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PEE(K)ING INTO DERRIDA'S UNDERPANTS: CIRCUMCISION, TEXTUAL MULTIPLEXITY, AND THE CANNIBALISTIC MOTHER

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In Nineteen Hundred and Forty-Four—the date was Columbus Day, October 12—I was sailed like a frisbee quite involuntarily¹ into the ocean of patriarchal heterosexism, of male hegemony, and of maternal betrayal², as the mark of circumcision was inscribed forever on my flesh. As I was hurled through the fog- obscured skies of gender expectation, my foreskin was ripped away in a gust/o of parental violence.³

¹ “that de-cision taken in me and without me”; Derrida 1993, 255-256.

² Pinar, 120: “Circumcision demarcates manhood, the point after which the son is regarded as a member of the tribe of Patriarchy. The wounded phallus and the scar that remains are a cattle-brand indicating ownership and gender identity.”

³ The Christian liturgical calendar celebrates January 1, the eighth day after the birth of Jesus, as the Feast of the Circumcision of Our Savior. Given the Freudian interpretation of the psychological scarring that circumcision causes, not only to the male child but to his parents as well, perhaps this should be called the Fast of the Circumcision, in penance for the sins of

Four hundred and fifty-two years separate these two events, and yet Columbus and I hold a wound in common,⁴ like Freud, like Derrida. Columbus was, by most accounts, a Marrano, a Jew who adopted the external trappings of Catholicism in order to survive the successive waves of persecution and expulsion.⁵ I am not a Jew,⁶ but I, like Columbus-like Freud, like Derrida—am circumcised, involuntarily determined a child of patriarchy long before I could think for myself.

Who wounded me, and why was I wounded? As I struggle through the unveiling of my scars,⁷ so I unveil the wounds that all men carry. Some of us carry them visibly on our cocks. Even more troubling are the invisible wounds of the uncircumcised, the unreadable marks written on the bodies of men who are wounded and do not know by whom, or why, or even that they bear/bare wounds.⁸

How do we make meaning out of the practice of male circumcision in the world, in the South Pacific, in Aotearoa-New Zealand, in the

patriarchy inherent in the wounding of male children. And see Hoffman (7) on whether it is the day, or the rite, which is to be celebrated.

⁴ Yet every circumcision is unique to the man who bears/bares it; Derrida 1986, 307, 336; 1993, 59-60.

⁵ Roth, 756-757.

⁶ Or am I? In 1971, on my first trip to Israel, I had an overwhelming sense of having 'come home,' as if there were some sort of genetic reason for such a deep attachment. However, my family acknowledges no Jews in the family tree. I can only hypothesize: My paternal great-grandmother was named Katie Klopfenstein/Klophenstein. Her grandparents came from Grandvillars and Brochiller, in the Haute-Rhine, Alsace. Katie was one of 16 children, though only seven are named in the family tree: John, Hannah, Eli, Miriam, Joseph, Katie (born 1869), and Benjamin. Upon coming to America sometime in the early 1820s, the family identified as Mennonite, though in Katie's childhood her father became a Methodist minister. I am one of Katie's 69 great grandchildren, all of whom knew her. My own daughter Katie is named after her great-great-grandmother, in honor of the Jewish heritage that I believe I carry in my body, as invisible as the circumcision scar on an uncircumcised penis.

⁷ My scars: "the circumcision of me, the unique one, that I know perfectly well took place, one time, they told me and I see it but I always suspect myself of having cultivated, because I am circumcised, *ergo* cultivated, a fantastical affabulation" (Derrida 1993, 59-60).

⁸ See Grosz's chapter, "The Body as Inscriptive Surface." Freud believed that all men are wounded in their genitals. Uncircumcised men still bear such scars but can't see them, so it is harder for them to work through their own psychodynamics.

contemporary men's movements, and above all in the thought of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Derrida?

First of all we have to admit that there is no single meaning to this act of ritually or surgically altering or removing the prepuce,⁹ or foreskin, of the penis, in order to expose the glans penis.¹⁰ 'Dick-head' is the word one hears more commonly in the streets.

The practice of circumcision is 7000 years old. Today, although it is infrequently observed in Europe, it is practiced routinely in many parts of Africa and in all Moslem countries.¹¹ The rate in the US has dropped recently from 85% to about 60%,¹² though in my generation it was routine. Judaism requires it at the eighth day after the birth of a male child,¹³ and Islam requires it for boys at any age up until puberty.¹⁴ Doctrinally the Christian Church has interpreted circumcision as a metaphor for the conversion of the heart, and thus it is not expected to be practiced literally.¹⁵ Yet the interpretation of Christianity may be, and often is, over-ridden by culture. For example, my own circumcision, as a Christian and a priest of the church, is hardly metaphorical,¹⁶ and yet St. Paul and the

⁹ The Latin 'prepuce' = pre + puto, or the pre-penis, so it is the same as the 'fore skin.'

