On the madness of lecturing on gender: a psychoanalytic discussion
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This essay comments on the emotional difficulties psychoanalytic discussion introduces to conceptualising the poiesis of gender through its reconsideration of the valence of aggression and its development in psychical reality. It returns to the 1936 lectures on the emotional life of gender given by Melanie Klein and Joan Riviere to a public about to go to war. These psychoanalysts are known for representing ‘the mad side’ of gender and consider femininity and masculinity as lending emotional weight to the body and as one source for phantasy material that propels gender’s reach into symbolisation, conflicts, and intersubjectivity. Their views are brought into tension with Winnicott’s reconceptualisation of aggression in gender development. While historical questions on the relation between psychoanalytic theories of gender and the context of World War II are raised, Winnicott turns to a little war in the emotional life of gender to analyse traces of mental pain that its history leaves in its wake. He raises the new problem of the play between internal and external reality and how a one-sided take on gender as either masculine or feminine as the entire experience and goal of the body forecloses attempts to understand the self’s gender work as both internal conflict and intersubjectivity. Loyalty to one side, or the defence of splitting into good and bad, itself the condition for war, has as one of its roots gender polarity. The madness of lecturing on gender resides in conveying this problem. My contribution leans on psychoanalytic allegory: that a return to historical discussion of psychoanalysis on the problems of representations of gender may allow reflection on our world of war and create elbow room needed to reconceptualise the currency, difficulties, and emotional obstacles repeated in contemporary pedagogical efforts and research.

Keywords: psychoanalysis; gender; aggression; phantasy

Madness

When lecturing on the topic of gender, words lent to the body take on uncanny abundance: there are fights about essentialist claims; gaps between experience and theory; discussions of ‘gender trouble’; questions over the relations between nature and culture and between phantasy and reality; attempts to correct or defend stereotypical meanings through the splitting of gender into masculinity and femininity; discord over social and emotional meanings of terms such as gender, sex, sexuality, men, and women; and heated debate over the status and focus of social constructions, regulations, and resistance. There are hurt feelings and pedagogical failures. Additionally, when lecturing on how gender ought to be, the lecturer is apt to forget that ideas about gender are neither easily received nor viewed as a means for change, since gender involves an
intimate resistance and an inchoate refusal to involve oneself in a circus of meanings. We may find that the lecture founders on the bedrock of biology or takes cover in the defence of conscious meanings. All this raises the questions of the emotional world of gender, the reach of its psychical representatives, and their tendencies of splitting.

Psychoanalysis proposes in mental life the additional factor of internal aggression, or bodily drives, as a needed element for the constitution of gender and that gives rise to phantasies of gender that complicate problems of its symbolisation. Psychoanalysts risk the soundings of a peculiar madness when trying to represent the internal world and the object relations that propose an impressive dispersal of the unconscious history of gender. They play in the field of the personal and the impersonal, feeling their way into gender as a combine of feelings in search of constructions. They also propose a constitutive gap between the given and received meanings of gender.

One of the first attempts to put such theories to the general public occurred in 1936, when the London Institute of Psychoanalysis sponsored two public lectures given by Melanie Klein and Joan Riviere, announced as ‘The Emotional Life of Civilized Men and Women’. A year later they were published under the title ‘Love, Hate, and Reparation’, perhaps because the negativity of Riviere’s opening topic, ‘Hate, Greed, and Aggression’, seemed to sound the death knell. Indeed, Riviere worried what the audience would take to heart and concluded on that note:

An artificial segregation and discussion of the hate in emotional life, such as has been attempted here, is, you must remember, entirely schematic and is no representation of life as a whole. I hope that my presentation of it will not have proved depressing. It is of great importance that this side of our lives should be better understood. (1937, 52)

Then and now the delicate problem is whether, without having to take a side, we can begin to understand what is so one-sided, or rather so defended against and resisted, in attempts to represent the inside of gender. The danger is that this psychoanalytic orientation will propose and even act out both the madness of gender and the madness of trying to speak about it.

