FEMININITY AND FETISHISM

BY ANDRÉ MICHELS

There is no need of any special evidence to show that fetishism is very developed in some women. In spite of this, little importance has been ascribed to it in psychoanalytical literature. The reason probably lies in the assumption that their type of fetishism belongs to normality and can hardly be grouped among the perversions that have been described until now.

In the majority of cases, heterosexual male's fetishism is described and is regarded, at the same time, as a paradigm of his perversion. Accordingly Freud's basic formulation is still valid: the fetish "saves the fetishist...from becoming a homosexual by endowing a woman with precisely the character through which she becomes tolerable as a sexual object" (Freud 1927, 313). Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that fetishism also plays a large role with the homosexual male and contributes to the structuring of his perversion.1

I should like to take a different route and investigate the question of the extent to which it is justifiable to speak of female fetishism, and, above all, whether or not this can be regarded as a perversion. I do not claim to be able to give this question a definitive answer, but I shall attempt to contribute somewhat to making it more precise. To be sure, the answer depends on how the question is posed.

Freud's suggestion is also valid in our case:

The examination of fetishism should be urgently recommended to all those who still doubt the existence of the castration complex or who may be of the opinion that dreads of the female genitals might have another reason. (Freud 1927, 315)

Let us therefore proceed with a few reflections on castration. It is not a concept; rather, it represents the nadir of any conceptuality, and therefore its point of departure. Since castration is not conceivable as such, only its consequences are accessible. They can be observed on three different levels:

1) that of the Imaginary, by way of the body. The body cannot be represented as a whole and thereby made conceivable. The boundary that subjects experience here permits them to deal with their drives differently. This means,

It should be noted that M. Masud R. Khan has described such a case: "Fetish as Negation of the Self: Clinical Notes on Foreskin Fetishism in a Male Homosexual," in Alienation in Perversions. London: Hogarth Press Ltd., 1979.
above all, that they are capable of doing without their complete satisfaction;  
2) that of the Symbolic, by way of interpretation. Interpretation makes a  
virtue of necessity. Since not everything may be said, interpretation introduces  
the metaphorical dimension of language that, in both space and time, is slightly  
out of place with reference to a certain point (the ineffable); and  
3) that of the Real, by way of action. Since not everything is permitted,  
every genuinely subjective act not only misses its aim, but also has an air of trans­gression about it. The result of this is that there are no absolute (achieved) acts,  
but only *Fehlleistungen* (misachievements).  

Castration therefore confronts us with the multi-dimensionality of prohibition. This gives us an idea of the extent of what the pervert attempts to avoid and subvert.  

Fetishism is a choice means for avoidance, and moreover, for *Verleugnung* (disavowal) of castration. However, one can only disavow something that exists  
from the outset; one can disavow something that one has encountered, in one  
form or another, or that one has taken offense at. Fetishism is therefore a para­doxical recognition of castration. Freud leaves no room for doubt about this.  
Nevertheless this also means that we should understand fetishism not as a regres­sion to a pre-oedipal phase, but rather as a result of the castration complex.  
Not just any castration is placed in this way into the “center of events.” A  
small child’s love, independent of gender, is meant for the phallic mother. When  
children discover that their mothers are missing something, they react to the crumbling of their world with the means that are at their disposal. The conse­quence of this is different for a girl than for a boy.  

Before we get into the specifics of the female answer, let us first examine  
what are the necessary conditions for setting up and maintaining a fetish: its  
place, its function, and its effect.  
The fetish does not just surface anywhere but rather beyond the love object  
as its appendage or accessory. Added to this comes an essential condition: the  
fetish takes the place of love, not only in order to repress it, but also, as it were, to  
replace it. The result of this is a far-reaching incapacity for love which becomes  
the preferred method for avoiding every conflict. This becomes almost a supreme  
commandment.  

The main function of the fetish is to exercise control, not only over the  
object but also over that which goes beyond it and that to which it gives access,  
i.e. over *jouissance*. The result of this is that *jouissance* represses and tries to take  

over the place of desire. This dual event determines the clinical picture of  
fetishism (and also that of perversion) with which we are all acquainted.  
The consequence of this is a confusion of love, desire, and *jouissance*, i.e., of  
the three main components of erotic life. The result of this is not a simple confu­sion of eroticism (which is the case with neurotics); it is, rather, the domination  
over that which occurs beyond the object (the other), whose price is the destruc­tion of the object (the other). This results in a dehumanization of sexuality, and,  
only in uncommon cases, real death. However, real death stands on the horizon of,  
and helps to shape, the perverse scenario.  