¹⁰ Apropos of nothing (!), the clitoris, mistaken for centuries by medical science as a 'tiny penis,' was known in the Viennese slang at the time of Freud as the *Jud*, or Jew; see Geller, 330 n5.

¹¹ According to medical literature, circumcision is the most common surgery performed on men in the world; see Latifoglu, et. al.

¹² See Laumann.

¹³ Gen. 21:4; see Snowman 570 on some of the halakhic exceptions.

¹⁴ Ishmael was circumcised by his father Abraham at age 13; see Gen. 17:25. But Islamic practices vary according to tribe and nation; the customary age seems to be between 5 and 12. See Morgenstern, 48-55.

¹⁵ See Acts 3:1; 21:21; Romans 4:9-12; Galatians 2:3-9; 5:2-3, 6:12-15; 1 Cor. 7:18-19; Col. 2:11. On the Pauline attitude toward circumcision, see Collins.

¹⁶ I need simply to look down to ascertain this information. We all need personal reminders of who we are, as Derrida points out in 1997, 19-20. According to BT Menachot 43b, David's sight of his own circumcision 'set his mind at ease,' reminding him that he was never without the observance of at least one precept. Geller (329) comments on George Eliot's Daniel Deronda, the eponymous hero of one of Freud's favorite books. "It takes some three-quarters

writers of the early church were at great pains to separate Christianity from Judaism by telling Christians not to circumcise.¹⁷

Here in Oceania, the Christian dis-avowal of circumcision is observed primarily in the breach. In Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, ritual circumcision is still practiced as part of the male rites of passage from childhood to adulthood.¹⁸ A male who is not circumcised is not considered—according to the traditional social construction—to be an adult, and therefore may not marry or take a seat in the village governing council. According to the construction of gender in traditional Samoan culture, an adult male who is not circumcised is considered lower in voice and authority than a woman.¹⁹ Circumcision routinely takes place for Melanesian and Polynesian (though not Maori) boys at puberty, or immediately before. While such circumcisions are done in a doctor's office, they are celebrated with elaborate social rituals. Yet here in Aotearoa New Zealand, the rate of circumcision has dropped so low—among both Maori and Pakeha—that friends who recently had a baby son could not find a doctor in all of Palmerston North who would circumcise the boy. They had to make an appointment in Wellington with the only doctor they could find who would do the surgery.

Given its 7000-year history, and given the wide variation of ritual and surgical practices throughout the world, how can we give meaning to this 'simple snip' that so quickly removes a quarter-inch or less of tender, and possibly useless, male baby's skin?

To comprehend the process of meaning-making, Derrida refers us to the ancient Jewish exegetical schema known as PaRDeS, or 'the paradise

of this eight-hundred-plus-page novel for Daniel to discover that he is of Jewish descent. Yet as Lennar David has quipped, 'What this has to mean...is that he never looked down.'" Derrida, 1993, 114-116, describes himself as "the only philosopher to my knowledge who will have dared describe his penis, as promised, in concise and detailed fashion."

¹⁷ See, for example, Justin Martyr, Dialogue 19 and 33; Tertullian, Adv. Marc. 5.9 and Adv. Jud. 4. See also Greenblatt in Hillman and Mazio, 221-241.

¹⁸ See Herdt 1984, Adam; and van Gennep, 82-84.

¹⁹ See Macpherson, 181-182, on the Samoan practices of circumcision.

of Scripture'.²⁰ Both medieval Christianity and medieval Judaism insisted that every verse of the Bible has at least four meanings, basing their arguments on more ancient interpretive practices.²¹ According to the Jewish tradition that Derrida cites, meaning-making occurs at four levels, usually simultaneously, though each must be teased out in its own right:²²

- **Peshat:** The simple, the 'literal,' the plain meaning of the text, usually accessible to the uninitiated, and having its own inherent value as memory, instruction or entertainment.
- **Remez:** The allusive, the intimated meaning, the metaphor hinted at, though always based on a rational and concrete form of logic, such as a notarikon, tachygraphy, mnemonic, or gematria. This form of exegesis became popular in both Judaism and Christianity as a sort of puzzle.

²⁰ John Chrysostom (c.347-407), *In principium Actorum* 3.1, Montfaucon 3.71C (unpublished translation by Arthur Bradford Shippee) speaks of "the Paradise of Scripture" as a walled garden with an abundant fountain and trees inside. A very similar reference can be found in the Gospel of Truth (Layton, 262), where paradise is God's perfection of thought, and the plants therein are God's verbal expressions of that thought- perfection.

²¹ I have written on the medieval Christian schema in Culbertson, 1991; and on the medieval Jewish schema in Culbertson, 1995, chapter 2. I have applied these schema to the practice of psychotherapy in Culbertson, 1998.

