitarian dependency, as well as all sorts of longings for a paradise lost before birth and the most obscure aspirations for death.”

This is the dimension of the relation with the mother that later, in his seminar on the Ethics of psychoanalysis, Lacan defines as occupying the place of *das Ding*, the Thing, the void left by the Thing.

The fantasy of castration, Lacan argues in La famille, operates as a defence, not so

much against genital desire as against the anxiety precipitated by the object re-actualised by the Oedipus complex: the mother. The subject responds to this anxiety through the reproduction of the masochistic rejection by means of which he has overcome his primordial loss; however, during the Oedipus complex he does so in a localised manner (castration in the restricted sense of inhibition of the genital function). The mother, who previously evoked the very abolition of the subject (death of the subject as he is attracted by the return to the maternal womb, a theme already studied by Freud), now evokes the subject's abolition as being of *jouissance*. Furthermore, the mother introduces repression through the disciplines of weaning and sphincter control. Freud had already referred to the libidinising effect of maternal care (the mother as the primordial seducing Other who also introduces the prohibitions).

Lacan discusses in La famille this contradictory aspect of the identifications that emerge with the Oedipus complex, of which the superego constitutes a precipitate. On the one hand, the parental imago inhibits the sexual function unconsciously; on the other hand, the same imago preserves the sexual function, "although under the cover of its miscognition". In an insidious way, the superego promotes the *jouissance* that it simultaneously prohibits. Years later, Lacan would emphasise this superego demand for enjoyment, its implacable, cruel mandate to enjoy that the subject will never be able to satisfy. Paradoxical imperative is that of the superego, as J.-A. Miller has pointed out, since it is exactly equivalent to an interdiction: for *jouissance*, according to Lacan, is impossible.

That the superego is antinomic in its structure does not mean that its effects are exclusively pathogenic. The superego is pathogenic in so far as for the speaking being the law itself is pathogenic in its effects. In La famille Lacan refers to the creative dimension of the conjugal family in so far as it incarnates the functions of the superego:

"Because the conjugal family incarnates authority in the next generation and in a familiar person, it puts this authority within the immediate range of creative subversion. [...] In the conjugal family the psyche is formed as much by the image of the adult as by going against his constraints. [...] The evidence of sexual activity among those who are the representatives of moral constraint, and especially the example of transgression by the imago of the father of the primary prohibition, lifts to their highest degree the tension of the libido and the influence of sublimation."

In his seminar on the object relation, Lacan also refers to that function "undoubtedly disturbing, but also stabilising, that is the superego." It is not a question, therefore, of reducing the superego to any of its most sinister imaginary presentations: the devouring mother, the devouring father, the corrupt and cruel policeman, the implacable and puritanical judge. The imaginary face of the superego was highlighted by post-Freudian psychoanalysis. The application of the Lacanian categories of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real registers enables us to define more precisely the status of the superego. This is an eminently symbolic agency; not the Law itself (with which it should not be confused), but its internalised voice. In his seminar on the Ethics of psychoanalysis Lacan says:

"We have never stopped repeating that the interiorisation of the Law has nothing to do with the Law. Although we still need to know why. It is possible that the superego serves as a support for the moral conscience, but everybody knows that it has nothing to do with the moral conscience as far as its most obligatory demands

are concerned.”

The superego is symbolic, but not pacifying, as J.-A. Miller points out:

“The superego is certainly the law, but not the pacifying and socialising law, it is rather a senseless law, in that it entails a hole, an absence of justification. It is the law as unary signifier, S1, whose signification we do not know. [...] The superego is the evidence and the paradox that results from a unique signifier which, because it is alone, is senseless. This is the reason why we could locate the superego, in a first analysis, in S(A), which assumes that the supposed complete law of the Other can be perceived in its fault.”

In a paragraph that clarifies the question of the maternal superego, Miller adds:

“The superego as senseless law is very close to the desire of the mother before that desire becomes metaphorised, and even dominated, by the name-of-the-father. The superego is close to the desire of the mother as a capricious whim without law.”

As to the superego as *real*, it is necessary to distinguish a number of functions and singular effects. In his seminar on the object relation, Lacan characterises the real dimension of the superego. He says there that the end of the Oedipus complex is correlative to the introduction of the law as repressed, in a permanent way:

“The law is not simply [...] that in which the community of men is included and implied. (...) It is also founded on the real, in the form of that nucleus that remains after the Oedipus complex, a nucleus called superego. As analysis has demonstrated in a definitive way, under the real form is inscribed what until now philosophers have shown [...] as the density, the permanent nucleus of moral conscience, incarnated in each subject, as we know, under the most diverse, senseless, ostentatious forms.”

