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**THE PATIENCE OF JOB: PSYCHOANALYTIC NOTES ON  
THE COUPLE'S CONFLICTUAL RELATIONSHIPS**

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The Chinese sage *Chuang-tzou* dreamt he was a butterfly, and on waking wondered whether he then had been a man dreaming, or might not now be a butterfly dreaming he was a man...

*(J. Campbell, Princeton  
University Press, 1974)*

This paper is based on clinical experiences and personal reflections on the role of the family and couples as containers of shared psychological elements.

I frequently observe a particular quality which is responsible for the emergence of conflictual elements within the interaction of couples who ask for psychological consultation that could eventually emerge into physical and psychological violence.

I would like to present some thoughts on this subject and on the concept of split-off male and female elements. I will be referring to the theoretical and clinical literature of D. W. Winnicott, Marion Milner's comments on the tables of William Blake, and to Milner's study of a particular psychological function.

In these works both Winnicott and Milner deal with interpersonal relationships that are analysed in terms of potential distribution of split-off elements and that, if strongly present, may be responsible for significant instability within a couple's relationship. This is a topic which is more commonly talked about nowadays than in the past.

Starting from the assumption of psychological bisexuality, they both assume the existence of a psychological function that has particular qualities, called "female element of the psyche," Milner and "pure female element," Winnicott (1971).

At this point, I would like to suggest a psychoanalytic understanding of the quality of the elements that are displaced within the couple. What I'm interested in proposing in this writing is a psychoanalytic reflection on the quality of the elements that are displaced within the couple and particularly on the psychological valence and function that the female element can have in the organization of a dyad or in a family.

Winnicott clarifies this particular quality of the relationship in the couple Hamlet and Ophelia.

He refers to the passage where Hamlet rejects Ophelia unexpectedly, denying in a traumatic way, their bond and promise, a fact that together with the murder of the father will drive the young girl crazy and will lead her to drowning herself.

"If the play is looked at in this way it seems possible to use Hamlet's altered attitude to Ophelia and his cruelty to her as a picture of his ruthless rejection of his own female element, now split off and handed over to her, with his unwelcome male element threatening to take over his whole personality. The cruelty to Ophelia can be a measure of

his reluctance to abandon his split-off female element" (Winnicott *ibid.* pg. 113).

I would like to comment on the terms Winnicott uses: female element...handed over...split-off.

Winnicott focuses on this dramatic passage of Shakespeare's drama, in a way that we could define as being sympathetic with an analytic attention that involves both characters: in this passage the apparent inevitability of events that overcome a young couple is expressed, where love breaks into pieces in a traumatic way thus leading to a tragic dimension that will bring both the protagonists to their deaths. He dwells on Hamlet's reluctance to totally abandon the split-off female element even if this does finally occur.

Following Winnicott's thought, he suggests that Hamlet's denial will give Ophelia an unbearable, mortal burden. The young woman's Ego will break down on the impact of the unexpected.

Ophelia's disorganized talking in the passage describing her madness seems to be the only holder of a Self language that is lost for both protagonists, *thus testifying to the breaking impact of perverting the truth* (Eiguer 1999).

In Winnicott's description, Hamlet's traumatic projections seem to burden Ophelia with parts of the Self that cannot be developed and that are connected with grief and loss. On the other hand, the young lady seems to have to suffer the consequence of a greater permeability to these aspects so brutally rejected. This issue will be the focus of my work.

At this moment, I would like to take a step backwards and come back to the totally split-off female element that Winnicott identifies in the protagonists' relationship in this drama.

He makes clear the role he recognizes for the function of the psychological female element and the nature of its specificity during the primary identification processes.

"...The pure female element relates to the breast (or to the mother) in the sense of the baby becoming the breast (or mother), in the sense that the object is the subject." (*ibid.* p.107).

According to Winnicott, the subjective object is related with the female element of the psyche, firstly with the mother's and infant's psyche. Without this condition, it wouldn't be possible for the beginning of a primary experience of "being" that prepares the individual for a relationship, a necessary basis for the early introjective processes that continues throughout one's life.