Riviere and Klein’s lectures introduced to a general public about to go to war the concealments and displacements of aggression in emotional life. And they placed the evolution, dynamics, and phantasies of femininity and masculinity there. In doing so they proposed what is most startling about our gender madness and our endless struggles to feel its reasons. They also gave to aggression a precocious chronology that is best called ‘phantasy’, an inchoate constellation of helplessness, drives, anxieties, defences, and wishes that form the internal world of object relations and carry on through projections, introjections, and identifications. While there are a great many ways to think about aggression and gender within the psychoanalytic field, Klein and Riviere were the first to present the force of what is most inevitable about the gendered body – somatic trauma, psychical frustration, and constitutive anxiety – and what is most abstract and creative about our style of being: epistemophilia, or the drive to know, to represent, and to symbolise. Along with the entanglements of love and hate, they added one more dimension to aggression: it is ironic in its self-protective postulates and foolhardy in its destructive tendencies. Aggression, they argued, is needed to create the distinction between reality and phantasy and the difference within gender. For Klein and Riviere, there is something impossibly unreal about aggression: it originates interiority, ordains every one of its functions, defences, and wishes, and reverberates throughout gender and its transference.2 There really isn’t anything civilised in conveying and receiving a kernel of neurosis in any knowledge since trying to know
plays with what is most uncivilised, or asocial, about emotional life: a tendency to collapse perception with the object.

The problem of symbolic equation, where internal affects collapse into an external object, is analysed in Jacqueline Rose’s (1993) contemporary lectures on Melanie Klein and war. Rose considered violence and femininity, war in the nursery, and the death drive. She, too, brought what is most uncivilised to our attention and tried to respond to the anxiety that the magnification of phantasy and its negativity in emotional life might exclude, rather than deepen, awareness into the inexplicable and always terrible hostility found in the social world. There is, after all, a large problem with trying to discuss gender. It has to do with the fact that the body conveys ‘being’ without the consolation of knowing in advance how the other will receive it. Rose asked that we consider the problematic of this limit in our theories: ‘what are the possible connections between an interrogation of problems of self-identification and sexuality in the unconscious and a field that can be called one of (conscious) knowledge and politics…?’ (1993, 236). I add another dimension. It has to do with trying to represent phantasy, since identification and sexuality lend erotic force to its meanings. This leads to the question, where, when speculating on the experience of gender, can our madness play?

Here, then, are some ideas on gender madness, the madness involved in conveying gender to the other, the madness of gender itself, and the madness of lecturing on gender. My psychoanalytic approach experiments with matters of emotional life that unexpectedly bother, agonise, propose, and surprise our sense of gender as given, as unity, and as cohesion, all idealisations that seem to make gender feel so one-sided. I’ll describe what Klein and Riviere make of gender and its aggression but will also press the limits of their understanding with Winnicott’s approach to gender and aggression. Winnicott was analysed by Riviere and early in his psychoanalytic training was supervised by Klein (Winnicott 1996b). His views will lead to a new paradox of gender madness: we seem to find gender, destroy it, and then create it. These emotional activities are how Winnicott defines gender. In Winnicott’s view, aggression in gender, however, feels as if it has been created before it can be found, and with this paradox a new understanding of destruction will emerge. Each of the three analysts – Klein, Riviere, and Winnicott – consider gender’s madness differently, even as they maintain the innateness of bodily drives and consider aggressive drives as a constitutive force in emotional and social development. On these matters, we need not take sides since intra-psyche and inter-psyche processes are two sides of the same coin. In fact, one intimate dilemma of gender is that if we feel we may only have or occupy one side, we find and create the condition for war.

I turn to the idea of gender madness for three reasons, knowing full well we cannot give reasons to our reasons. First, I have been struck by the strangeness of trying to explain something like why we have gender at all, let alone what it means to attempt to affect its imaginary. And, given the transference, or the ways we unconsciously exchange authority, love, and knowledge, I have also felt that it is difficult to know when we are *not* talking about gender. This strangeness can be found in our classrooms, our theories, our activism, and in clinical practice. We can say with some certainty that one cannot be talked into gender or out of it even though gender seems to be an odd combination of given and received ideas, social pressure, and cosmetic manipulation. In fact, quite often, the idea of having or being a gender seems to be akin to meeting what the analyst Wilfred Bion called, ‘thoughts that have no thinker’ (1993, 165). Gender is there before consent, it is in the minds of those who come
before us, and trying to think about gender brings us to what is most archaic in social and psychical life.

My second reason for focusing on gender madness emerges from a reconsideration of the admixture of feminism and its poststructural turn. We are used to the feminist ideal that the personal is political and now the poststructural one that both the political and the personal are historical and constructed and so resonate in the rubble of discourse. Along with taking the body through the linguistic turn we can add what Butler (1990) named, early on, ‘gender trouble’, or identity’s performance anxiety. Yet, I am not sure we have sorted out just what the historical, the constructed, or the performative means let alone thought through the tension Pitt (2003) has called ‘the play of the personal’. It may now be time to consider qualities of the personal that are deeply impressionable, impressive, and even excruciatingly impersonal and ahistorical. That is, there is something about gender that is also unconscious.

