



Sons of Passionate Mothering

Rosemary Balsam M.D.

**SONS OF PASSIONATE
MOTHERING**

BY ROSEMARY M. BALSAM

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.....What makes the engine go? Desire, desire, desire. The longing for the dance stirs in the buried life. One season only, and it's done. So let the battered old willow thrash against the windowpanes and the house timbers creak.

Stanley Kunitz

Introduction:

"The longing for the dance stirs in the buried life. One season only, and it's done," mourns the former United States Poet Laureate Stanley Kunitz. This yearning and keening, (as in the lamentation at a Irish wake,) for the fullness of the life-span of the already dead, registering past desires both met and frustrated, seemed to fit right in with some further musings I have had about women and their lives, in particular ageing women's relationships to their adored sons.

Growing older has shifted some of my own previously firm views I about such women's mothering. When I was young, I did not realize how much some women feel so strongly that all passion and love is over when their young fly the nest, because their children alone — and not their husbands, friends or work — were their sole *raison d'être*, the apparent seat of all their passions and desires. When menopause enters their lives, as their Fall and Winter, and their children have begun to disperse like autumn leaves in the wind — this kind of mother loses her one fleeting season of warmth in the sun. Unlike the earth, a human maternal season, (if viewed that way), is over. It's done. Life never has the same verve. Their young sons, in particular, for some of them were their one chance to live with vigor, if vicariously. Their self-esteem as females *per se* was commonly so impossibly challenged by their own cultural and familial history, that a life-long imagined existence as a boy-child was indeed their paradise, their acme of perfection, their escape from the sorrow of being born destined to be an individual and a woman.

It took me a long time to credit the complexity and appreciate the complicated mixed effects that this avidly desirous mothering had upon the psyches of their sons. It was not through analyzing such mothers that I gained more insight and empathy, but from analyzing their reflections in the psyches of their sons. I believe that it was *this* particular female state of mind that Freud mistook as *the* universal condition of women.

“The great question that has never been answered, and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is ‘What does a woman want?’” Freud disclosed to Marie Bonaparte in 1925, (according to her), about 10 weeks after she began analysis with him (2001, p 84). The timing incidentally is interesting. This 1924-26 period was when, according to Zinnia Fliegel’s 1973 paper, Freud was feeling particularly needled by Karen Horney’s beginning publications that so sensibly challenged his boy-like view of adult females. This infamous pained cry came from the depths of hurt puzzlement amid the maze of the “dark continent” of despair; for Freud, albeit fascinated by the subject matter, was doomed by stumbling into echo chambers that repeated the same underlying sentiment as Professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady*: “Why can’t a woman be more like a man?”

Freud and his all-male group as early as Oct of 1910 in the Wednesday Society had a session on the emotional dangers of being the favorite or the only child, which included mention of the mother’s favorite boy-child. Isodore Sadger reported that such sons were exposed by the overheated relationship to preconditions for “psychic impotence...homosexuality...and dementia praecox...” (Minutes p. 5) and

many developmental lags. Of course, this was also quite a touchy and ambivalent topic among the group: so that when Margarete Hilferding, a family MD and the first woman accepted into the Vienna Society, suggested in 1912 that the first-born child was often actually *hated* by the mother, the group was put on edge. Paul Federn burst out that she was in “denial of mother love for the first child” (p.122). It is well known that Freud’s mother doted on him and referred to him as “Mein goldener Sigi”, and that he was vastly privileged over his girl siblings. And in 1917 he wrote glowingly: “If a man has been his mother’s undisputed darling he retains throughout life the triumphant feeling, the confidence in success, which not seldom brings actual success along with it.”¹ This paper is a further elaboration on these themes of either benefit or damage that accrue to such sons that, depending on a given previous author, seem slanted in one direction or the other. I will try to trace a dynamic path revealed in some of these sons’ adult psychoanalyses — and thus in their psychic development *continued into adult* life — that can, I believe, accommodate both the advantage and the problems.