This primary element, that becoming entwined with the instinct drive, enables the beginning of the symbolic elaboration process. This is due to the emergence and the development of transitional phenomena. "In the growth of the human baby, as the ego begins to organize, this that I call the object relating of the pure female element establishes what is perhaps the simplest of all experiences, the experience of being." (ibid. p.108).

Marion Milner is the second author I would like to refer to, in order to illustrate two clearly different kinds of psychological functioning. Marion Milner chooses as an example a mythical couple and more specifically a biblical couple; she talks in fact about Job, his wife and their daughters in her interpretation of the fascinating tables engraved by W. Blake.<sup>1</sup> (Milner, 1987)

In this work I won't dwell further on Milner's comments on the contents of the engravings, thus leaving to the curiosity of the listeners the role of recalling the poet's fantastic and intense language, what I'm interested in here in fact is the dissertation Milner develops about the split-off elements in the couple.

In Milner's writing the narration of the biblical sufferings illustrated by Blake would be an hypertext to describe, as a dream or a free association, the latent content referring to the dissociation of elements confined in the unconscious.

Job is described as a good person, a successful patriarch, who has nevertheless to pay the price through his punishment for what he assigned to his wife (and their daughters) as the only bearers.

In contrast, Job's expiation would be the price paid by the patriarch for the denial of conditions excluded from his vigilant consciousness and totally confined in the unconscious or mainly dissociated. These states of the mind (that must be necessarily integrated through these tribulations) would regard conditions of the female primary experience that would remain in the female real experience (Job's wife and

daughters) but that normally would be eluded or split-off in the male experience and in the vigilant phase of the conscious Ego. These experiences would regard not only the original passivity but also the persistence of a relatively different way of experiencing and living the constitutive processes of bonding and separation in the two sexes, as we can perceive from Milner's comments on the illustrations of the tables.

Milner's research on Blake's tables implies the examination of an area of experience that seems to involve the aspects of object relationships in the two sexes in a different way, the psychosomatic front and the use of instinctual drive.

In particular, Milner focuses clearly on an area of psychological functioning defined as the "female phase", during which the differences between the object and the subject are softened, a phase that overlaps with wide spectrum attention, mainly unconscious, from which the area of shared and artistic creation is originated in both sexes.

Her field of study is mainly represented by the considerations on this particular quality of object relationship that develops through this specific area and which we can define as the "female element of the psyche". In my opinion, this is the most stimulating part of her analysis due to the hypothesis it leads to.

In one of her detailed comments on the tables she says that Blake suggests that this phase or state he calls "female" doesn't necessarily imply the borders containing the Self, and dividing it from the rest of the world, as if Blake meant that the ongoing process nullifies the established separation between the Self and the other, and the Self and the universe. Therefore, it seems that having acquired the sense of our own separate existence, it becomes necessary to nullify it, with a cyclical movement, in order to avoid psychological sterility.

In her writing, Milner clearly deals with the distinction of two different ways of functioning of the Ego, and, talking about the biblical couple, her attention is focused on the role of functional dissociations.<sup>2</sup>

Starting from the concept of psychological bisexuality as a basic assumption, the function Winnicott defined as "pure female element" is a theoretical abstraction and therefore it is conceived as having a close

relationship with the instinctual element he defined as “pure male element”.<sup>3</sup>

This function may be described as being responsible for both sexes of the processes of unconscious interaction that is connected to pre-verbal experiences and has its specific quality in the organization of the object relation.

On another occasion, we emphasized that this function, even though remaining mainly unconscious, is repressed to a greater extent and it is also partly subject to physiological dissociations in the male during psycho-sexual development, thus leading to a secondary organization of identity and sexual roles.