²² Freud, too, was very aware of the multiple meanings carried in any single entity. He likened the existence of these meanings beyond the literal, to what lies in the unconscious beyond the ego. According to DiCenzo (85-86): "The ego represses, covers up, and seeks to eliminate, while the unconscious or id preserves memory traces. Hence tensions, symptoms, and clues emerge as meaningful by-products of intra- psychic conflict. Similarly, gaps, contradictions, and other textual vicissitudes are not simply accidents of historical transmission and the oversights of numerous exegetical hands. Like dreams, parapraxes, and symptoms, they disclose hidden (or new) meaning irreducible to either of the conflicting agencies. Freud's discussion of textual vicissitudes opens the possibility of reading a text beyond itself—that is, in excess of its surface arguments. He thus anticipates the deconstructionist articulation of processes of *dehiscence* [splitting open or rupture of a seed pod or surgical wound] and *dissemination* [to scatter widely, as sowing seed] as features of meaning production."

- **Derash:** The homiletical meaning, more a synthetic attribution than an analytic clarification of meaning, an excursus by which moral and ethical applications are drawn.
- **Sod:** The secret meaning, the mystical message accessible only to the select few initiated, and often having to do with the very nature of God.

This schema for meaning-making plays a significant role in Derrida's primary essay on the subject of circumcision, his *Circumfession*. There he writes: *"In relation with the singular score of these four epitomes, unrational enough to have to be denied or complicated, cut into, I discover the quaternary model of a paradisiac discourse of Jewish irrationality, to be specified, etc.: 1. Pshat, literality denuded like a glans, 2. R'Emez, crypt, allegory, secret, diverted word, 3. Drash, morality, homily, persuasive and pulpit eloquence, 4. Soud, profound, cabbalistic, although I've got the PaRDeS of this partition 'in my blood,' it does not correspond exactly to the one imposing itself on me, some laborious translation of it is not forbidden".*²³ And indeed, throughout that essay, he struggles to make meaning, at a variety of complex levels, of the wound that marks his own male member, that "exemplary counterscar that we have to learn to read without seeing".²⁴

²³ Derrida 1993, 108-111; see also 237-238 and 250-253, citing the rabbinic parable of The Four Who Entered Paradise (Tos. Hagigah 2:3-4, JT Hagigah 2.77b; Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 1.4,1; BT Hagigah 14b).

²⁴ Derrida 1993, 120-121. In the search for levels of meaning, Derrida cites as one of his authorities St. Augustine (upon whose *Confessions* the *Circumfession* functions as a midrash): "And for me (and I am saying this from my heart, without any fear), were I writing something aimed at the highest authority, I should prefer to write in such a way that each man could take whatever truth about these things my words suggested, rather than to put down one true opinion so plainly as to exclude other opinions, even if there were no falsity in them to offend me" (*Confessions* XII, xxxi, 42; Outler 296); see Derrida 1993, 237. Elsewhere, he cites William Blake as an inspiration for seeking the "tropic dimensions"; Derrida 1986, 344. Both the Jewish and Christian interpretive schema, with their emphasis on multivocality, are echoed in the Freudian concept of "overinterpretation"; see Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams" 6E and H in SE V:353 and 471, and DiCenzo, 7-8.

Derrida applies the PRDS schema in several ways in his long essay *Circumfession*. For example, he speaks of four bloods that are signified in the removal of "the ring of flesh around my foreskin":²⁵

- (1) his own blood, drawn by the mohel's circumcision knife (recapitulated in his middle-age by an alarming bloody discharge in his urine;²⁶
- (2) the blood of his cousin Simone, whose accident on a scooter Derrida witnessed, and which he describes as "that first blood that came to me from the sex of a cousin";
- (3) his mother's menstrual blood, evidenced by "the towels my mother left lying around, 'marked' from red to brown, in the bidet, when, as I understood so late, she was having her own 'period';" and
- (4) his mother's life blood, draining out of her as she lay dying.

These four function as *Peshat* (his 'literal' blood of circumcision); *Remez* (the blood of an accident, connected with sex, and awakening his first sense of the trauma of his own circumcision); *Derash* (the menstrual blood which signals femininity, and thus conversely, masculinity: the yin and yang of creation); and *Sod* ("for the life of the flesh is in the blood"; Leviticus 17:11, 14). It is thus in the bleeding, newly-circumcised penis that Derrida finds his most-powerful symbols of maternal threat, psychological trauma, community identity, and the hope for his autobiographical salvation, as we shall see.

I confess, in the autobiographical manner of Derrida,²⁷ that for much of my life as a circumcised, middle-class, American, male Christian, I didn't think much about the possible larger meanings of circumcision. Yet

²⁵ Another example can be found in his four-fold reading of the 1586 El Greco painting "El Entierro del Conde de Orgaz" (The Burial of the Count of Orgaz), in Derrida 1993, 150-152.

²⁶ Derrida, 239.