¹ A new chatty, practical and dynamically oriented book called: “The Favorite Child” just dropped into my mail box as I write. It is full of the author’s take on pop cultural figures and her client examples, by a psychotherapist called Ellen Libby. I was curious what she’d say on this topic. “‘Oedipal’ is the Freudian term” she says, while “‘Mama’s boy’ is its street spin.” (209). (I must say I never quite thought of it that way before!) She particularly stresses this only as a negative state due to an absent father. She says, “A mother’s favorite son can develop an overinflated sense of himself in the world. He can grow up believing that if he can replace his father as his mother’s intimate, he can successfully take on any challenge, getting anything he wants. The son feels enormously entitled and develops a false sense of power.” (p 210).

The Mother's Body Ego and Boy-Adoration.

This is my understanding of how so-called “penis envy” works in this particular situation. Only a biological female has the actual experience of housing another person right inside her body (barring science fiction about the future of male body). Fantasy surely stretches that far for anyone — male or female — but the *actuality* of a physical experience of a female body qua female as a ground base of existence, I believe renders a different quality to her fantasies, as opposed to a male’s elaborated fantasy of imaginative identification with a female object of attachment, such as might be the case of a Drag Queen. The same applies to female fantasies of possessing a personal penis. A girl not having grown up with the experience of erections, for example with the *shame* encountered as well as the *pride*, a female who has a strong penis-acquisitive desire therefore needs to fill in the lack of body experience with a great deal of subjective imagination regarding her own female biology. Her thrilled imagination of owning a penis never includes vicissitudes! A mother whose prehistory has disposed her to long for a penis while growing up, has a new lively opportunity in pregnancy to psychically merge with a proud and joyful possession of maleness that is actually created from right inside her own womb. I believe that this concrete bodily experience lends a more reified caste to an envy of a fantasy penis that she now treats as her rightful possession. The baby son that was literally attached to the mother’s uterine wall, after delivery continues into the cradle of their joint interactive psychic register. Growth of his individuality becomes therefore a special problem for both this mother and the son.

My personal complications with this issue:

Originally when I read Freud's view about how a woman's greatest desire was to give birth to a son, I was rather shocked and thought him ridiculous. Being originally a British biologically oriented psychiatrist, I read this for the first time in my early 30s when I already had a baby daughter and I first was a candidate in the '70s in New Haven. Immediately it was crystal clear to me that one's family culture was utterly fundamental to whatever truisms one pronounced, such as this. My upbringing was quite different from Sigmund Freud's as you might imagine. My maternal grandmother, a beautiful silver-haired, lazy, indulgent creature who appetitively read romantic novels and loved her "wee hot toddy" on a cold winter's evening, had had 8 children to a husband who worshipped her from the moment he pulled her long blonde braid in County Cavan at 16 years old and was greeted with a grin. She spoiled all her grandchildren, was famous in my family and is regularly quoted on the subject of baby girls to this day. My cousin's daughter, for example, just gave birth to a third daughter earlier this month. "What a relief!" the family all said. If someone delivered a boy baby, Granny would crush the new mother by saying dolefully, "How did you miss?" Or again, "As long as you have a wee girl you'll never want for a shirt on your back!" I must say that I was always aware of being proud to be a part of this powerfully bonded matriarchy that this woman helped beget, rich as it is with women who have quite a high regard for themselves as females, Who knows why she gave off these fateful intergenerational messages? She indeed ended up self-served, a beloved and pampered invalid who lived with plenty of shirts on her back into her advanced 90s, being patiently tended by her oldest

spinster daughter whose task had been scripted for her long ago. Such experiences having influenced my thinking about analytic theory, made it plain to me that Freud was speaking of sexed gender in his own culture and his own era.² Adding to my sense of the fluidity of our understandings due to the limits of our own respective cultures, I add a theoretical and clinical fascination with processes of internalization in which I was steeped by many years of supervision with Hans Loewald.

Particular Mothers of Particular Sons:

In my early career, biased by my own cultural reasons, I therefore viewed the mothers who were besotted with their young sons as a rather pathological lot. Reading the separation/individuation literature also, I was sure their male offspring could not thrive emotionally coming from such a nest. Indeed many of these women did and do indeed suffer agonizingly from a penis envy born of their family cultures that had denigrated women and condemned them and their girls as being less desirable to society than men. IF such women gave birth to sons, they were treated with more respect in the family than if they “only” had daughters. We still globally and locally find such women and family cultural patterns in 2010.