On the contrary, we may suppose that in the development of female identity, this same primary organization might partly remain unchanged in function of the acceptance of a certain amount of passivity and object permeability. This would be a required condition in the woman for procreation and for the later necessary identifications with her own children.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the polarity that is activity-passivity illustrated in Winnicott’s research on psychological bisexuality by the statement “the female element is, the male element does” (Winnicott, *ibid.*), B.Denzler effectively defines the function of the female and of the fantasies connected to the female for the organization of secondary sexuality. According to the author, if in the fantasies the pair (activity-passivity) is the central core of psychological sexuality, the differentiation between male and female derives from different elements, starting from the real, biological body, that has a great impact on the representation the subject makes of it.

In her opinion, “female” is not simply synonymous of passive, nor of passive-receptive, just as “male” is not equivalent to active. There are other qualities implied here, such as the fact of holding or being held. (Denzler, 2004)

Reminding us that sexuality is at the core of the unconscious, the author goes on saying that this female element is acquired through primary identification with a “female” person, a female influenced by its passive, wordless condition, is at the same time, more complex to be reconstructed, and, at the same time, repressed to a greater extent or even split-off.



As Eiguer reminds us, "The rejection of the female element expresses itself as fear of being *at the mercy of...*" (Eiguer 2005, pag. 133).

According to Denzler's thought, the male element, instead, is the active, penetrating, and visible dimension, it is reassuring, as the anxieties of loss it can be linked to appear later in time, they are less destroying, and more limited. Therefore, conflicts about masculinity would be less subjected to a deep repression." (Denzler, op.cit.).

Acknowledging Freud with a surprising abundance of cues that still nourish psychoanalytical research, it's still necessary to consider the fundamental role played by the fantasies regarding the presence-absence of the penis in the organization of psycho-sexual development (Green, 1990).

In psycho-sexual development, if the penis represents the critical element differentiating from the primary maternal object, in the female the psychological equivalent to vagina would be a mysterious common denominator, a "white or opaque area" (Giuffrida, 2007).

In my opinion, this would make the female condition more available both to organizing and alienating projections (Fainberg, 2006).

Therefore, due to its links with original dependence, the female dimension could more easily evoke disturbing fantasies that are connected with both passivity and the unsaturated, it might activate both primary and secondary anxieties regarding the vicissitudes of the loss of the object, and, at the same time, it might also promote a regressive fusion anxiety of indifferentiation.

The absence of the penis exists at a phantasmatical level, the constitutional "emptiness"; the female "Nullity" (Alizade, 2006). A phantasmatical element other than being secondary, which, with its inevitable reality of absence, may stimulate counter-phobic movements including severe dissociations.

Furthermore, the "nullity" manifests itself in a body cavity which has a potentially holding function, it is a body reality which is the basis of the psychological function of holding and relating, which, according to many authors, finds its conceptual dimension as an intrinsic quality of existence. Among the first of these authors were Lacan and even Winnicott.

From this shared experience of the origin, the human willingness towards interacting and also the need for it would arise, but would find itself up against narcissistic organization. From this initial condition, various aspects of phobic defence and of denial would have their origins at about the same moment in time, as well as violent projections that the female experience could be object to ( Chabert, 2003).

Female receptivity might therefore actively be searched for, or, in an opposite way, may even be feared, both in its erotic and maternal components and physiologically used or abused as a container of primary anxieties where elaboration is sometimes not possible. (In the same way, the male side would also have its phantasmatical correspondence in this). Contrarily, another significant consequence is extreme idealization which is heavily present in religious expression in our culture.

In the psychoanalytic research, female and primary erotism at a phantasmatical level are really close, even if they are not exactly the same. If maternal and primary are synonymous, female erotism would similarly be a bearer of both trespassing and diffusion elements of an "atopyc" sensuality and of erotism that is spread in "jussance" (Schaeffer, 2007).

Looking at the clinical experience, the possibility of being penetrated by the analyst's interpretations could be accredited to such a female element, both in accepting them and integrating them. In addition, it includes the counter-transference capacities that are closely connected with the concept of empathy in situations of fluctuating attention.

Actually, Winnicott's concept of "pure female" and Milner's concept of "female phase" of the functioning of the psyche are almost the same, and, in the main, define a quality of a subjective relationship where the borders of object and subject overlap. This represents the place of the shared creation of subjective object. Moreover, it is exactly this area that, starting from original fusion of different degrees, will be the lifelong prototype and indicator of the existence of an inter-subjective relationship. It is what Winnicott describes as "something in between".