²⁷ Derrida 1993, 13-15: "If one more circumcision delimited my lips, if my confession sucked at the truth that appeases and reassures, even without redemption, I would put an end to the being in perdition that I am, although I feel myself to be still kept in the prayer of my living mother."

having said that, I also couldn't reconcile the New Testament argument that circumcision is a vain ritual for Christians, with the fact that every Christian male I knew was circumcised. How did I know that? Yes, we do peek in the changing shed; we just peek very carefully so as not to get caught peeking.²⁸

As a child, I did occasionally see an uncircumcised penis when changing for a swim. But foreskins were rare, and in my disbelief, I could only come up with three possible explanations: that the boy came from a lower-class family; that some unimaginable health complication had prevented his 'normalization'; or that his parents had particularly poor aesthetic taste. In all cases, I reasoned, surely an uncircumcised penis was a carrier of shame. Only when I began my study of Freud thirty years ago as part of my psychotherapy training, did I begin to think more deeply about the meanings of circumcision. My involvement in Men's Studies fifteen years ago heightened my interest, and recent exposure to Derrida's writings has intensified it further.

Reading history and cultural studies, we discover that male circumcision signifies a staggering multiplexity, a paradisaical polysemy, a daunting dissemination,²⁹ a cacophonous chorus of constructed voices. Various the practice has been explained or interpreted as:³⁰

²⁸ We have to be equally careful peeking into Derrida's underpants, though the psychodynamic intensity of his autobiographical graphics makes it hard not to see all that he reveals.

²⁹ Derrida prefers this term to Ricoeur's "polysemy"; see his *Positions*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 45. According to DiCenzo (7-8): "Derrida certainly accepts Ricoeur's notion of polysemy, but insists further on the creative fore of dissemination. This expands the dynamic of meaning production beyond an inherent plurivocity of discourse. It expresses an ongoing process that can never be reduced to the text or phenomenon in itself. An ever-shifting other or outside is necessarily operative in establishing the sense of a text. This outside might be understood in terms of context, as long as we bear in mind Derrida's caveat that 'no context can determine meaning to the point of exhaustiveness.' That is, no context is final or closed." Overinterpretation, polysemy, and dissemination parallel Mikhail Bakhtin's "polyglossia" (see Bakhtin, 65, 327, 366, 431).

³⁰ On reading meaning into body parts, see Hillman and Mazzio, xii: "The ontological status of the part is revealed again and again—to be in endless flux between the positions of subject and object: as vehicles of culture and symbolization, as organ with eerily individuated

a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood,³¹
a mark of covenant relationship,³²
an external signifier of an internal condition, such as a circumcised
heart, lips, eyes,
or, in Derrida particularly, 'circumcised' words,³³
a sign of national, cultural, or communal identity,³⁴
a symbolic wedding ritual,³⁵
a symbolic remnant of human sacrifice, especially child-murder,³⁶
a metaphorical simulation of castration,³⁷
a symbolic remnant of ancestral cannibalism,³⁸
a witnessing scar to paternal or maternal jealousy, possessiveness, and
envy,³⁹
a way to ward off evil spirits,
a reminder of death, much like the less painful ashes on Ash
Wednesday,⁴⁰
a writing, inscribing, tattooing of identity on the body,⁴¹
a method for instilling sexual discipline by way of blessing and

agencies, as objects of libidinal cathexes, as instruments of sentient experience, as imagined loci of self-knowledge and self-alienation."

³¹ Van Gennepe, 70-73.

³² See Hoffman; Eilberg-Schwartz 141-176, and Snowman.

³³ Derrida 1986, 320, for example. Compare Ezekiel 44, Acts 7:51, as well as those Biblical passages where 'unclean' is a synonym for 'uncircumcised.'

³⁴ Derrida 1986, 320, 340-341, 346; Derrida 1993, 250-253, 309-310; Snowman 568.

³⁵ Hence Derrida's comparison of circumcision to a wedding ring; Derrida 1993, 114, 217-218, 255-256.

³⁶ Derrida 1993, 188-190, 244-246; 1997, 38.

³⁷ Derrida 1993, 70-73; van Gennepe 73 n2.

³⁸ Freud, "Moses and Monotheism," SE XXIII.81-82.

³⁹ Derrida 1993, 91.

⁴⁰ At Derrida 1997, 38-39, he describes the cloths that bandage the recently-circumcised penis as 'shrouds.'

⁴¹ Though it is not always clear *whose* identity is being inscribed. Derrida 1986, 328, 332, 344-346; Derrida 1993, 70-73, 93-95, 158-160, 188-190, 224, 291. On reading wounds, see Derrida 1986, 340; on reading bodies see Grosz.

purification,⁴²

a sacramental consecration of the sexual organ,⁴³

a metaphor for nudity,⁴⁴

a mark of shame,⁴⁵

a hidden proof of perversity, immorality, dereliction, or devotion to the anti-Christ,⁴⁶

a preventative or cure for masturbation, nocturnal emissions of semen, and bed-wetting,⁴⁷ a means to enhance sexual pleasure,⁴⁸

a means to decrease sexual pleasure,⁴⁹

a medical preventative of syphilis or epilepsy,⁵⁰

a hygienic prophylactic,⁵¹

as protection for women against cervical or uterine cancer,⁵²

a reactive substitute for menstrual envy,⁵³

as cosmetic or aesthetic,⁵⁴

⁴² Derrida 1986, 340-341.