My third reason is really a hope that a notion of madness, sometimes also referred to as passion, may be a useful frame since gender is saturated with phantasies of one’s own body, the body one does not have, and by the transitional space of creative play. The idea of madness conveys this entire scramble. This may seem like a long way from Klein and Rivere’s lectures, or from Rose’s needed question, but really, these thinkers teach us that there is always a conflict with the creation, transmission, reception, and unconscious meaning of both personal and political knowledge. The personal, all maintain, is also unconscious.

Now these ideas of the phantasy and symbolic space of gender play havoc with the political and every concept that must be taken for granted for something like the political to be postulated. When Rose (1993) attempts to hold the personal and political together, she does so by way of their destructive force, with the interminable question, ‘Why war?’ She brings to this clash the fact that there are three wars at stake: the inner world, the external world, and how the body lives the relation between these realities. Rose illustrates the conflict of these registers when she analyses the well-documented British Psychoanalytical Society’s 1941–1945 Controversial Discussions between Melanie Klein and Anna Freud. This little war occurred between schools of thought and erupted in the midst of World War II. It concerned, among other things, whether psychoanalysis itself had to be one-sided and what happens to education in this collapse (Britzman 2003). The other controversy, still active today, concerns just how much the war imagery of psychoanalytic theory affects the psychoanalyst. Rose tells us that war is a terrible breakdown of knowledge and imagination, a foreclosure of the fact that as soon as knowledge becomes tied to the certainty of authority, both knowledge and imagination fail. But authority, as well, has a phantasy life that affects us all: in psychoanalysis it goes under the name of omnipotence, the drives, the super-ego, love and hate, the transference, guilt, and moral anxiety, and finds a home in our attitudes toward what is imagined as going right and wrong for gender.

In entering the personal – what we take too personally – Klein and Riviere’s public lectures have some odd work to do. They take us beyond the brink of experience, reason, consciousness, and memory. They begin with what feels to be an unsolvable conflict between love and hate, show how it leads to guilt over destroying the object, and then insist that from this negativity comes the work of gratitude, love, and reparation, the elements for thinking, relationality, representation, and recognition of difference. At times, their claims lean upon the madness of absolutism yet still they manage to propose that knowledge of the emotional world can never be absolute since it may only begin when one can admit its vulnerability to loss, breakdown, frustration,
and phantasy. Klein and Riviere suggest as well an unavoidable relation between feeling absolute certainty and defending against a primary helplessness. From all of this, they suppose, guilt and ambivalence allows knowledge of the world its transience, incompleteness, and fragility. There is an utter difficulty in learning from (as opposed to defending against) the travails of this emotional life.

Affect

Riviere thought of affects as both bodily passions and representations of the force of their history. She stayed with their negativity as her means for reaching into what is most disclaimed and disavowed about their vicissitudes and stunning outbursts. She also refused to separate affect from its roots in bodily distress. It is a counter-intuitive approach since in everyday parlance affect is considered as a product of consciousness. Riviere follows affect along its lines of the logic of psychical reality.

Riviere’s (1937) lecture ‘Hate, Greed, and Aggression’, kept aggression close to love and hate, and linked it to our capacity to fight for what we believe is right. She argued that while hate is allied with destruction, love, too, has its destructive underside: we do not give up the libidinal object easily, the object is so easily lost, and thus love indicates a constitutive dependency on the object, a tie that is also hated. In proposing our right to love and so our fight against its vulnerabilities, Riviere insisted that aggression is never so far away. She kept close to the fact that our emotional life is emotional. Yet this leaves us with bare bones tautology: that emotions cause emotions. It is probably better to admit that we become entangled in the roots of our emotional life since, to say the least, the roots themselves are insecure because someone always waters them.

In a clinical essay on bereavement, written after the Second World War, Riviere argued that when we try to get at these emotional roots, we still meet contemporary entanglements:

There is a tendency to experience events in later life in terms of earlier ones … [and] we tend to explain unhappy events in personal terms; that is to say, we attribute them to some personal cause, essentially to some wrong-doing (as with the child to whom the loss of a pleasure means that his parents are punishing him). (1991a, 215)

These two emotional rules, all having to do with personal cause – or, what we take too personally – are the foundation of Klein and Rivere’s lectures. There, the register of aggression oscillates between the sources, aims, and pressures of bodily drives and the Other’s care needed to become a subject. In a very special sense, the madness and creativity of our emotional world lean upon this drive dilemma, and aggression is both the hallmark of this tiny war and, paradoxically, a destruction needed for symbolisation. This emotional world conveys our uneven development: our lifetimes are spent piecing together and fraying again the innumerable threads of what Klein, in her lecture ‘Love, Guilt, and Reparation’, simply called ‘the emotional situation of the baby’ (1937, 58).