This somewhat schematic outline gives us an idea of a process that in reality is much more complex and permits an immense degree of nuance. Two restrictions on this representation seem to me especially worthy of mention. One  
has to do with the result, the other with the point of departure.  
The fetish is, in fact, not constant, but rather is subject to a more or less pronounced discontinuity. In its full ostentatiousness, it actually occurs and  
comes into play only in borderline situations. This does not prevent it from being primarily a construction against discontinuity, against the loss that necessarily  
proceeds with time (above all against generational division). This ambiguous atti­tude to time sets its stamp on the clinical picture of fetishism.  
The formation of the fetish can best be traced if it is regarded, in Freudian terms, as *Heilungversuch* (an attempt to heal). This means that it first occurs as a  
reaction, as an answer to the inconsistency of the other, the first other that is  
encountered. The fetishist confronts with a very great fear the maternal side  
which could not be articulated. The first function of the fetish is to keep this in  
check in order to save the realm of the other. The young fetishist experiences this  
as being exposed to a colossal threat. It is as if he were to find himself aboard a  
ship that had a big hole in its stern which only he could plug up in order to save  
it from sinking. If he finds himself in this position, it can only be the result of a  
misuse of his love as a child.  

His fetishistic answer, however, is not determined by the *manque dans*  
l’Autre (by the lack in the Other) but rather by his non-existent reference to the  
signifier of a third term; that is, his failure to submit to the paternal signifier. This  
is precisely the reason for the inconsistency of the other, which results for the  
fetishist in a particular usage of language. He succeeds in avoiding the split  
between absence and presence, between “*fort*” and “*da*” which alone creates the  
signifier. Language therefore becomes somewhat artificial3 or affected, which is a

---

3There seems to be a certain connection between the three Lacanian dimensions presented here and the  
familiar Kantian questions: What can I know? What may I say (hope)? What should I do? This,  
however, cannot be further developed here.

3This is perhaps the reason that fetishism is so often encountered in all types of artists. Their activity  
has to do with the creation of an artificial world that often makes use of the disavowal of reality as an  
instrument.
typical fetishistic symptom, when one knows how to recognize it.

Language is not thereby abolished but it functions differently because both primary and secondary symbolization is affected. The essential result is that the split that goes along with the signifier carries with it not a loss of object, but rather the necessity of its preservation.

Although this seems somewhat theoretical, it has enormous consequences which aside from the area of psychopathology, are most evident on the level of politics and religion. Freud compared the fetish with the meaning of the throne and the altar. Both cases have to do with an emblem supposedly representing an absolute value and the destruction of which sets off an uncontrollable panic. Our poor twentieth century has shown us just what unspeakable catastrophes the fall of thrones and altars can bring with it.

I should like to interrupt this short theoretical sketch to turn to an examination of a few of the concepts brought forward up to this point.

"Beyond the object (the other)" is a multi-layered and enigmatic formulation than can be read in many and varied ways. Depending on the discourse, its place can be taken by something completely different.

As referred to earlier, fetishists place exceptional stress on the stability of values to such an extent that they submit to a sort of master commandment. It is for this reason that they are very susceptible to ideologies and every kind of totalitarianism. Even if they are very inhumane or barbaric, fetishists do not find these controlling structure offensive because of the economy their jouissance commands. It is mostly senseless to want to discuss this with them, as they are governed by other motives and another logic.

This can best be illustrated through what we said about the way they treat the signifier. There is hardly an argumentation that can have a real or lasting influence on them, not because it would come up against a barrier in them, but rather because they will agree with anything, be it a given claim or its opposite; they can uphold them both, side by side with little difficulty. They are even capable of giving the impression of depth, intelligence, and tolerance.

The reverse of this is represented by the behavior of the "revisionists." An example of this are those people who, despite all evidence to the contrary, assert that the gas chambers never existed. For what reason do they so trumpet their assertions, and why are they so ready to fight for them in court, even though "common sense" should be enough to restrain them from such things?

The manner in which they behave is meant primarily to provoke the public, so they will be taken to court. With this, at least partially, they have attained what they wanted: to slip into the role of the defendant and the victim. The jouissance that is bound up with this seems so great to them, that they are prepared to claim anything for it. Normally they have a very sensitive antenna for what attracts the most attention and provokes enraged reactions among the public.