*The experience of shared female within the couple would therefore pertain to three different levels:*



- *the first, relating to fantasies that are activated in both partners, referring to primary and secondary experiences;*
- *the second, more specifically concerning the function of the holding parts of the Self in the generative fantasy that is shared by the couple;*
- *the third level in women would concern an ineluctable condition of greater permeability to the tangle of reciprocal emotional content, and to an area that is prone to a larger identity overlap, for persistence (in relative terms) of a primary object relationship that is supported by psycho-sexual development.*

If the area of Winnicott's subjective object structures the inter-subjective relationship, the object use would shift the emphasis onto the dynamic of separation. However, we talk of dimensions coexisting in human relationships in the same way in which it is not possible to strictly separate that which constitutes the subjective intra-psychic heritage and which is implied in the inter-subjective relationship.

"Instead, we can talk of a pathology of the relationship when the movement between differentiated and undifferentiated parts is destabilized and the bonding structure collapses at that point in a symbiotic space within which a desire that is "other" or alien speaks instead of the subjects. It is here that the simple denial of separateness and diversity takes over (Thanopoulos, p. 76).

In the pathology of relationship there is no place for the experience of real intimacy (M. Khan, 1979). For this reason, in a certain sense, a balancing and a re-appropriative exchange of dissociated areas is no longer possible.

In contrast, in a couple, a continuing movement between identification with the partner and investing him/her as a separate object is possible. Intimacy, involving sexuality then becomes the principal vehicle of both attribution and relative re-appropriation of experiences and primary and secondary experiences of identification. The complex experience of couple dreams provides us with proof of this. <sup>5</sup>

To a different extent, and with a wide spectrum of individual portions, the roles and functions find their natural distribution in the sexual couple, through physiological dissociation. Without these functions, the

sexual roles and the sexual and parental attitudes will result as being indistinctly distributed and not well defined.

The affective bond, in a sexual relationship guarantees, but also at the same time, represents a way for the Self to re-appropriate the same dissociated elements, both primary and secondary that are recognizable, to a certain degree, in the other.

It is important, however, to remember that Freud himself offered the main foundations to the reflections on the particularity of the object choices, following the development of narcissism not only for what concerns the pathological dimension (Freud 1914).

## **Clinical cases**

### **Claudia and Maurizio**

They asked for consultation due to Claudia's evident depressive symptoms.

I chose to see the couple. They are both young, in their thirties, wealthy and at the beginning of the sessions, had been married for 5 years. No children. Claudia is an extremely beautiful woman, but really nervous, her look is shifty and she is often elegantly dressed in black.

Maurizio is a really handsome man, he is a successful manager who works full time in his family firm.

He agreed to his wife's request for help, but only because she insistently asked for it, but he had no intention at all of being involved in the therapeutic process. He was actually clearly annoyed by the "frailty" of his wife, by her panic attacks and by her sudden sufferings. He left (in a phobic manner) the session to his wife and waited for her outside the room. He didn't need any help. All my attempts at involving him in the therapeutic process, even if just for a period, were a failure.

Instead, despite Claudia's difficulties in trusting me (a collusive element of the couple), the need to have a place for herself prevailed, a place that would protect her from the closely controlling attitude of her partner who considered her a dependent woman, a woman scared of everything.

During a long period of psychotherapy, her depression decreased as well as did a great part of her phobic symptoms. During the therapy Claudia had 2 children, and these births removed her fears about the couple's infertility.

Later on, she would tell me that her husband had begun to notice a fear of flying and that even if he had been so self-confident before, he had then become nervous, irritable and perhaps depressed. One of the more frequent reasons for their arguing is that even if he doesn't share many occasions of intimacy with her, he doesn't understand her need of being with their 2 children, he would like to have her working longer hours with him, he is annoyed by the normal length of the breast feeding of the youngest baby. During the analysis we have to work hard to understand the complex determinants that make her think about reducing her breast size, which she considers too big for some unaccountable reason. The jealousy toward their children doesn't seem to be the only explanation of her husband's change of attitude, in fact he would even like to have more children as he is the third from last in a large family. He also gives her precious and incredible jewelery, thus testifying his love.

