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## 15: Enigmatic Sexuality.

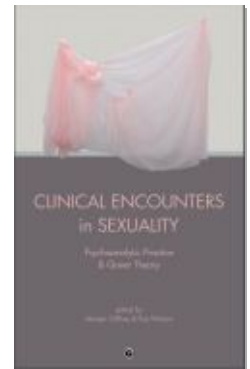
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## Enigmatic Sexuality

*Katrine Zeuthen and Judy Gammelgaard*

### Introduction

It was not without hesitation that we agreed to take part in the discussion initiated by the editors of this book. We are only very superficially acquainted with queer theory, and as clinical practitioners we are not quite at ease with postmodern and post-structuralist thinking, and thus we felt ourselves to be unfamiliar with the perspectives presented by those who are more well versed in this field.

In some ways our apprehension was confirmed when we read the texts, but at the same time our curiosity was piqued when we realized that psychoanalysis was being both used and challenged by deconstructive readings of the Freudian theory of sexuality. As we gradually familiarized ourselves with this line of thinking, we found several perspectives we wanted to address. Because of the limited space, our answers to the many interesting and provocative ideas are of course only preliminary. To this we want to add that we have confined ourselves to commenting on the ideas presented in this book and only occasionally on the ideas quoted in the book, many of which we are not familiar with.

The authors of this book take a postmodern, deconstructive approach, reading classical Freudian psychoanalysis from a certain critical perspective. Most of the authors follow the Lacanian and post-Lacanian return to Freud in an attempt to promote a

subversive and queer theory of sexuality. Lisa Downing makes this very explicit in her chapter, when she states that sexuality is the common theme of interest in psychoanalysis and queer theory. “In the former,” however, “it is a source of truth to be tapped; in the latter it is a perversion and power-laden lie to be exposed.”

This lie to be exposed — according to Lara Farina — is Freud’s concept of the Oedipus complex, the focal point of his theory of infantile polymorphous sexual development. Freud saw this concept, so the argument goes, as a “foundational structure of modern Western society (which) produces the opposition of gender and the experience of desire as lack.”

Later when we discuss Laplanche’s concept of “the sexual” we shall comment on the distinction between gender and sex which does not have the same bearing in most European languages where the two concepts tend to be typically expressed with the same word.

Furthermore, queer theorists challenge Freud’s developmental model of sexuality and not least his theory of perversion “as sexuality gone awry” (Downing). A prominent spokeswoman for this approach is Judith Butler, who combines feminist and queer theory to give substantial political and ideological weight to the concept of gender as performance rather than essential. Defined as performance, gender and sexuality “are a series of performances that habitually *do us* (implying that) we can turn around and do them back” (Downing). We can in other words “*transform* the meaning of gender by performing it self-consciously, playfully and with self-awareness rather than unconsciously and in ways that shore up the idea that gender emanates naturally from an essentially sexed subject” (Downing). We wholeheartedly support Butler and others in their political opposition to oppressive and ideological crusades against sexual minorities and find the deconstruction of what is often taken for granted enriching. However, we also see the shortcoming of this strategy when working with patients, whether homosexual or sexually perverted.

While we greatly appreciate a theory of sexuality and desire which escapes the binary concepts of male and female that haunt Western conceptualizations of gender, we want to underline that Freudian theory only concerns itself in a very limited way with gender, focusing rather on repressed, infantile sexuality. We shall return to this.

While reading through the chapters of different queer theoretical accounts of sexuality we found ourselves caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, we were genuinely attracted to the many poetic notions of a sexuality pointing to a desire, as Kathryn Bond Stockton puts it, “over the staid nature of pleasure.” Introducing the term “bliss” as one of the meanings of the Lacanian term *jouissance*, gives desire the touch of queering, which according to Farina endows it with the critical potential for “the dismantling of sexual norms.” More importantly it makes sexuality what Bond Stockton captures poetically as “sexy, intimate, scandalous, and bodily, while it’s evasive of capture and speech.” We would also willingly take part in the imagined party inspired by Plato’s *Symposium* where love, philosophy and intoxication are gathered in the picture of Socrates drunk in love. Farina hopefully transfers this picture to the analytical situation, wanting the analyst to be drunk in love, “rather than remain at a remove from the erotic object of analysis.” Analytic work could hardly take place if we weren’t intoxicated by love and philosophy.