As I have grown more seasoned, I am no longer so sure that these overpoweringly strong mother/son bonds need necessarily yield a powerless damaged sort of man, who is merely the tool of his mother’s desires. My focus here will be on the quality of transference to me as a woman analyst that allowed me to

² As a mature analyst, I was pleased therefore that Nancy Chodorow included me as one of the “cultural ego psychologists” in her 2004 article on the contemporary American Independent Tradition.

build a more complex portrait of how the inner lives of these men were affected by their sense of being adored, and (imaginatively) compellingly desired by mother/analyst in their transferences. I was surprised that the result of these analyses often revealed (as Freud noted) men with robust, healthy durable self-regard and exceptional accomplishments whose main worldly characteristic could be described as being both effective and independent minded. However, in intimacy with women partners (or if gay, with male dominant partners)³ though looking “big” superficially in their homes, they often behaved in overly compliant ways, haplessly unconsciously allowing themselves to be diminished in domestic life. They indeed tried to build their own heterosexual intimacies out of the stuff of maternal fantasy — to reflect a wished-for fulfillment of an uninterrupted sense of worship from their controlling possessive and devoted mothers, now displaced to their wives. Mother herself could never be talked to directly. Palliation, seduction and soothing was the son’s specialty in his dealings with her. In turn, and in gratitude from the mothers, the sons would elicit worshipful blind love and endless indulgence. They were in no doubt precisely what this special Goddess in their inner pantheon wanted of them in order to fulfill *herself*. She had conveyed this with great clarity. She frequently needed them to succeed in every arena in which she felt second-class. For example, each time one of these men reported yet another business success to his housewife, housebound mother, his “dearest” — akin to the mother of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *Little Lord Fauntleroy* — she’d say seductively softly, “And what comes next up the ladder after this, Cedric?” My patient knew very well that she meant him

³ A different kind of complication for another day.

to make the Fortune 500 before he turned 40. “Of course she’d deny it were you to ask her. She’d say (imitating a falsetto saccharin tone) ‘It’s only what my Cedric wants for himself — and what Cedric wants Cedric gets — you’ll see.’” Freud, like Cedric, likely knew exactly how mutually to feed his mother’s desire and his own, to fulfill her. I have wondered if his despair, disappointment and puzzlement in the inner life of women *other* than his mother, came perhaps from imagining that *all* women must want from him exactly whatever his own mother wanted. My patients’ judgments about women were certainly flawed in this way.

Clinical instance:

Mr. F, a CEO of a successful company, was in his 40s when I first saw him. His complaint, briefly, was that he was unable to get married, as he had troubles committing himself to his girlfriend of many years. His problem was immediately obvious in our first interchange. He replied to my phone call return with, “ I hope you’re having a nice day doc! “ to which I said sharply, being in between patients, “ Sorry, I really don’t want to buy anything. This is not a good time!” “No, no” he protested, “ You’re very astute. I actually *am* in sales — but I wanted to arrange an appointment to talk about my troubles!” You can guess how I felt!!

The first level that we worked on in analysis was how indirectly he expressed himself to females who were emotionally involved with him. He believed firmly that he had an accurate read on all their psyches. I gradually helped him see, through interpreting his maternal transference to me, that his tunnel vision about women was actually one very particular familiar psychic pattern that was repeated over and

over. One of its features was that the woman was too delicate to bear the truth. He spent much effort feeding her imagined narcissism and smoothing her down. She in turn appreciated toying with his elaborate disguises and rejected any inkling of confrontation with unpleasant facts. This interchange was an art form of baroque manners to protect this female pained psyche from itself. In return the bargain was that she glowed approval.

Later, in speaking directly to me as to a peer man, it turned out that his girlfriend was a woman whom he despised as she was beneath him, and not to his mother's taste. He was ashamed of her. Their sex life was minimal but he felt trapped. He would go off to a conference, usually look for a younger woman to have a brief sexual fling, and come home to find his ever-loyal girlfriend in a pool of tears. "Didn't she suspect your infidelity?" I asked. "Oh no, not at all. I tell this story to let you know just how utterly dependent she is on me. She just weeps at me when I go away and says, "Why don't you marry me yet? What have I done wrong? We've been together 5 years and we're not getting younger." Allegedly she had refused the patient's offer to go to couple therapy. She was, according to the patient, "A doormat." This densely wrought sadomasochistic bond served their mutual needs to remain static. F became aware that he was misreading his mother's blind worship into this girlfriend, and simultaneously he acknowledged that he was punishing her for not being a replica of mother. "Perhaps mother is the only woman I really want?" he'd say in nervous jest. In the transference, similar echoes of going along pleasantly with something I suggested would reveal later that he secretly would think or act confidently on his private opinion, if he did not agree. Anything but confront me