## **Stefano and Giulia**

The couple asked for my consultation due to their concerns about the gender identity of their pre-adolescent daughter. The child is a ten-year-old and refuses to wear dresses that look too feminine, such as skirts. The daughter's whole situation is not particularly critical, instead, it seemed to be a sign of difficulties regarding the parents.

During the psychotherapy various problematic areas arise in both parents and regard both their childhood and family situations that influenced the experience of sexuality and the organization of their gender identity, even though they are a sufficiently close and harmonious couple. Giulia seems to be more aware of the fact that the tragic suicide of Stefano's biological mother and his subsequent adoption is a traumatic element, that for Stefano is difficult to approach. It appears to be an obstacle for deeper affective communication in the couple. Even if the therapeutic sessions are useful for finding points of contact in common, past experiences, the husband seems to be less motivated to approach these problematic

areas. In fact, he is often away and delegates many aspects of their everyday life to his wife. She expresses a more evident discomfort, and after a really dramatic quarrel, she said, "My anger was like a twister...I took his wallet (containing his money and his documents, in short his identity)...and threw it at a crystal vase which had been a wedding gift...obviously I broke it, it disintegrated into pieces...My husband helped me repair it, it was really kind of him, but...I was extremely angry, it seemed to me it was Pandora's box, I had to hold so much, both my own and our things ..."

## **Giovanni and Cristina**

They have been married for 15 years, they are continually fighting as a consequence of their daughter's adolescence.

Their arguing is increasing at home which is mainly due to the huge difference of opinions about the way they think she should be educated. They are both successful in their professions, they both experience moments of severe personal discomfort. Cristina is having a bout of depression following one by her daughter, Giovanni shows his distress through intolerance. They don't seem to understand the inner reasons of their family conflict. They both had a psychoanalysis in the past, even if Cristina's was longer and more "orthodox".

As a consequence of the family crisis, they begin couple psychotherapy to help them to get back to communicating again without quarrelling in such a violent way. During the therapy, the extent of Giovanni's fear comes out and as does the extent to which he is disappointed by their daughter's suffering, similarly, how he tends to assume such an attitude of refusal and such a denial of his own needs of dependence which are only expressed through his intolerance for the temporary dependence of his daughter. He would like to see her as a "successful" girl, he lives the fear of non-success in a dramatic way he which he projectively activates in her. His feelings of suffering towards his daughter's adolescence show his defence against the re-emergence of his own needs for dependence that were denied him very early on in his adolescence. He had decided to go and live on his own when he was only sixteen as a consequence of conflict within his family. Now, the dependence of his wife and the daughter's need for

attention seem to activate trauma inside him which he cannot easily handle.

## **Marta and Riccardo**

They choose to begin couple psychotherapy because Marta is having bouts of depression. The psychotherapy shows the presence of collusive entanglement within the couple which is connected with really confusing organisation of past identity where roles and functions were almost completely distorted.

In the course of the analytic work, it appears that Riccardo, through his maternal behaviour that is both controlling and obsessive at the same time, seems to have to control the vital aspects of his wife with whom he strongly identifies. Their marriage implies the apparently paradoxical aspect of a relationship that is quite strong. It is for this reason that it's dramatically conflictual, as Riccardo's projections of his needs seem completely dissociated from his wife who is seen as a frail and dependent woman, in addition, the more vital aspects of their life seem to be flat in both of them.

## **Vittorio and Laura**

They were referred for psychotherapy due to Laura's experiencing depression, the second time in her life. It began after the birth of their second daughter. The first episode, followed by hospitalisation, happened before they met for the first time, it was the consequence of the breaking up of a prior relationship.

The therapist who referred the case had identified the husband, a successful engineer and affectively "secure" man who was sincerely affectionate towards his wife, as a possible resource for the development of the therapy. Vittorio also declared that he was willing to help his wife.