The lectures are extraordinary in candour, in their passionate language, in their audacious sense of love and hate, and in the ways in which they magnify the already disproportionate unreason of bodily anxiety and defence, which they call phantasies. They insist that what is most difficult for the human is coming to terms with the fact of dependency, so linked as it is to the ensuing anxiety of losing the beloved object.
which will be equated with being left. For Riviere and Klein, the fact of dependency is a frustration that then incurs the hatred of dependency, itself a part of this fact. We can now get to their punch line: our original dependency on the mother will have an afterlife in how men and women imagine—through fears of persecution, punishment, envy, and with love, guilt, and reparation—the advent and vicissitudes of femininity and masculinity.

Klein and Riviere tell an incredible story of the infancy of gender and sexuality as marked by a constitutive anxiety transferred through its surrogates: from the fact of dependency will come phantasies of destroying and being destroyed. Quite schematically, in Klein’s (1975) view, humans begin their gender madness with the femininity phase, organised by their identification with and envy of the breast. Dependency on the mother saturates the child’s phantasies of femininity, linking its meanings to fear of dependency, hostility toward this condition, and then desire to be separate. Separateness brings feelings of guilt and the awareness that the mother is a separate whole being. The infant loves and hates the same person. With the work of reparation a new meaning of separation and unity comes into being, and Klein proposed this work as the depressive position, an awareness of love’s fragility and concern for the other.

Unlike melancholia, where nothing seems to matter at all, the depressive position is the beginning of poignant thinking, the capacity for guilt, and development of concern for the other. It is also the beginning of an awareness of the difference and relation between the internal and external world and a way to symbolise absence into something more than destitution and abandonment. Before all of that, as we will soon see, Klein posits the paranoid schizoid position, where the world is split into a terrible war between good and bad and attack and retaliation, a mad scramble that creates the need to project whatever feels bad in the self into others and then defend against the other’s retaliation. This is what war feels like. There can be no real others since there is no meaning as to why the battle had to begin and since there is no meaning to the fact of dependency. In the psychological logic of emotions, dependency is just a bad thing to be defended against. Femininity may languish in this empty space and masculinity will imagine an escape. The tension is that Klein and Riviere locate this conflict within the body.

While Klein presents us with a bellicose tiny subject, it is not so apparent as to why the baby must be paranoid, or, why this war of love and hate? Indeed, in these lectures, the emotional situation of the baby reads like a miniature war theatre: from the beginning of life, the biting, kicking, crying, incontinent baby is always formulating and communicating its anxiety over absence and presence, equating absence with badness and presence with goodness. The baby is burning mad, particularly when she feels and must feel her utter dependency. The beginning is painful and devastating. In Riviere’s words:

If he feels emptiness and loneliness, an automatic reaction sets in, which may soon become uncontrollable and overwhelming, an aggressive rage which brings pain and explosive, burning, suffocating, choking bodily sensations; and these in turn cause further feelings of lack, pain and apprehension. The baby cannot distinguish between ‘me’ and ‘not-me’; his own sensations are his world, the world to him; so when he is cold, hungry or lonely there is no milk, no well-being or pleasure in the world – the valuable things in life have vanished. And when he is tortured with desire or anger, with uncontrollable, suffocating screaming, and painful, burning evacuations, the whole of his world is one of suffering; it is scalded, torn, and racked too … It is our first experience
of something like death, recognition of the non-existence of something, of an over-
whelming loss, both in ourselves and others, as it seems. And this experience brings an
awareness of love (in the form of desire), and recognition of dependence (in the form of
need), at the same moment as, and inextricably bound up with, feelings and uncontrolla-
able sensations of pain and threatened destruction within and without. (1937, 8–9)

No wonder Riviere worried about her audience’s feelings. So did John Rickman
(1937), whose preface to their book tries to warn readers what they are in for. The
conflicts described will be felt and then, perhaps, disclaimed by this very reason. In
one way, this was Riviere’s worry: that magnifications of hate mean we are liable to
lose all perspective. Our hope may take cover in depression. We may feel there is no
way out. These lectures do empower infancy to such an extent that it never seems to
go away. More so, they seem to be speaking for the baby who cannot yet speak, and
the mother’s voice is barely perceptible. Intellectual defences against their views also
follow: neither Klein nor Riviere could prove that the baby has and projects phantasy
into the other, that it made a story about its body and the other body without any
knowledge at all, and that there was something already driven, already psychological
about its mind. And, in a certain way, we cannot settle this account with any ease
because, as Riviere worried, an account of our emotional world must be one-sided
since so much depends upon what can never be remembered, since emotional life
filters our perceptions of the object, and since the exploration of one’s emotional
world takes its lead from phantasy and play, all of which are experiences most adults
hope to leave behind.