with a direct contradiction. His myriad ways of keeping me in the dark involved witty and charming and disarming engagement which I often enjoyed and was also the route for me to gain a sense of how he and mother interacted. My delay in interpretation allowed me some insight into the pleasantness of this mutual dance of seduction. I think that in my younger days I might have been so committed to interpreting the opposition underlying F's superficial compliance and flattery, that I would have quickly interpreted this opposition as a clear fear of being swallowed up by me as possessive mother, and a fear of her demands to brook no disagreements.

As an older analyst, though of course this fear of such a mother could be marked, I eventually became aware that he himself was quite aware of himself in this "Prince Charming" role. The question for me became then, what element is *unconscious* here for this man? He also talked to me in the margins of sessions as he rose or lay down on the couch as a more respected male peer.

His professional work was excellent, and *there* he showed wisdom, discrimination and caring both towards himself and others in running his business. I thus began to build a picture of his ability to operate with autonomy and confidence, and in taking risks. He would often joke that he felt he could get away with them fruitfully because when all was said and done — echoing Freud's confidence — he knew that at least his *mother* loved him! I suspected though that this was only a part of the story.

Then he launched into the internet for dates, usually for one night stands. He said that having such a wonderful and calm analyst like me allowed him to have an

adolescence his parents never allowed. He was setting me up not to be critical in any way.

Here is some live interaction from the analysis at this point two years into the 4times/week work:

F was arguing with me about my matter-of-fact statement that he seemed to be inviting STDs or AIDS by asking most of these one-night-stand women in coy tones if they would “do it” without a condom. On this occasion, he argued that he was only doing foreplay. His behavior seemed very rash to me, and I felt annoyed at him, and over-identified and protective of each of them. He hated my pointing this out. He was furious for the first time with me, and called me an “interfering bitch”. He felt I’d offended his intelligence. “It’s not life and death these days — they’ve all kinds of treatments.” He cried, defying me. “Why would I risk this anyway? Tell me even one single time that I’ve EVER risked getting STDs or AIDS? Absolutely not. This is so unfair that you would think that of me. Give me one good reason why I’d do that kind of damage to myself!” he taunted.

Not my finest hour... I rose further to the bait, partially based on a clumsy analogy with my own feeling about what was aroused in me. “Because then you’d justify “confessing” to your mother all about your sex life, get rid of your guilt and the hard struggle to be separate, and get her to be alarmed and over-attentive and taking care of you again”. He was silenced. He was not expecting this. I felt I’d given him a low blow.

Next day he came in blazing, having told “everyone” and gotten much support at the office that I was utterly unfair about “accusing” him of wanting to have his mother look after him. He angrily said that I’d always been against his sexual pleasures, his internet dating for one night stands with no strings attached, and that I thought everyone who went on that web site was nothing but a dangerous john or whore, whereas his latest would-be-lover was shy and gentle and might prove a perfect partner. “You see” he argued, “I know I CAN find nice girls on this site.”

I was calmer by that time having gotten a few rocks off at him, and more able to listen to what he was telling me and wanted me to know ...I tuned in finally to him re-explaining himself for the umpteenth time as to how he was in NO danger at all in the sex scene described above. To show me how I’d made far too much of it he offered brightly; “To help you understand...it would be as if *you* were naked in bed with *your* lover, and he had his penis just teasing your clitoris and he was just playing it in and out of our introitus and around your labia...and you said (imitating me in the identical saccharin falsetto tone he used for his mother,) “UMM. *Without* a condom?” ...you can see now very well that it would be just you testing him to *see* if he’d do it without a condom. It would be your way of saying, “*Not* without a condom”. That’s what I conveyed to her, and you just jumped to conclusions that I was stupid enough to take risks or expose her to risks.”

I said, being quite confounded by all the layers of self-deceit, “A kind of confusing message though, don’t you think when you say it out loud?”

He shot back instantly, “I guess she didn’t say, ‘Hey dude, what the hell are you doing!’ if that’s what you mean.” ...