However, we must respond to what Farina describes as the pessimism of psychoanalysis, when we are confronted with descriptions of what queer means for our understanding of sexuality. Queer is supposedly “wonderfully suggestive of a whole range of sexual possibilities” (Kuzniar, quoting Ellis Hanson) or according to Alexander Doty “a flexible space for expression of all aspects of non (anti, contra-) straight production and reception” (Kuzniar, quoting Doty). Maybe we are too serious or literal, but we sense in these and other attempts to delimit the essence of sexual queerness an idealization which contradicts our experiences of the pain and suffering which many patients — homosexual as well as heterosexual — associate with

coming to grips with the unconscious part of sexuality. Alice Kuzniar proposes that instead of understanding the homosexual, psychoanalytically speaking, as someone who has failed to adopt a heterosexual identity, we should instead see him or her as “dis-identif[ying] with heterosexuality and the coerciveness and predictability of the oedipal ego formation all while acknowledging the pains it produces.” From a clinical point of view, this sounds like a political and ideological aim that is not in accordance with psychoanalysis, which abstains from defining the aims of the cure except of course for the goal of relieving the patient’s pain.

We find ourselves on familiar ground with the suggestions of Lisa Downing, Will Stockton and Kathryn Bond Stockton. To overcome the false dichotomy between, for instance, “fluidity” and “fixation” as signifying the vicissitudes of drive, we need a theory, as Downing argues, that dissolves both and comes up with a more nuanced way of thinking about the concrete ways people find towards pleasure. When fluidity is used as an uncritical weapon against the psychoanalytical idea of fixation it may turn out to be just the other side of the coin rather than giving way for a dissolving of limiting boundaries.

We also need the kind of discussion we see in Will Stockton’s chapter of the book which critiques psychoanalysis for its a-historical conceptualization of sexuality. Using Lacan and Laplanche to critique Foucault, Stockton shows that “Foucault denies the ‘reality’ of the unconscious by focusing only on sexuality’s emergence as a discourse of human ‘truth.’” Thereby, he argues, we ignore that “sex [...] is not simply discourse [...], sex rather confounds the discourses of sexuality.”

Following Stockton we will focus the rest of our discussion on unconscious sexuality as the object of clinical and theoretical psychoanalytical investigation. After a brief clinical vignette we go on to discuss Laplanche’s reading of Freud’s concept of sexuality, supplementing it with a discussion of what Ruth Stein (1998, 2008) refers to as the excess, the poignant and the enigma of sexuality, taking a different perspective on Laplanche.

## Unconscious Sexuality

Anna sought analysis not because of her homosexuality but due to the difficulties she experienced in ordinary interpersonal relationships, including the give and take in her love life. The way to her sexual life had been very long and troublesome, from the moment she dimly realised that she was different from her girlfriends in that she could not take part in their budding interest in and orientation towards the opposite sex. Now, while Anna probably did not differ from others who had to fight their way through the constraints of normative gender roles and was painfully aware of the comprehensive constraints these norms and conventions imposed on her search for her own sexuality, this was not the main issue in the analytical situation where another aspect of her sexuality came up in the transference. Anna started analysis with what at first appeared as a strong erotic transference. The remarkable thing about these eroticized transference fantasies was how stubbornly she insisted on addressing them to the analyst, giving reasons for the analyst's countertransference questions like: "what is it, she wants from the analyst?" In sharp contrast to Anna's inhibitions against communicating about herself and sharing her thoughts and feelings with others including her analyst, she was remarkably open about her erotic fantasies, seemingly due to the pressure and vital importance of their meaning, which however, was not available to consciousness.

Anna grew up in a family where sexuality was non-existent in meaning, i.e., neither visible nor mentioned. Even though her mother cared for the physical needs of her small daughter, there was an absence of libidinal investment, corresponding to the image of the mother of the hysterical patient described so incisively by Christopher Bollas (2000). A distinct modesty and insecurity relating to her own sexuality prevented the mother from normal seduction and made it difficult for her daughter to find her way to the erotic playfulness of the body. Finding no answers to her infantile curiosity about the parental couple, Anna turned her investigation of sexuality inwards in an at-

tempt to find the object and aim of desire in fantasy. The result was a kind of overheating in the inside world that complicated genuine reciprocity and blocked her ability to communicate in words. Experiencing her desire as “too much” for the other to meet and feeling awkward when trying to decipher the other’s desire, Anna was and is often desperately unhappy when her attempts at seduction fail. Allowing herself to address the question of the other’s desire in a concrete way in analysis, Anna encountered the legitimacy of this kind of question for the first time.

Space does not allow us to go into greater detail about Anna. We want to illustrate that sexuality in the Freudian meaning of the term is deeply woven into the texture of mutuality; unlike gender, however, it is not assigned to the child in his or her upbringing but produced as a residue of what remains non-understood in the erotic communication. This leads us to Laplanche and to Stein’s concepts of the excess, the poignant and the enigma of sexuality.