Towards the end of his comments on the case of Little Hans, in the last chapter of Seminar IV, and in the same passage where he speaks of the stabilising function of the superego that I mentioned previously, Lacan says:

“Hans’ Oedipal crisis does not properly lead to the formation of a typical superego. By this I mean a superego such as it is produced according to the mechanism indicated by our teaching on the *Verwerfung*, that is to say, what is rejected in the symbolic reappears in the real. This is the true key, at the closest level, of what happens after the Oedipal *Verwerfung*. Indeed, to the extent to which the castration complex is surpassed but, at the same time, cannot be fully assumed by the subject, an identification with a kind of brute image of the father is produced; it is an image that carries all the reflections of his singularities, with all its weight, which can be flattening. Once again we see a renovated version of the mechanism of re-appearance in the real; but this time it is a real at the limits of the psychical, in the interior of the ego boundaries - a real that imposes itself on the subject in a quasi hallucinatory way, when the subject, at a given time, is disengaged from the symbolic integration of the process of castration.”

In the case of Little Hans this intervention of the real dimension of the superego fails:

“If Little Hans is identified with the maternal phallus, this does not mean that he is able to assume the function of his penis as such. [...] The penis is left aside, disengaged, as something that has only been depreciated, disapproved by the

mother.”

An intervention by the father would have enabled the positive appreciation of that penis; the absence of such an intervention is precisely Hans’ problem. Lacan continues:

“Little Hans establishes himself in existence because he has some idea of his ideal, because he is the mother’s ideal, namely, a substitute for the phallus.”

Lacan then concludes:

“In a case like this, in which the subject is introduced in an atypical Oedipal relation, the maternal ideal induces very precisely a certain type of situation and solution in the subject’s relation with sex. The outcome occurs through an identification with the maternal ideal.”

In his conference on the clinic of the superego, J.-A. Miller proposes the use of the matheme  $\Phi_0$  (phallus index zero), with which “nobody has done anything” to write down the superego in Lacanian theory:

“Phallus index zero,  $\Phi_0$ , is the writing of that *jouissance* which is not frozen, not captive of the phallus.”

$\Phi_0$  is not a negativation of the phallus; it rather “shows the ubiquitous nature of *jouissance* when it is not localised as phallic *jouissance*.”

The real of the superego, therefore, has antinomic functions (already recognised by Lacan in the passage of La famille quoted above). On the one hand, the real of the superego is necessary to ensure the implementation of the Oedipal law, on the other hand, the superego is unregulated *jouissance*: “An unchained function which does not know about limits; it is for this reason that it has been proscribed by psychoanalysts”, says Miller.

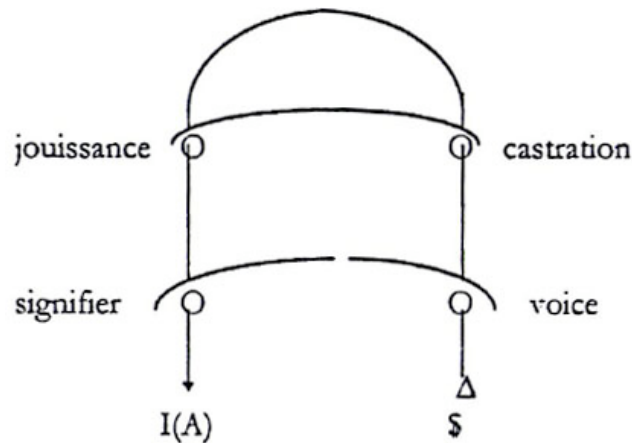
The dimension beyond the name-of-the-father present in the *jouissance* of the superego is linked to the problem of the feminine superego, or the superego of women (a question not to be confused with that of the maternal superego, even if they are connected).

Freud thought that women’s superego was deficient. This appears to be contradictory with the clinical evidence of the most rigorous, oppressive, ‘obscene and ferocious’ superego in many women. As J.-A. Miller points out, the problem of the feminine superego is only a masquerade of the more essential problem of feminine *jouissance*. The incomplete subjection of *jouissance* to the phallic order leads to the idea of a supposed “free” *jouissance*, not subjected to the law. For this reason Miller has proposed to write: “The superego, feminine”, in so far as the superego is disengaged from the phallic order ( $\Phi_0$ ).

Such imaginary effects have been clarified by the Lacanian theses on sexuation. The question of the feminine superego is inscribed in that chapter of Lacanian theory. The question of the maternal superego, although located in relation to the theses on sexuation as well, includes a particular reference to the failure of the paternal function, as described by Lacan in the seminar on the object relation.

The superego is an appeal to “a pure *jouissance*, [...] to non-castration”. It is the legacy of the father who enjoys, the father of Totem and Taboo, the father of the primal horde, not of the father “who knows or does not know, and who eventually prohibits.”

Applying the graphs of desire, Miller proposes to situate the functions of the superego in the area formed by the signifier, the voice, castration and *jouissance*:



Miller suggests that “we can locate the place of the superego in the vector that crosses the locus of the Other, and which constitutes the deep voice of the superego.”

In summary, these are the considerations that support the possible validity of retaining the reference to an archaic maternal superego:

1. The maternal superego is not to be considered as a separate agency, but as a function of the superego.

2. This function is structural and corresponds to that portion of the mother’s desire which is not subjected to the paternal metaphor. This residue of the mother’s desire is pre-Oedipal or archaic only in a structural sense; it does not correspond to any supposed developmental stage. It is defined retroactively as a “law of the mother” that escapes the Law established by the name-of-the-father.