⁴³ Gilman 1993, 59.

⁴⁴ Derrida 1997, 26; Satlow 1996.

⁴⁵ Derrida 1997, 26.

⁴⁶ Gilman 1993.

⁴⁷ Derrida 1993, 244-246. Circumcision was widely practiced to discourage masturbation; see Gilman 1998: 121, for an example from 1950s America. From the mid-19th century, it was believed that proper diet could moderate sexual desire, including the urge to masturbate. For that reason, both the Graham Cracker and Kellogg's Cornflakes were invented; see Sokolow. On masturbation and prayer, particularly in relation to the tallith (prayer shawl), see Derrida 1997, 19-20, 45-46.

⁴⁸ Gilman 1993, 56-57.

⁴⁹ Gilman 1993, 56-57.

⁵⁰ Gilman 1993, 57-59.

⁵¹ According to Snowman 572-75, Philo was the first Jewish writer to advance hygienic reasons for circumcision; *De Circumcisione* 11:210. See DeNoon, for example, on the increasing number of medical studies which argue that circumcision + safer sex is the best preventative against contracting HIV.

⁵² Derrida 1986, 336; Snowman 575.

⁵³ Gilman 1993, 56-57.

⁵⁴ The aspect of 'aesthetic' is under significant fire from some quarters of the contemporary men's movement, who instead refer to circumcision as 'male genital mutilation.' Various methods are suggested to men who wish to restore their foreskins. Biblical precedent for

a metaphor for the universal human phenomenon of self-discovery,⁵⁵
an indelible setting-apart of men from women, men signifying the
perfected state,⁵⁶ and women the natural state,⁵⁷
a warning of how dangerous our fathers and other male forbears are,⁵⁸
a hypocritical unveiling of males in a patriarchal culture that demands
the veiling of women,⁵⁹ a petrified memory,⁶⁰
the traumatic primal wound of masculinity and patriarchy,⁶¹
and a personal holocaust.⁶²

Many of these interpretations appear in the three Derrida essays I have examined. Perhaps few or none are original to Derrida, but he has succeeded in identifying many of the polysemic labels carried by the simple term 'circumcision.' The effect of this Derridian dissemination, however, is to cause the penis, once again as it so often does, to wiggle, to change shape, to appear ungraspable.⁶³

such restoration can be found at 1 Macc. 1:15; the surgery is called epispasm (Snowman, 568) or epipost (Ginzburg, IV.284).

⁵⁵ Derrida 1986, 340-341.

⁵⁶ According to Ginzberg v.29, Bereshit Rabbah 66.3 and parallels "remark that nature does not produce anything quite ready for use, but expects man to improve upon its creations. This applies to a man's body which becomes perfect after its natural state has been improved upon by circumcision." Hillman and Mazio, 181, cite Aristotle's famous formula that the female is an "imperfect male."

⁵⁷ Derrida 1997, 62, n38.

⁵⁸ Pinar, 117: "Father's authority is communicated by his pretentious seriousness, his virility, his cold capacity to oppose and suppress the Other when he judges it necessary, to compete for scarce commodities (and to keep them scarce), by sons who serve as his policemen, his military, his bureaucrats, his rebels (who underline his importance as they keep him mobilized), and by women who praise his achievements, attend to his wounds, and do his dirty work."

⁵⁹ Derrida 1997, 40. According to Worth 1996:129, "sexual difference plays a central role in Derrida's work."

⁶⁰ Derrida 1986, 346.

⁶¹ Derrida 1993, 280; Pinar, 120.

⁶² Derrida 1986, 336.

⁶³ "The penis will not behave: now a penis, now a phallus, the one when we wish the other, it is itself a text that we can barely read, even with double-vision. It seems not one thing but

Derrida is often seen as a Freudian revisionist, in the same vein as Kristeva, Irigaray, Ricoeur, Lacan, and LaPlanche. But revisionism is perhaps not the most accurate descriptor, for there are times when Derrida, like almost all of Freud's students,⁶⁴ parts company significantly with 'Papa.' One departure point of particular interest to a discussion on masculinities is the attribution of responsibility for the trauma of circumcision to the father by Freud, and to the mother by Derrida.

In his 1912-13 series of essays entitled *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, Freud used the work of Darwin, Robertson Smith, and James Frazier, among others, to develop a social anthropology often referred to as phylogeny.⁶⁵ Now Freud was aware that circumcision took place at a variety of ages in the world's cultures, and attempted to devise a theory which would explain its effects as associated with the Oedipal struggle, whether the circumcision took place several years before that or several years afterwards. The idea of the Primal Horde is first set forth in *Totem and Taboo* and is expanded in Freud's 1939 work *Moses and Monotheism*.