### Otherness

In their attempts to explain how our sexual identity affects who we are, queer theorists tend to focus on society and its oppressive dualistic norms of sexuality that equate sexuality with gender. In our opinion the deconstructive strategy of queer theory focuses too one-sidedly on society when searching for answers to questions such as “who am I if I do not fit into these categories?” or “why do I feel queer?” In her essay, Kuzniar suggests the theory of Laplanche as a possible frame for finding “a language to reflect feelings of disjointedness.” We think that if the above-mentioned questions are to be addressed in a Laplanchean framework we must turn to the small child and its early relations with important caregivers. It seems that the queer focus has lost sight of the fact that society *is* these primary relations, which are cultural expansions of the biological womb. This focus is expressed most uncompromisingly by Leo Bersani whose work is cited by most of the contributors to this book.

Thus Bond Stockton refers to Bersani stating “that sex keeps one free from the ‘violence of relationships.’” In visualising sex as beyond object-choice and even personhood altogether, Tim Dean — quoted by Farina — follows the same line of thought with the aim of liberating the sexual from any kind of relationship. Laplanche begs to differ.

Laplanche’s theory (1989, 1997, 1999, 2002) expands and enriches the focus of queer theory by turning our attention to the early relation between child and adult and the development of meaning that takes place here. He does so without losing the deconstructive focus characteristic of queer theory, but also without dissolving the creation of meaning into powerful yet arbitrary constructions. When the adult gratifies the child’s needs, the child is confronted with the adult’s desire. The child is seduced by the adult other through its attempt to understand the desire when the adult addresses the child; an address full of meanings that are inaccessible and thus enigmatic to the child.

What Kuzniar calls “lack of intelligibility,” Laplanche refers to as an enigmatic message or signifier. There is a difference, we want to emphasize, between that which lacks intelligibility and that which presents itself as an enigma to be solved. Laplanche’s focus is thus the hidden and enigmatic signifier of the adult’s care-giving; a focus that embeds infantile sexuality in a real lived relation rather than surrounding it with “an aura of sexual mystery,” a signification that too easily leads to other and similar vague descriptions of sexuality as “being mystifying and unexplainable” (Kuzniar). Desire is directed towards what we lack, Farina asserts. We agree, but at the same time we want to point out that the specific experience of lack is always embedded in what we have experienced in our real and lived mother-child relation. The construction or translation of meaning is not arbitrary but has as its starting point the adult’s enigmatic signifier and thus the adult’s *otherness*, rather than sheer lack of intelligibility.

In her work on the poignant, the enigmatic, and the excessive, Ruth Stein (1998) emphasizes the child’s fundamental need for bodily care, thus making explicit that sexuality comes into



existence and develops in real and lived relations. First of all there is a body and with it bodily excitations and sensations that are overwhelming or *poignant* (263). Secondly there is the enigmatic object, the caretaker “whose otherness, transmitted via enigmatic, unconscious, seductive messages helps the infant’s psyche build itself through the infant’s efforts to ‘translate’ and fantasize about these messages” (2008, 47). And finally, that which cannot be given meaning is by Stein defined as excessive, in so far that “the mother’s enigmatic message vaguely attracts and excites the child, but it can only belatedly become symbolised” (1998, 263). Often this symbolization takes place not only very late but is also very painful, as Anna’s story reflects.

Anna’s relations to others and the meaning or lack of meaning she experiences in these relations are marked by the enigmatic address of the adult other as well as the adult other’s failure to answer Anna’s question: “what do you want from me and who am I in relation to your enigmatic address?” Stein’s concept of sexualization — i.e., the ability of the infant to deal with the painful gap between herself and the excessive adult — has been very useful in working with Anna, since it gives meaning to the powerful libidinal excitement which found a kind of solution in her sexual fantasies. Sexualization, thus understood, is a capacity, a positive achievement and not only a defensive manoeuvre. Admitting that we need to add to the concept of sexuality, inherited from Freud, some other dimensions to take into account the extraordinary impact of sexuality, Stein turns to queer theory and the work of Georges Bataille and, as she puts it, his idea that eroticism by “undoing us [...] is a device for carrying us beyond the toll of our separate individuality” (255). In Stein’s renewal of psychoanalytic writings on sexuality we find similarities between her approach and the many fresh perspectives expressed by the authors of this book. Thus we see a similarity between her concept of excess (2008) and the concept of bliss introduced by Bond Stockton. Stein, however, like Laplanche cannot envisage sexuality outside the relation between the subject and the other, even though it is both enigmatic and excessive.

We shall give a clinical account of how a child's unconscious sexuality can be seen as a result of the communication between mother and child, leaving the child with an excessive sexuality as a consequence of his attempt to respond to his mother's enigmatic messages.

### Tom, Sexuality and Gender

In the analytic work with the eight-year-old Tom it became evident that what at first appears to be a story of a boy whose sexual identity *as a boy* was prevented from developing by sexual abuse and by his mother's attempt to protect him, turns out instead to be about a child whose mother did not let him find his way to his own infantile sexual fantasies of what it means to be Tom in relation to his mother.