That was EXACTLY what I meant. I didn’t need to say anything more. I was grateful for his new demonstration of conscious awareness, and for this moment I felt he was in charge again – in charge of his own body...he was also able to imagine the mind of the other person, and I felt released into a more comfortable separateness from some kind of sadomasochistic wrestling match where I had felt alarmed for his welfare and the consequences of his sexual exploits. It is not that I did not have a point about his seeking maternal merger once more, but it was that the timing of my comment that was off and dictated by my annoyance at and anxiety about his capacity to take care of himself sexually.

His desires and mine were multiplex in this sequence, but he showed me here that the less conscious but mature ego functioning was the ability to imagine his girlfriend’s outrage at his sexual behavior. *This side of him was the one that was capable of emotional directness and linked to his CEO capabilities. I felt that this transferential shift showed a bridge to the integration of the two sides of his functioning.*

F showed here that he was *not* so easily swayed by what he imagined was my “maternal” objection to him having sex with women. He also, notably, in a thinly disguised way had imagined making love to me in this session. Once a genuine Oedipal pattern began to emerge, his father at last entered the previously dyadic stage.

Unconscious internalization of the Father

Father had been a blustery, angry presence, whom the boy and his mother often ganged up against with fierce denigration. It seemed mother was frightened of permitting a relationship with father as she feared she'd be superseded or left out. It was her way to adore the preadolescent, innocent, more *asexual* apparently compliant charming "good" boy in young F...and it was this version of himself that seemed so fused as the apple of mother's eye. However, almost in secret, this boy grew also in a repudiated identification of the father. His vigor, his ability to stand up for himself, his ultimate leadership positions in business were all not just to please mother "dearest", but in association to his unconscious admiration for father. At one level he thought himself mother's better lover — but as he was rejected as the son, he became stalled — partially looking for a woman of his own, trying to share his youthful sexual escapades with his titillated mother both to elicit her admiration but also defying mother's preference to keep him childlike. He simultaneously inhibited himself by pursuing unsuitable women; to be thoroughly successful in his love quest would be to open himself up to her denigration, as had happened with her rejection of father. For F to develop autonomously sexually ran a danger of spoiling a gratifying latency merger with mother.

Conclusion

The point of this analytic story of this boy/man and his besotted mother was that in contrast to my earlier certainties that a child would be smothered and squelched in all channels of ability to think for himself or his burgeoning masculinity or the sense of his own agency, it seems that if the adult man exhibits some success

in the outside world or some world other than mother, there may well exist a covert, hidden and confident identity that may be split off from female intimacy, and associated with a repudiated father, and that can be recovered in analysis. That identity has potential to mature to manhood. It may have become split off in favor of the loyalty to a mother who is wildly devoted to her “one and only”, her beloved son, usually her last hope of staying in a maternal summer. She loves best what I presume she once wanted to be, a boy – not a man – but a beautiful young latency boy with attenuated sexual desires, a boy with his whole future before him. Both mother and son need never grow old.

Sadger spoke of it back in 1910 in old Vienna: “...the ‘beloveds’ of their parents – especially the parent of the opposite sex, a circumstance to which boys in particular are exposed... Such parents often try to prolong the period of childhood by all kinds of artificial devices, and indulge to excess the child’s... needs” (p. 4). Hence the sad sense that when the boy’s childhood naturally comes to an end, the mother can feel useless and old, as if “*the battered old willow thrash[es] against the windowpanes and the house timbers creak.*”

The passionate mother’s desire for this latency pure boy-child in her son — so manifestly unlike the repudiated adult sexual father — is doomed in the course of the boy’s inevitable development, because of the *otherness* of the male body that the boy grows into. Regardless of the status accorded the father in the house, the boy will often, even if unconsciously and as a secret to himself, have sought Father or other important men out as objects for sexual and gender identification that will ultimately temper and render more complex than it first appears in the opening

phases of the analysis, a regressed identity as the mother's best and beautiful boy, the apple of her eye — to quote Hodgson Burnett's portrait of little Cedric:

“a graceful, childish figure in a black velvet suit, with a lace collar, and with lovelocks waving about the handsome, manly little face, whose eyes met ...[others] with a look of innocent good-fellowship.” (*Little Lord Fauntleroy*).

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