While Riviere worries about the audience’s feelings, Rickman turns to a plea for
feelings they may have but know nothing about. Rickman’s advice and warning
resides with the centrality of the unconscious in the lectures: remember, he writes, that
the unconscious is antithetical to reason, to time, and to contradiction. Consciousness
will be that struggle against its own unconscious representations. His advice concerns
the ways Riviere and Klein move seamlessly between the child and the adult, as if no
one can ever rid themselves of infantile despair, omnipotent thinking, and the talisman
principle of an eye for an eye that governs the unconscious. Rickman writes:

The fact is that the unconscious of the adult is actually not so very different from the
mind of the child; it must be recognized, therefore, that in a certain sense psychoanalysts
do attribute infantile thinking to grown-ups. (1937, vi)

Something about us does not grow up, and knowing this may return us to our oldest
defences. And yet, his warning is really a plea for the reader’s tolerance and open-
mindedness, even as he concludes by understating a special difficulty that affects
psychoanalysis as well: ‘Not a little misunderstanding of psycho-analysis is due to a
failure to realize that unconscious ways of thought and feeling are not only uncon-
scious but are grasped only with difficulty’ (Rickman 1937, v–vi).

Lest we begin to feel that psychoanalysis plunges us back into solipsism, or worse,
the paranoid schizoid position, notice the ways in which the external world matters to
what is being said. The psychoanalyst sees group psychology in each individual,
although there are strong disagreements as to how the subject is thought to repeat, with
great variation and without prior knowledge, their susceptibility to history, which
includes the unconscious emotional history of parents, culture, and nation. In speaking
about what the historical means in the psyche, André Green describes the historical as
akin to a dream,
a combination of what has happened, what has not happened, what could have happened, what has happened to someone else but not to me, what could not have happened ... [and] a statement that one would not have even dreamed of as a representation of what really happened. (2000a, 2–3)

The psychoanalyst is not immune from this dreamy history and indeed, through the transference, learns to lean upon her or his own inspired time (Britzman 2009). Unconscious life exhibits the odd paradox of being both formative and destructive, proposing the future of conflicts and serving as both their blind spot and their magnifying glass. So a large difficulty of learning the consequences of the historical, let alone trying to symbolise this, has to do with our capacity to play within the ever-shifting lines of the conscious and the unconscious, masculinity and femininity, and phantasy and reality.

**Clinical knowledge**

While Klein and Riviere’s lectures give us a sweeping account of development, it is useful to consider how clinical knowledge constructs and conveys these difficult passionate matters. It must be said that its knowledge is not authoritative but vulnerable to the imagination and the unconscious play between the analytic couple. Paradoxically, clinical knowledge is not so far away from how infants acquire their sense of the world. Such knowledge takes as its starting point the force of phantasy, anxiety, and desire within the intersubjective sphere. Constructions made in the clinic are one way to symbolise the relation between the inner and external world, even as their language may return us to what is most disclaimed about both: namely the gendered afterlife of our fact of dependency. This fact weaves its way into rigid notions of masculinity and femininity that do find confirmation in the external world, but not without having to first pass through our own anxiety over loss of love.

In her discussion of Melanie Klein, Juliet Mitchell (1998) suggests the difficulty the clinician undergoes when trying to understand the other and how the clinician herself is changed. This is because clinical knowledge is made from being good at identifying with what one observes in order to follow what is going on in something other than oneself and then describing it [, which] constitutes an intermediary level of conceptualization ... Klein identifies and describes what intuitive identification and clinical observation are about: areas of confusion, fusion, lack of boundaries, of communicating without the differential structures of speech. (Mitchell 1998, 29)

Mitchell’s depiction of Klein’s technique of projective identification gives us a primary definition of gender as ‘areas of confusion, fusion, lack of boundaries, [without] the differential structures of speech’ (1998, 29). The psychic life of gender is an admixture of masculinity and femininity and so expresses the conflicts between them. Our private gender is also an on-going commentary on how we feel others feel about our bodies and pleasures. Projective identification is our permit into this madness. The danger is that in the act of trying to know, knowledge, too, carries a kernel of paranoia made from defences against the inconceivable.