In primaeval times primitive man lived in small hordes, each under the domination of a powerful male. The strong male was lord and father of the entire horde and unrestricted in his power, which he exercised with violence. All the females were his property, wives and daughters of his own horde and some, perhaps, robbed from other hordes. The lot of his sons was a hard one: if they roused their father's jealousy they were killed or castrated or driven out. Their only resource was to collect together in small communities, to get themselves wives by robbery, and when one or

two. The phallus is haunted by the penis and vice versa. It has no unified social identity, but is fragmented by ideologies including race and ethnicity." (Culbertson 1998).

⁶⁴ The break between Freud and his student Carl Jung is notorious, but Freud was almost ultimately rejected by his colleagues and students Alfred Adler, Karen Horney, Helene Deutsch, Wilhelm Fliess, Melanie Klein, and Otto Rank, to name just some. On Freud's break with Jung and Adler, see Gay 197-243. The parallels with the classic Oedipal struggle are obvious.

⁶⁵ The structure and theories in *Totem and Taboo* are explored in Palmer, chapter 2, and Gay, 324-335.

other of them could succeed in it, to raise themselves into a position similar to their father's in the primal horde.⁶⁶

Eventually the expelled brothers united to overthrow the Primal Father and then devoured him raw. Once free of the Father they both honored and hated, they quarreled among themselves over power. "A realization of the dangers and uselessness of these struggles, a recollection of the act of liberation which they had accomplished together, and the emotional ties with one another which had arisen during the period of their expulsion, led at last to an agreement among them, a sort of social contract".⁶⁷ The social contract included a renunciation of behavior based solely on instinct, a recognition of mutual obligations, and the introduction of institutions that codified morality and justice along the lines of patriarchal standards. Circumcision was one of those institutions, an indelible marking of the flesh to remind all future sons of the power that the Primal, or tribal, Elders held, and that castration and death would be the outcome of any future attempts at rebellion. Toward the end of the section of Moses on drive renunciation, Freud interprets Moses's introduction of the custom of circumcision in light of this same need for "the painful renunciation of instinct" intrinsic to acculturation into any patriarchal society. ... circumcision is the symbolic substitute for the castration which the primal father once inflicted upon his sons ... and whoever accepted that symbol was showing by it that he was prepared to submit to the father's will, even if it imposed the most painful sacrifice on him.⁶⁸

The wound of circumcision, then, raises phylogenetic memories of the taboo against endogamous sexual relations—whether within the tribe or the family—which are punishable by castration and death. Today we men and women still carry the primitive memories of the Primal Horde as part

⁶⁶ Freud, "Moses and Monotheism," section 2D, in SE XXIII.81.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 82.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 122.

of our unconscious social and cultural heritage, and their power continues to shape our individual development as well as our family relations.

Of course, circumcision as symbolic castration need not necessarily lead us back to the Primal Father, to the transmission of his deeds and threats through acquired memory, and to the irresolvable difficulties of these formulations. In his 1926 book, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, Freud argues that a child incorporates the power and authority of his own biological father as a significant part of the child's super-ego. This power and authority are in themselves enough to produce castration anxiety, which in turn becomes globalized into an undefined social or moral anxiety.⁶⁹ Here, while attempting to find a definitive reference point for anxiety in the threat of castration, Freud actually de-literalizes the concept. Castration anxiety becomes indicative of the conflicts involved in ethical, as opposed to tribal or patriarchal social, acculturation.⁷⁰

In the pre-Oedipal period, around the age of 3, when the young boy has fallen in love with his mother, he then enters into an intrapsychic struggle with his father to win away the mother as his own.⁷¹ However, the young boy is well aware that his father is bigger, stronger, and more powerful, and that any attempt to win the mother may lead the father to a jealous and murderous rage that will result in the boy's death. To defuse his growing anxiety, and indeed, to preserve his own life, the boy ultimately shifts his object of affectional alliance to the father, and away from the mother. The Oedipal struggle goes on whether a boy is circumcised or not. In children who are circumcised, a look at their wounded penis will remind them how dangerous—and yet desirable—adult manhood, and ultimately patriarchy, can be.

The father, so important to Freudian explanations of the psychological trauma of circumcision, almost disappears in Derrida's writings on the

⁶⁹ Freud, SE XX:128.

⁷⁰ Freud's two most famous cases which deal with the issue of neurosis and castration anxiety are "Little Hans" and "The Wolf Man." See Gilman 1993, 77-89 and 1998, 95-98.

⁷¹ Oedipus, it will be remembered, is he of Greek mythology who killed his father and married his mother. On the Primal Father and the Oedipus complex, see Gay, 329-335; on "Little Hans," Oedipus, and castration, see Gay 257-260.

subject. Whereas the mother is an object of desire in Freudian theory, in Derrida she is even more a subject of fear, betrayal, and danger, for it is the mother, rather than the father, who is held responsible for the boy's circumcision trauma.