For them, a trial has the meaning of a perverse scenario in which their entire effort is directed to unfolding the whole length and breath of their impossible assertions. The contradictory expectation connected with this, and about which we can hardly be surprised, is their ability to outfox the judge as the representative of the law; that is, to subvert his function and to experience the law in the severest form. Since it requires such a great expenditure and so much preparation time, clearly they can allow themselves such a scenario only now and then.

I need not add that the example of the "revisionists" is only one of many. Yet, it shows us the means with which the fetishists operate, the sort of logic they look for, and the extremes for which they are prepared.

A literary example may now contribute to illustrate another aspect of fetishism. The book in question is Patrick Süskind's novel, The Perfume, which became an international bestseller.

The protagonist, Jean-Baptiste "Grenouille" (frog) murders a young girl with the sole intention of seizing and possessing her aroma for himself. He says that without possession of this particular odor his life would make no sense. Above all, he wants to bring what it represents under his authority: he calls it the principle of scent. For him, this is everything. The girl who presents him with the scent is, however, nothing to him. He does not cry to get to know her and never exchanges a word with her. He murders her but this is not enough: shortly after the murder, every memory and picture of her, her body, her face, is effaced. "He had, after all, preserved the best of her and made it his own: the principle of her scent" (Süskind 1985, 58). This murder is, for him, the equivalent of an "amorous tryst," which we know would provide a new sense. So it is with Grenouille: he grabs the aroma, as the epitome of sense, for himself. The destruction of the object precedes this seizure, however. This emerges very clearly from the caricature-like example.

To Grenouille, it is as if he were born a second time; no, he returns to his declaration, for the first time since, until now, he has only led an animalistic existence (Süskind, 57). This is a clear reference to the mother, to the first other, in whose place he kills the young girl in order to possess the sole and simple thing that she can give him: her scent, which is a substitute for her love. Nothing is more unmistakably bound to people than their scent, just like the love they give us. But it is equally justifiable to say: nothing is more easily "gone with the wind" than the scent and nothing is more ephemeral than love.

The value of Lacan's formula that one gives in love what one does not have is
demonstrated in this context. Because this is so intolerable, our hero definitely
wants to appropriate what, up to now, we have referred to as “beyond the object
(the other).”

Grenouille does not shrink from committing a murder. The crime is an
essential part of the perverse act. Far more astonishing, and necessary to add here,
is the fact that crime raises man for the first time above the status naturalis (the
state of nature); where, to be more precise, a being is able to recognize crime as
crime. There is no crime in the animal world. It is, as it were, first created by the
law. We are therefore forced to assume the law to be a priori. The Torah goes so
far as to put the law at the beginning of the world: God could only create the
world by having the book of the Torah before him. The Oedipus myth teaches
something different: the law first shows itself by means of its transgression, but it
must have existed from the outset in order to give the act its consistency.

This is relevant in the context of this article because the pervert attempts to
turn this temporal sequence around. The most radical in doing this was the
Marquis de Sade. This explains why crime occupies such a central position in his
system. The more massive the crime, the greater the chance that the law will suc-
cceed in coming to play.

With this said, to what extent is femininity affected by the problem of
fetishism? A preliminary word about the creators of fashion allows us to get some-
what closer to our theme. It is their concern not only to contribute to the beauty
of a woman, but also to “give” her what she is missing in order to make her desir-
able. This is their job. They are paid for this, often exaggeratedly well.

Fashion is somewhat like an artificial narcissism which women like to use
but which would shock us if a man were to use it to the same extent. Not that an
unfashionable man would not seem odd to us. But with a woman, something else
is at stake: her femininity. A man can hardly give evidence of his masculinity by
wearing any kind of chic clothing. A woman, on the other hand, is often at the
mercy of a palpable coercion because fashion is subject to a strict codification
that determines what is appropriate and what not, how far she may go without caus-
ing offense, and especially what makes her desirable.

The cause of this surely rests in the fact that there is no representative of fem-
ininity in the unconscious. At least, this is what Freud and Lacan teach us. As we
know, this theory has been much contested and often severely criticized. But
most clinical practice has depended on it in its orientation. Since we are dealing
with an essential point here, we must try to examine it more closely. A clinical
example can help us to proceed.