The clinical relation lives within and creates this emotional tension and, as we will soon see, constructs a mad world where, paradoxically, one can feel sane because emotional actions may take place symbolically. The clinic can be considered as a container, not so much in terms of unifying gender or even aligning it with adaptation
to reality, which would be an experience of compliance and actual aggression. Rather, the clinic provides a safe space where thinking can contain the play of the emotional life of gender and where phantasies of destruction can be sounded and symbolised. In this way the clinic contains and repeats the features of the psychical world, but from a new angle because there is the other (Green 2000b, 47).

Clinical material
One of D.W. Winnicott’s (1999) formulations of gender is found in his discussion on the origins of creativity, where he suggests a paradox within the transit between femininity and masculinity, between the analyst and the analysand, and between aggression and frustration. Whereas Klein and Riviere highlight the inner world of anxiety, Winnicott’s approach is through observing play as the potential space for symbolising the inner and external world (Abram 2008). He is famous for his critical quip, ‘there is no such thing as the baby’, a needed reminder to psychoanalysts that cultural life and the other create the capacity to be a baby whose right is to be as ruthless as it pleases. His idea of ruthlessness concerns the use of the object and this brings him to thoughts on aggression. Destruction, he believes, allows for creativity, provided that the other can stand the baby as a baby. Here is where the fact of dependency belongs to the other who can survive, without having to retaliate against the condition of being depended upon. In speaking about Winnicott’s contribution to psychoanalysis, Pontalis observes that his notion of creativity ‘is the condition for an exchange between inside and outside’ (1981, 140).

Winnicott understands the problem of love, hate, and aggression through the uses rather than the ontology of the object. Object use presupposes the other and a shared environment. Because there is no environment without tension and frustration, the child’s aggression is first and foremost a communication to the environment that must fail. Destruction must take place at two levels: the infant’s omnipotence and the environment’s omnipotence (Scarfone 2005). The paradox is that the environment must frustrate the child but not so much that the child loses hope in her or his own capacity to find and create the world that already exists. No aggression, Winnicott thought, was a sign of compliance, a giving up on the idea that playing with reality is an activity of the mind needed to release gender phantasy from the rigidity of the inner and outer world.

When reading Winnicott’s paper on creativity, which contains quite a mad narrative of the inner world of gender, I found myself asking, what kind of man is Winnicott? And so I went to Joyce McDougall’s lecture, ‘Donald Winnicott the Man: Reflections and Recollections’ (McDougall and Winnicott Clinic of Psychotherapy 2003). I suppose I was asking whether he, too, was a good enough mother. In a short vignette, McDougall asked Winnicott about his article called ‘Hate in the Counter-transference’. There, Winnicott (1992) suggested why mother must hate the baby, or hates the fact that her omnipotence is of no use. McDougall (2003) wondered how he managed to support deeply disturbed patients that attacked his interpretations and refused to take anything he offered.

Winnicott replied: ‘We must admit that it is always fatiguing to be a bad breast.’ He went on to explain that it was also very important that the bad breast analyst survived the attacks of the enraged infant within … I sometimes wondered if perhaps he very much wished to be loved by his patients. (2003, 35)
It really is quite mad to understand that within the bad breast lives an enraged infant. And yet, the wish to be loved originates our capacity for both primal projections and our interest in self-understanding.

Winnicott’s (1999) paper on the origin of creativity provides another sense of the difficulty of putting the question of gender to the analysand whose own questions are incredibly congealed. Indeed, he speaks of gender as hidden, as secret, and as repressed. And this leads Winnicott to write a very long sentence that indicates the slowness of psychoanalytic technique, followed by a short sentence on its limits:

While it is the patient who is all the time teaching the analyst, the analyst should be able to know, theoretically, about the matters that concern the deepest or most central features of personality, else he may fail to recognize and meet new demands on his understanding and technique when at long last the patient is able to bring deeply buried matters into the content of the transference, thereby affording opportunity for mutative interpretation. The analyst, by interpreting, shows how much and how little of the patient’s communication he is able to receive. (Winnicott 1999, 72)

Winnicott then describes his work with a married man of middle age who had had many experiences with therapy, including psychoanalysis, but was left with the feeling that something had been missed. In one session, Winnicott felt something new: the patient was speaking about his penis envy.