Freud traces the origins of circumcision to Moses; Derrida bases his theories on the actions of Moses's wife Zipporah. According to the Biblical book of Exodus, Moses fled Egypt, where as a slave he had murdered his overseer, to the land of Midian. There he worked for a landowner and priest named Jethro, and eventually married his daughter Zipporah. They circumcised their firstborn son Gershom. When Zipporah was pregnant with their second son, Moses heard a call from God to return to Egypt, to deliver the Hebrew people from slavery. Hurriedly he took his wife, his son Gershom, and his newly born second son Eliezer, who was not yet circumcised because he was not eight days old, and began the trip back to Egypt. According to Exodus 4:24-26, "On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the Lord met [Moses] and tried to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses' feet with it and said, 'Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!' So he let him alone. It was then she said, 'A bridegroom of blood by circumcision'".⁷²

For Derrida, 'the enemy' in the circumcision struggle, the traumatic scarring of the psyche, is not the father, but the mother, each and every man's own Zipporah. She is simultaneously betrayer, hedonist, cannibal, and failure. She is Everywoman; she is Other. In his *Circumfession*, Derrida writes: "circumcision, another word for peritomy, that cutting of

⁷² Freud also refers to this story with admiration; see "Moses and Monotheism," SE XXIII.26, 44. The source of some of the details in Derrida's imagery is difficult to trace. The Exodus 4:24-26 text is expanded on in BT Nedarim 32a; and see Ginzberg II.295, 328; V.423-424, n149. But I have not yet been able to locate the source of his idea that Zipporah 'ate' the foreskin; as the circumciser, should would have had to staunch the flow of blood by sucking on Eliezer's penis, but this does not seem to be the same as 'eating.' The Talmudic passage says that two angels disguised as 'snakes,' named Af and Hemah ("wrath" and "anger"), came and swallowed Moses up. Of course, a man head-first inside a snake would look rather much like a penis in a foreskin. To touch Moses's 'feet' is probably a euphemism for genitals: the blood of Eliezer's circumcision touched to Moses's own mark of circumcision.

the surround, is instituted by the mother, for her, the cruelty basically being hers, and sometimes the very act of cutting off that sort of ring [Zipporah] had to eat the still bloody foreskin, I imagine first by sucking it, my first beloved cannibal, initiator at the sublime gate of fellatio, like so many *mohels*⁷³ for centuries had practiced suction, or *mezizah*,⁷⁴ right on the glans, mixing wine and blood with it, until the thing was abolished in Paris in 1843 for reasons of hygiene".⁷⁵

For Derrida, women's cannibalistic impulses are based on 'penis envy,' and here he turns to Freud for inspiration.⁷⁶ Because women do not have a penis, they compensate in two ways: by sublimating their desire into the offering of their sons for a (vengeful) symbolic castration, thus making the different like; and by having invented weaving. Humankind enjoys woven cloth, braided hair, and fiber optic cables, all because women learned to weave their pubic hair to veil the fact that they had no penises, forming woven pseudo-penises to compensate.⁷⁷ They have

⁷³ Mohel: a ritual circumciser in Jewish tradition.

⁷⁴ *Metsisah*: the mohel's action of sucking the circumcision wound to stem the flow of blood. The history of the practice is explained in Gilman 1993, 68-70.

⁷⁵ Derrida 1993, 69.

⁷⁶ Melanie Klein, student of Freud's, argued that the cannibalistic mother is even scarier for young girls than for young boys. The mother seeks to cannibalize not only the boy's penis, but the girl's as-yet-unborn children from her young womb. See Klein 1926, 232 n.1; 1928, 74-75; 1929, 92; 1955, 48; and Hinshelwood, 62. On Klein and 'womb-envy,' see Minsky, 78-109. On cannibalism as the primary form of identification, see Freud, "Mourning and Melancholy," SE XIV, 249-251, 255-256.

⁷⁷ Derrida's images and language come from Freud's theory of penis envy: "Freud's metalanguage then resorts to the opposable figures of hiding or veiling (*verdenken, verhüllen*) on the one hand, and of uncovering (*Entdeckung, Erfindung*) on the other, still with a view to analysing the motivations which might push the woman to invent, discover, unveil—and hide. No doubt one thinks that women have contributed little to the history of civilisation by their 'discoveries and inventions' (*Entdeckungen und Erfindungen*). But they have discovered (*erfunden*), uncovered one technique, that of braiding and weaving. The unconscious motive of this 'discovery'? Hiding, veiling a 'defect of the genital organs.' So they discovered with a view to veiling. They have unveiled the means of veiling. In truth, looking more closely, over Freud's shoulder, they have discovered nothing at all, all they did was imitate, since Nature, dame 'Nature', making pubic hair grow at puberty, had already 'given,' [Freud] says, a model, a paradigm (*Vorbild*) for what was basically only an 'imitation' (*Nachahmung*). This

veiled the truth of their abyss, and in return betray their maternal responsibilities to nurture, by offering their sons up as a bloody sacrifice, so that the sons too will suffer loss of "the gram of the lost part of self ...".⁷⁸ Because she has originated the wounding, she continues to hold "the wedding ring," that peritomic circle beneath the glans, until she passes it along to another woman to own in turn: the wife of her son.⁷⁹ With the penile ring, the wedding ring, woman at last has a boy-man with whom she can share *jouissance* without the power struggle typical to marriage.⁸⁰ With her circumcised son, she can play, at last, in a patriarchal world: *"imagine the loved woman herself circumcising (me), as the mother did in the biblical narrative, slowly provoking ejaculation in her mouth just as she swallows the crown of bleeding skin with the sperm as a sign of exultant alliance, her legs open, her breasts between my legs, laughing, both of us laughing, passing skins from mouth to mouth like a ring, the pendant on the necklace round her neck"*.⁸¹