3. This “law of the mother” is a superego function, in that it operates as an agency of prohibition which at the same time imposes the commandment of enjoying. It installs a “thrust towards the mother”.

4. This modality of functioning of the superego retains the traits of the superego incarnated by the father who enjoys; but it is incarnated by a maternal figure who enjoys.

5. This maternal figure who enjoys and punishes (and who enjoys the punishment) is one of the possible incarnations, or presentations, of the superego, which constitute a plurality and include the most bizarre forms, and whose inscription in the three registers must be distinguished and identified.

6. Certain particular vicissitudes of the Oedipal constellation (“atypical Oedipus” in Lacan’s terms) promote the incarnation of the superego functions by the maternal figure at a crucial moment of the Oedipal crisis. The clinical effects of such arrangement vary in accordance with the psychopathological structures and the



singularity of the cases; but there are typical features that can be identified.

7. The superego function incarnated by a maternal figure should not be reduced to an identification with the maternal Other or the maternal ideal. There is a distance between superego and ideal, the exigency of *jouissance* and the masochism induced by the superego must be distinguished from the function of the ideal.

8. The incarnations of the superego by maternal figures are subjected to the cultural and historical variations of *jouissance*, also reflected in the forms taken by symptoms. There are modern, and even post-modern, forms of the archaic maternal superego.

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Over the last few years I have worked in analysis with a number of analysands in whom the functions of the superego are incarnated by a maternal figure. Most of them are female; but some are male.

Manifest homosexuality is present in most of my cases of both sexes; but not exclusively. A common denominator, which belongs to the discontents of our culture, is the promotion of a maternal ideal, supposedly antiphallocratic, protective of women, encouraging alternative forms of *jouissance*, which ends up creating, in subjects as well in some institutions (where my analysands work), a new version of an autocratic, implacable superego agency, a kind of primal mother of a matriarchal mythical primal horde, with demands of *jouissance* similar to those that, for centuries, have been identified with the father who enjoys.

At least four, now classical, cases in the history of psychoanalysis with children show prominently the clinical effects of the archaic maternal superego (I am referring only to those cases where there is a clear and detailed account of the process, which are not numerous). They are Little Hans himself; Richard (cf. Melanie Klein's Narrative of a Child Analysis); the Piggie (Winnicott), and Robert, the Wolf Child (Rosine Lefort). The first three are cases of neurosis with phobias and hysterical inhibitions. The fourth is a case of paranoid psychosis.

In my own practice with children I have several examples. I shall briefly refer to only one of them, since it illustrates the problematic I have discussed very well.

When A. came to see me for the first time, at seven years of age, he was already a determined, resolute transvestite. But it was not because of that that his mother brought him to the consultation: he was becoming a nuisance at school by refusing to apply himself to most of the tasks demanded by his teachers. He worked in art classes (painting, modelling and sculpting), but only following his own plans, and at his own pace. It was acknowledged by everyone that he had great artistic talent, the mother told me, but also a complete aversion to all social rules and organised forms of work. Otherwise he was not antisocial: he liked everybody, although not everybody liked him.

The mother did not see that there was anything particularly wrong with the boy, and probably would never have brought him to a consultation had the school not insisted that A. needed help. The boy's mother argued that the talents of many children who

became great artists were not recognised by schools, who made them suffer by making them waste their time and effort studying matters largely or completely irrelevant to their artistic inclinations - a truth that 'conveniently' screened the more distressing truth of her son's symptoms, inhibitions and sexual perversion. He was not yet two, she said, and already showed a clear preference for girls' clothes, which his parents validated by acquiring them and letting him wear at home and sometimes in other places. A. was clearly dominated by his sister, one year *younger*, who in their-games chose and allocated the roles, controlled the toys and gave the orders. One day she broke into the session Leigh was having with me and yelled at me: "How dare you see him alone! What about *me*?"; to which A. said: "Don't worry, L.! You can stay!" Later on their father told me: "She should have been the boy, and he the girl!" Which was exactly as it was (A. and L. stand for names which, at least in Australia, are given to children of both sexes).

From the first session I noticed that both in his frequent absent-minded states and when he was anxious, A. put his hand on his penis, as if to protect it. I asked him what the matter was, that he seemed to need to hold his penis. He told me he had had an operation there. It then became apparent that he had the idea that his mother was after his penis, that she ruled his life, that his father was also subordinated to the mother's rule and that his best option, in order to save his penis, was to pretend to be a girl. His solution was not a phobic neurosis, but a transvestite perversion with symptomatic inhibitions, the latter representing his castration - the disavowed castration of his mother which his transvestism attempted to cover up.

In A.'s case, the archaic maternal superego was pathogenically effective in the severe constrictions imposed on all signs of masculinity and the promotion of a *jouissance* outside the phallic order, with disregard for the rules of this order. Although his actual family constellation promoted this state of affairs, it was clearly the agency of the archaic superego that imposed the decisive criteria for his choices.