I said to him: ‘I am listening to a girl. I know perfectly well that you are a man but I am listening to a girl, and I am talking to a girl. I am telling this girl: “You are talking about penis envy.”’ (1999, 73)

Now Winnicott understood his interpretation as akin to playing with reality. His patient replied: ‘If I were to tell someone about this girl I would be called mad’ (1999, 73). But Winnicott went even further in this cross-identification when he then said to his patient: “It is not that you told this to anyone; it is I who see the girl and hear a girl talking, when actually there is a man on my couch. The mad person is myself” (1999, 74).

The interpretation introduces separateness: two people are in the same room but have different minds. It is at this point that the patient could then feel sane in a mad environment. This led to something deeper, for in the analytic work the patient felt (but without any proof) that his mother wished for a girl and could not see him as a boy. And in the strange logic of the unconscious, the man could not feel himself as a man. As for the cross-identification, Winnicott occupied the position of the patient’s mother who was mad enough to see a girl when there was a boy. However, a few days later the patient fell ill and Winnicott began to think of what he called, for lack of a better term, ‘the split off girl element in the male patient’ (1999, 77).

The paper on creativity gets stranger. Winnicott brings to the clinical material a brief note on Shakespeare’s Hamlet to illustrate gender dissociation. Even as he summarises the play, Winnicott cannot help giving Hamlet some stage directions, knowing full well that the character Hamlet would not be able to go to his own play. Hamlet’s question – ‘To be or not to be?’ gives Winnicott a way to say something about the play and the disorder between ‘being’ and ‘doing’. Even if Hamlet cannot decide whether he should or can exist, he is still only one person. Winnicott links ‘being’, or the capacity to know one’s own existence, as a consequence of identification with the mother. ‘Being’, or what he calls the girl element, is the condition needed for the baby
to enjoy fusing with the mother’s femininity. It is the precondition for any self. While ‘being’ comes before ‘doing’, ‘doing’ allows for separation. Winnicott links the actions of ‘doing’ to the boy element, or the masculine position. Separation, Winnicott notes, also contains a deep-seated envy of femininity. This leads to a further astounding claim, because both doing and being contain elements of aggression, albeit of a different nature. ‘It seems’, writes Winnicott, ‘that frustration belongs to satisfaction-seeking. To the experience of being belongs something else, not frustration, but maiming’ (1999, 81). Frustration is an inevitable consequence of searching for satisfaction. Maiming is the reaching for existence that involves pushing against objects and therefore incurs both an emotional injury that provides one’s place and the pleasure of feeling one’s place. In Winnicott’s view, the object survives this needed ruthlessness.

This formulation defied my expectation, which is to say, stereotypes that, however much I try to rid myself of them, seem to be reading me and so return as anxiety. I worried that Winnicott, or really, that I, might fall into a rhapsodic view of oceanic femininity, as a unifying force, while masculinity is relegated to discord. And if this is the separation, then only one element was aggressive, only one element valued. But it turns out that ‘being’ not only signifies being with someone – Winnicott’s good enough mother – but someone who survives the baby’s ruthless attempts at both unity and separation. These ruthless attempts to become a self are what Winnicott calls ‘maiming’. Maiming comes before frustration, which sounds a different chord of aggression than the one played by Klein and Riviere. Maiming is now tied to creativity, to pressing on the world and not to hate, which, for Winnicott, comes much later and is rooted in frustration. The infant will create, from the world presented, what is already there. For the time being, the infant may act as if it can be the author of the world, but will soon come to be disillusioned by the mother’s maiming, her being. Creating, finding, destroying, refining belong to gender activity.

Winnicott’s ideas about the poesis of gender bring a new understanding of the ripples of dependency, not only as an index of our profound helplessness, although we all begin there, but as a condition located on the borderline of being and doing, between the boy and girl element, and between the self and the other. He presents an emerging subject who finds and creates his or her being through maiming and doing, but without knowing it cannot be its own origin. Winnicott proposes this aggression, stemming from omnipotent thought, as gender’s playground and mad scene. At first, the good enough mother provides the infant the conditions to discover, create, find, destroy, and so use what already exists. This permissiveness belongs to the mother’s madness. To play with this reality, one must separate from reality. Such play involves a destruction of compliance, itself a reaction to cultural, social, and emotional impingement. The activity of this little destruction neither splits the self or the Other but rather is akin to what Winnicott names as ‘maiming’, a word we might use when conceptualising the transference field between the boy and girl element in any gender.