The person in question is a good-looking, young woman, in her mid-thirt-
ies, who has been in analysis for several years and whose transference increasingly
revolves around a central question: what is it that I do not have that prevents you
from loving me? This question became so massive that it temporarily made any
sort of analytical work impossible. What occupied her at the moment proceeded
from the conviction that she had not been loved by her parents, especially her
mother.

This problem was not banal in that, as the only child of her parents, she
was treated by her mother with extreme severity. She was often locked up, and, as
far as she can remember, was always preoccupied with what was forbidden her.
She portrays her mother as being so suffocatingly authoritarian that her father
could mount no opposition. Her mother, in fact, seemed to take pleasure in
humiliating and making him look ridiculous in public, perhaps to demonstrate
that she and not her husband had the last word and the power.

Depending on the behavior of the mother, a young boy would have devel-
oped an obsessional neurosis or a perversion. For this young woman, however,
the worst thing was that her father foundered her totally. Not only did he not
oppose the predominance of his wife; at all critical moments, he also sided with
her against his daughter.

The only expedient available to her during her adolescence was anorexia
nervosa, which lasted for several years. What is interesting about the case is that
she only desisted when she began to fear that she was losing her femininity com-
pletely, as not only her periods stopped but also her breasts gradually disappeared.
She feared that she was becoming a boy. Later on, as well, she often appeared
masculine, although she is a good-looking woman who has no need to complain
about lack of success with men.

Even after the disappearance of her anorexia, something of its structure
remained. This is characterized by the law of “all or nothing” that opposes every
division (or partitioning) of the object. In her love affairs, she wanted to behave
precisely in this way since she was prepared to give everything to a man and obvi-
ously this was too much. Since she did not receive the same in return, she had to
ask herself: what do I not have to prevent people from loving me? What is miss-
ing (i.e. what would I have to have) in order to be loved? From a specific moment
onward, as already mentioned, the whole problem of transference with her
revolved around this question, which she pursued with great tenacity.

At the same time, she became visibly more depressive and spoke of suicide
in a manner that had to be taken seriously. This situation was not simple, es-
pecially since it extended over a long period of time. She was prepared to any
extreme necessary. She even said that she had provided for her analyst in her will.
Thereupon a new dynamic entered—writing. There was not only a temporal con-
connection with the will; it was, after all, written, and for this act, one uses the expression “to make over” or “transfer.” In French there is a certain proximity between the words *transferer* and *transcrire*, as in German between *ueberschreiben* and *ueberschreiben*.

Before she went away for the summer, she handed over all the letters addressed to her to her analyst, for safe-keeping. She herself, incidentally, wrote her analyst countless letters. The analyst often functions as a keeper of memory. But here she had to somehow materialize this by handing over something real to him. The question arises whether she thereby was truly prepared to cast something off or to lose it?

This is anything but certain. Every time she wanted to terminate the analysis—and this occurred frequently since she grew angry at her analyst for not returning her love—she first demanded the return of her letters. She said this on the couch without insisting on it afterwards. Something completely different could be heard through this. Perhaps she had entertained the hope that her analyst would read the letters, even though she had hardly spoken to him about it. What would this have meant, however?

As it turned out, she herself provided the key to understanding what had happened. From time to time, over an extended period, she would bring her analyst a copy or the original of a letter from various lovers. She handed these over to him, without explanation, as if they were letters from her, so that he would be sure to take a look at and read them. She herself then supplied the commentary for them; she hoped that the abundant compliments directed at her in the letters would not leave him unmoved. (Although I have said “lovers,” this is only partially accurate. She was more interested in obtaining recognition of her femininity than in having a sexual affair).

The material I have related to this point would, in fact, be sufficient. I cannot refrain, however, from adding a word about how the problem of writing and written material developed further. As already indicated, the transference had a very depressive component, especially since she did not receive the answer she was expecting. The idea that what she was experiencing “only” had to do with transference was intolerable to her. She viewed this as evidence that her analyst did not understand much about her nor about his work.

The sessions became increasingly difficult because she only complained. At one and the same time, she said that her analysis was the most important thing in her life (unfortunately) and that as there was no longer any sense to her life, she would like to die. Thus “all or nothing,” if not all, then simply nothing. If not for her child (she had a boy in primary school who had been involved for years in an ongoing divorce), nothing would have made her go on living. But before she went, she said, she wanted to write everything down, especially how her analysis had proceeded, and therefore she wanted her letters back.