Shocking? But so is circumcision. Both Freud and Derrida refused to have their sons circumcised—though both would have been expected to as Jews—perhaps because of the impact that studying such a trauma had upon them.⁸² Misogynist? I can't decide yet, for even in the shocking section I have just quoted, about a mother laughingly fellating her circumcised son to ejaculation, there is a power and a *jouissance* attributed to women that sounds liberating—at least from the point of view of male

pubic hair already hides, it dissimulates, it veils (*verhüllt*) the genital organs. For this feminine 'technique,' only one further step was necessary: make the threads or fibres (*Fasern*) hold together, intertwine them from where they were stuck on the body right on the skin, merely bushy, mixed up, felted (*verflizt*)." (Derrida 1997, 29)

⁷⁸ Derrida 1993, 255.

⁷⁹ Derrida 1993, 255-256.

⁸⁰ See Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, on mothers' projecting 'eroticized otherness' onto their sons; see also Pinar, 105.

⁸¹ Derrida 1993, 217-218.

⁸² Gilman, 1993, 86; Derrida 1993, 93-95, 221, 297. Perhaps for this reason, Derrida describes himself as "the last of the Jews" (Derrida 1993, 153-154). The date of Derrida's own circumcision was July 23, 1930, his mother's birthday; Derrida 1993, 108.

fantasy.⁸³ The word plays, the polysemy, the dissemination, the over-interpretation, the PaRDeS, has led us to the margins of subversion—just where Derrida wants us—deconstructed, decentered, destabilized.⁸⁴

At the same time—however graphically—Derrida makes a point about the human search for truth. The Jewish boy’s newly-circumcised penis is covered with blood and wine—an “incredible supper” Derrida calls it⁸⁵—and the image is distinctly eucharistic. Like the Christian eucharist, it is a supper in which all are invited to participate.⁸⁶ But in this case, each of us must participate in an individualized eucharist of self-examination, self-criticism, self-knowledge, and the search for the deepest meanings of truth within us. Derrida calls this “autofellocircumcision”⁸⁷—the fellating of one’s self, one’s identity, one’s source of ‘ejaculatory’ production, up to the extent that one has drawn one’s own penile blood and left an indelible mark. This intense introspection, this application of the most severe criticism to one’s own thoughts and outpourings—the circumcising of all of one’s own words—is particularly the task of those who write: philosophers, poets, and academics. Only then can the meanings below the veiled meaning, the Peshat, be unveiled in all their polysemic glory.

In his *Circumfession*, Derrida observes that when St. Augustine wrote his famous “Confessions,” he intentionally obscured the boundary

⁸³ When I delivered this paper at a conference in Auckland in June, 2000, a man in the audience told me later that when he was growing up in Wales 50 years ago, it was not uncommon for mothers there to fellate their infant sons in order to encourage their foreskins to stretch so that they could retract properly during penile erection. I have also been told that a similar custom is traditional to Puerto Rican culture. In both cases, this is constructed as a mother’s job, not a father’s.

⁸⁴ This seems to be a narrative of a laughing woman who breaks the patriarchal taboo around mother-son sexual activity. Of course the son here is not an infant, since he is capable of ejaculation.

⁸⁵ Derrida 1993, 153-154.

⁸⁶ Derrida 1993, 153-154: “let people see it how I see it on my sex each time blood is mixed with sperm or the saliva of fellatio, describe my sex throughout thousands of years of Judaism, describe it (microscopy, photography, stereo-phototopy) until the paper breaks, make all the readers drool, wet lips, high and low, stretched out in their turn on the cushions, right on the knees of ‘godfather’ Elie...”

⁸⁷ Derrida 1993, 158-160.

between theology and autobiography.⁸⁸ In holding up his own circumcised penis for our observations, Derrida has also claimed autobiography as the sacred space of meaning-making from which theology ultimately proceeds.

Any discussion of 'masculinities' cannot be just about the construction and deconstruction of gender, sexual and emotional health, and mythopoetic warriors. It must also be about the relationship between God and human woundedness—including the woundedness that Freud and Derrida and I carry in our flesh. Only as we make meaning of that woundedness, whether we are circumcised or not, can we as embodied men and women whose lives are directly shaped by masculinities move toward greater wholeness.

⁸⁸ Derrida 1993, 86-87.

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