From Winnicott’s clinical example comes the idea that splitting and the hostility toward male and female elements within any gender will agonise the subject’s capacity for taking gender pleasure. He attributes these gendered elements as emerging from the human’s constitutional bisexuality, and so gender becomes a commentary on the polymorphous nature of desire and object use, and then associated with something that is not gender at all, but still leans upon bodily activity, namely the capacity to be ruthless in playing with reality. I think Winnicott is suggesting that the afterlife of gender constantly constructs and deconstructs our own otherness that must include what is
historical about the history of feeling the struggle to be a subject with other subjects. The paradox is that gender both registers the body as other and services the potential space with others. On this view, gender is always active and passive and signifies being and doing. Gender is found before it can be created. Yet the psychic cost of reducing gender to the encasements of biology, stereotype, or even knowledge is depression and rigidity, which translates into a defended organisation dedicated to hatred toward the self and the other, a wearing away in the faith that language can matter, and a giving up on the creative work of playing with reality. This is also the condition of war.

Lecture madness

In a lecture given to social workers, Winnicott offers a definition of illness: ‘Let me use my friend the late John Rickman’s definition: “Mental illness consists in not being able to find anyone who can stand you”’ (1996a, 218). His definition may have resonance for everyday life, but it can also be used to return us to the problem of giving lectures on gender. If our lectures implicitly split off masculinity and femininity and only take one side of gender, it is as if we are telling the other side, ‘no one can stand you’. We miss the opportunity to grapple with the relation of psychological significance to gender’s sounding and instead demand compliance with external reality, another condition for war. If, in our lectures, we reduce gender to behaviour and social attributes, we lose contact with the emotional situation of gender’s overabundance of meanings, conflicts, and disavowals. Lost as well is our capacity to link the war within to the contemporary wars in our own time.

Later in this lecture Winnicott relates madness to what is most ordinary about life, telling the social workers:

Think of casework as providing a human basket. Clients put all their eggs into one basket which is you … They take a risk, and first they must test you to see if you may be able to prove sensitive and reliable or whether you have it in you to repeat the traumatic experiences of their past. [Now, here is where the mad part comes.] In a sense you are a frying-pan, with the frying process played backwards, so that you really do unscramble the scrambled eggs. (1996a, 227)

It’s quite something to move behind the scenes of the madness of lecturing on gender. We risk our own madness in doing so. My logic throughout this discussion began with rehearsing the worries that a lecture might depress the audience. A psychoanalytic approach, however, begins with objections to the emotional world and considers the transfer of the personal into the political as one of its inevitable consequences. There was also a last plea that in lecturing on gender we learn to unscramble eggs, an activity that cannot really be accomplished. Nor can we be frying pan playing backward, though we can try to imagine what comes before the scramble of gender. Here again is the gender madness and perhaps a new worry that a lecture drives the audience mad, playing, as it must, in areas of fusion, confusion, maiming, and separation. Still, if we can tolerate these mad parts and become curious toward their scrambled play, I believe we can learn a great deal and not only about the madness of lecturing on our life in topic of gender. We may learn to speak the strange grammar of gender’s emotional logic, become curious with what love, hate, and aggression have to do with it, and perhaps play with this knowledge as ruthlessly as it is made. This would be the new madness: conceptualising gender as potential
space. The large question is whether education, too, can tolerate this indirection and so serve as gender’s playground.

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Notes
1. André Green takes on the old word of ‘madness’ this way: ‘Rather than characterize it as a disorder of reason, one should on the contrary stress the affective passionate element which modifies the subject’s relation to reality, electing a part or whole object, becoming more or less exclusively attached to it, reorganizing his perception of the world around it, and giving it a unique or irreplaceable aura by which the ego is captivated and alienated’ (1986, 223). Its model is ordered by love, and the use of the term ‘madness’ in my essay follows along Green’s lines of research.
2. The psychoanalytic idea of aggression is drawn from the Freudian view of the life and death drives and the sadomasochistic element in psychical life. It can be thought of as an unconscious wish to destroy the object, although the unconscious logic behind this wish takes great force from any experience of frustration given the human’s long maturation process, primal dependency, and radical need for care. Aggression, however, is a needed element for identification and creativity. For a discussion of aggression in cultural life, see Freud (2002).
3. While it is beyond the scope of this paper, Riviere (1991b) further develops the emotional force of splitting masculinity and femininity when she writes about femininity as in conflict with intellectual desire that tends to be considered a masculine possession and in phantasy, a diminishment of femininity. One outcome of this symbolic collapse, she argues, is an exaggerated femininity, or ‘a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and retribution feared from men’ (1991b, 91).

References