A male pre-school teacher that Tom had been very attached to had abused Tom anally, when Tom was six years old. His condition was worrisome as he suffered from chronic constipation, withdrew from his classmates, and stayed in his room when he was at home. His parents had been divorced since Tom was two and his relation to his mother was very close; their symbiosis had been reinforced by the abuse and his bad health. At the same time the mother was disgusted by the close relationship her son had had to the pre-school teacher as well as by the sexual abuse.

The mother protected her son by shutting out the outside world, thus preventing him from being in the world independently, but the world that obtained between mother and son was potentially threatening. To Tom, faeces were dangerous, symbolizing the inverted penis and penetrating him when he held it back. If he let it go, he feared it would penetrate his mother, yet holding it back kept him at a pre-genital stage. Thus faeces became identical with the penis, which mother and son conspired to ban from their relationship. Thus the mother was able to maintain a relation to her son that was without sexuality. Holding back the faeces and thus his development, however, prevented Tom from creating social relationships with children of his age.

First of all Tom's case is a nasty example of perverse seduction, which inflicts on the child a brutal reality that takes the place of the child's infantile fantasies. These infantile fantasies should have carried out the work of interpreting the enigmas given to the child through maternal seduction. Tom was forced to cling to his mother who seemed simultaneously both available in reality and inaccessible. The mother repeated the trauma he had suffered by binding him to their relation and denying him the right to give their relation meaning in fantasy. Tom missed the moment where he should have developed his infantile sexual fantasies as interplay between fantasy and reality, an interplay that should have separated him from the relation to his mother. Instead, he met his mother's enigmatic address, an approach that was already filled with significance, but a significance that was totally beyond the reach of Tom's translations. Thus, Tom could neither answer his mother nor give their relation a meaning of his own. Fantasy was not put to work but rather was locked by the mother's gaze. Tom's holding back of faeces as an inverted penis is not to be interpreted as a holding back of gender, but as a holding back of the mother's enigmatic address and her refusal to let him give their relation a meaning of his own. The faeces prevented Tom's creation of infantile sexual fantasies.

#### Continuing the Copernican Revolution

While we were reading the attempts of the authors of this book to seek out the queerness of psychoanalysis through the work of Lacanian and post-Lacanian analysts, we found an interesting article, written by Laplanche (2007), which takes us directly to the subject under consideration.

In this article, Laplanche presents an outline of how the triad of gender, sex and the sexual functions in the early history of the human being, suggesting that "the sexual" as such "is the unconscious residue of the repression/symbolization of gender by sex" (202). In other words, the sexual becomes the repressed through the societal or parental need to define gender as two-

fold by letting biology and genital difference assign gender a duality. With his interest in and talent for dissolving givens in our understanding of what it means to be human, Laplanche argues that “conceptual distinctions are valid not in themselves but for the conflictual potentialities they conceal” (202). Binary distinctions often hide a forbidden middle that does not automatically fit into the categories which we use and allow to define the world and its possible identities. Laplanche states that: “the question of sexual identity” is displaced “onto the question of gender identity” (202).

In a society with a “forbidden middle” or a lack of room for that which falls between false dichotomies we should focus on the relation between subject and object, and the difficulties and pain that the otherness of relating holds. How can we keep expanding the Copernican revolution, its unfinishedness, its openness? If Laplanche gives queer theory a hand we can keep our focus decentralized, that is to say that we can shift between the intersubjectivity of the child and the adult other, as well as between the intersubjectivity of subject and society. The Ptolemaism or self-centeredness of the human psyche is a conviction acquired by the psyche itself — as is that of society.

Queer theory opposes duality; first and foremost that which is founded on the argument that biology determines sexual identity. It argues that society leaves out categories that are queer — that is, not dualistic or defined by having or not having a penis, being or not being male — and tries to capture a world of identities not categorized in stigmatizing dualities and categories.

Such identities do not maintain dualities by falling inbetween them, but dissolve duality by pointing at the many ways of being that cannot be understood within the dualistic categories supposedly determined by biology. Queer theory points to the excess of sexuality by reminding us how very difficult it is to categorize sexuality in acceptably delineated dualistic definitions.

While queer theory helps us question the categories of sexual identity by turning to society, psychoanalytic theory and its clinical practice can help us understand how identity is embed-

ded in the relation between the child and the adult and how this decentralized subjectivity is a driving force of development that is facilitated in the relation; that is, the relation between child and adult as well as the relation between analyst and analysand. Psychoanalysis lets us focus on the enigmatic character of sexuality and helps us maintain that enigma as defined by that which cannot be categorized. Psychoanalysis can explain to us why sexuality or the sexual is not twofold or dualistic but rather plural or polymorph.

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