During the analytic work it actually came out that he had suffered from 2 temporary periods of depression, he had never told his wife about them and the episodes were only treated with drugs. The first episode was a consequence of the breaking up of a relationship, the second one to the increase in responsibilities in his job. Through one of her

dreams, Laura shows some progress in the therapy, as well as the new willingness of her husband to share emotions that were previously assigned to her within the dimension of her illness,

"We were in a new house, it was a big and beautiful, we were with our children...It was a square house, but in the background there was a door which closed off the entrance to another part of the house. My husband is interested in getting in with our daughters...It is a beautiful part, with antique furniture, as if it were an old part, but it's still not possible to open that door. We remained in the square part of the house, and wandered around..."

I think it's possible to see these split-off elements in all the couples I have mentioned. It is an area closely connected to a female holding function (and/or an infant or adolescent element) that may collapse and cause the arising of symptoms, in addition, there is the role played by the dissociations that become dysfunctional.

For this, I have reflected upon the reasons why female depression is represented, in proportional terms, the larger amount being in the economy both of a problematic family and of a conflictual couple. This reality is now beginning to be considered as clinical evidence by several psychoanalytic authors.

For the same reason, I have often wondered about the distribution of cross-identification that represents the structure of a couple's inner world, and furthermore, about the interpersonal relationships in general. I have also contemplated their function in the economy of human relationships.

These reflections triggered many questions that imply different levels, both at functional and representational levels. For example, regarding the hypothesis of a female function that is connected to unconscious representations: what does a woman symbolically represent in the male mind?

Furthermore, which determinants are involved in conflictual relationships, and which of the above contents can be connected to infant pathology within the family when just considering the symbolic closeness with the primary receptiveness that infancy represents in the parental unconscious?



Could we present the hypothesis that a woman, due to the female primary element that she bears, more often represents the primary instinctual Self of the male within the relationship?

Could this explain violent episodes at least in part, the short-circuit that occurs in relationships and the strong ambivalences and idealizations that are so often present in cultural and religious contexts?

Maybe we could suggest that the crisis in relationships arises from the sharp break at the point of shared creation of the other as subjective-object; a shared dimension where the me - not me elements coexist in relative overlapping. Pathology will place more regard on the primary vicissitudes of relationships, and in particular, it will concern the processes of radical dissociation.

In conflictual couples, the acting-outs happen one after the other with a strengthening of the borders, where permeability or interchange are no longer possible (or never have been present). In its place there is a way of functioning that could become dramatically projective, crystallizing the functions and forcing them toward a futureless repetitiveness.

Our efforts as therapists are oriented towards modifying these situations, where possible, and accepting the challenge of giving back sense and making such situations treatable, even in the most difficult of cases.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Blake, poet and engraver who lived in England between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

<sup>2</sup> Speaking about this, it's interesting to note that some authors are beginning to propose a psychological topic which includes this differentiation in functions (Gibeault 1993 quoted in Carau 2002 ).

<sup>3</sup> Winnicott's concept of pure female element is often subject for debate. In our opinion it is not in any way similar tout court to the concept of "good enough mother", nor to the one of erotic female, even if, as a theoretical abstraction, it involves them both. It is in a dialectic relationship with the concept of "pure male". Thus, from the beginning, a dynamic relationship begins between two instances of the

Self, the dimension of being and the one of instinct entwined together to make the beginning of the object relationship possible (Celotto, Laganopoulos, Punzo 2008).

<sup>4</sup> (Celotto- Punzo 2007)

<sup>5</sup> To the double dream of Albertine and Friedolin, testifying to the male acting out of an exploration of unconscious that finds a first form of elaboration in the wife's oniric representation (Nicolò2005), I would like to add the sadly known dream of Anna Karenina e Alexej Vronskij concerning a common Superegoic persecutory element in Tolstoj's novel. In another novel by this author, "La sonata a Kreutzer," dissociated elements are present. Freud (1921) had talked openly about the theme of split-off elements in the couple while he was exploring the mechanism involved in pathological jealousy.