It is impossible not to notice the contradictions inherent in these formulations; they show that the subject can come to experience the borderlines within herself only as determined by a profound contradicroriness. In summary, this situation could be reduced to the formula: writing is her means, her vehicle, not only for object loss but also for its avoidance. The difficulty with which the object loss had to contend here was that, over an extended period, it was only comprehensible while bound up with death. The analysis shows, however, that, for the analysand, this did not remain an insurmountable hurdle.

Yet, more importantly, this example shows us something completely different: that her struggle was for her femininity and that it took on the form of a struggle for survival. Her femininity was obviously bound up with her sexuality; but not identical with it or of equal significance. It was her fear, moreover, that the one might be confused with the other in her. She was prepared to give a man one of them, i.e., the one that he wanted so that she, so to speak, would receive the other one, in exchange, the one that she wanted, as a gift.

This can be formulated still another way. She has hardly a doubt about the sexual attraction which she incites in men. Nonetheless, she is extremely insecure with reference to the recognition of her femininity. It is from this that the greatest threat emanates, that of the loss of her femininity. This threat sits all the more deeply in her because she was directly confronted with it during her adolescence in connection with her anorexia.

Much more could be said about this example. From it, however, we have learned that we should understand femininity as different from feminine sexuality, that each corresponds to and obeys a completely different logic. The split between the two is an excellent way for women to be confronted with castration (i.e. with object loss).

We should understand femininity as something that can be split from woman. No specific evidence is necessary to show that it can be lost. Justification for this is easily found in the world of fashion, as mentioned earlier. A very important consequence of this is that femininity, precisely like the phallus, can be fetishized. This is certainly the case with any woman who can be called normal. We should be more inclined to have misgivings when a woman puts everything at stake in order not to be feminine.

Fashion has a significant function here to the extent that it determines a woman’s image. As stated, this exerts tremendous pressure because a woman must subjugate herself to it if she wants to be feminine. This pressure is connected with
what could be called the social imaginary (which also obviously applies to men, but differently).

Fashion represents a “codification of modesty” (pudeur, Scham). At the same time this points to the borderline of what we have called subjugation (to fashion) because a woman finds that she may be at her most feminine if she is at least somewhat immodest (impudique, schamlos). We know how a prostitute exploits this, making out of it her “inventory” (fond of commerce). But this has hardly anything to do with femininity.

I should like to develop only a few additional thoughts. The whole issue has to do with what we, along with Freud and Lacan, have called the lack of a representative of femininity in the unconscious. For this reason, the need or temptation somehow arises to represent the unrepresentable. It is here that the significance of fashion lies. It throws a veil over something that is not there. But the function of the veil is to maintain the illusion that something is nonetheless hidden behind it. A woman has the alternative of two fundamental positions, both of which stake out the field of her femininity. The one entails arousing the illusion that she possesses what the veil is supposed to camouflage the lack of. The other is, that she is the only one capable of facilitating access to the unrepresentable and unnameable—castration. Here the question can be raised of when her analysis should be ended, and thus can hardly be separated from her search for femininity.

These two positions are only partially contradictory and do not exclude each other in any way. Above all, they express a fundamental contradiction for women in their approach to castration: that women can pass on what they do not possess, the phallus, in that they are the only ones capable of giving men access to it. Only a woman is capable of making a man out of a man, in so far, obviously, as he does not attempt to avoid his own castration problem. Here lies the point of departure for male homosexuality. He thus attempts to deceive himself and the other away from the “catastrophe” of castration by forming an artificial, imaginary virility.

It also emerges from foregoing that the woman as mother makes an essential contribution toward passing on the phallus, in its symbolic function, to the next generation. In this respect, women often play with fire, not so much for themselves as for their own children. Herein lies the point of departure for female perversion which consists of its approach to children. I therefore think that there is good reason for accepting this although some people fundamentally question

WORKS CITED


female perversion.

What I should like to show here is that fetishism is very common among women and not essentially perverse. It departs from the attempt to achieve a material representation of the unrepresentable. That this attempt can hardly succeed gives women a certain protection against perversion which men do not have because they find it much more difficult to withdraw from the illusion, the conviction of possessing “it.”

\[4\]It should only be noted in passing here that these are two attributes of God.

\[5\]This is what would be called “the transmission of the Name-of-the-Father in the Lacanian terminology ("la transmission du Nom-du-Père").