

FETISHISM

(1927)

Freud, S. (1927). Fetishism (J. Strachey, Trans.). In *The complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. XXI, pp. 147-157). London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psychoanalysis.

EDITOR'S NOTE

FETISCHISMUS

(a) GERMAN EDITIONS:

- 1927 *Almanach 1928*, 17-24.
1927 *Int. Z. Psychoanal.*, **13** (4), 373-8.
1928 *G.S.*, **11**, 395-401.
1931 *Sexualtheorie und Traumlehre*, 220-7.
1948 *G.W.*, **14**, 311-17.

(b) ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

'Fetishism'

- 1928 *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, **9** (2), 161-6. (Tr. Joan Riviere.)
1950 *C.P.*, **5**, 198-204. (Revised reprint of above.)

The present translation is a modified version of the one published in 1950.

This paper was finished at the end of the first week of August, 1927 (Jones, 1957, 146), and was published almost simultaneously the same autumn in the *Almanach 1928* and in the last issue of the *Zeitschrift* for 1927.

In his earliest discussion of fetishism, in the *Three Essays* (1905d), *Standard Ed.*, **7**, 153-5, Freud wrote that 'no other variation of the sexual instinct that borders on the pathological can lay so much claim to our interest as this one', and he in fact returned many times to a consideration of it. In this first account he did not go much further than maintaining that 'the choice of a fetish is an after-effect of some sexual impression, received as a rule in early childhood', and he left it at that in some passing comments on foot-fetishism in his study on *Grädiva* (1907a) a year or two later (*ibid.*, **9**, 46-7). His next approach to the subject seems to have been in an unpublished paper 'On the Genesis of Fetishism', read to the Vienna Psycho-Analytical Society on February 24, 1909 (Jones, 1955, 332); but we have unluckily not been given access to the Society's Minutes. At that time he was on the point of preparing the 'Rat Man'

analysis (1909*d*) for publication, and in it he mentioned a fresh point—the connection of fetishism with pleasure in smell (ibid., 10, 247)—which he enlarged upon in a footnote added to the *Three Essays* in its second edition of 1910 (ibid., 7, 155). But soon afterwards a new and more important connection must have occurred to him, for this same added footnote contained the first assertion that the fetish stands for the missing penis of the woman, which had figured prominently among the infantile sexual theories to which he had recently devoted a paper (1908*c*), ibid., 9, 215–18. This new explanation of the fetish was also mentioned (as Freud remarks on p. 153*n*. below) in his study on Leonardo (1910*c*), ibid., 11, 96, published very soon after the *Three Essays* footnote.

The special question of the origin of foot-fetishism (referred to in the present paper, p. 155 below) attracted Freud's attention a few years later. On March 11, 1914, he read another paper to the Vienna Psycho-Analytical Society, on 'A Case of Foot-Fetishism'. This too remains unpublished, but this time we fortunately have a summary of it from Ernest Jones (1955, 342–3). The explanation of the choice of the foot as a fetish—approach to the woman's genitals from below—, which was arrived at there, was published in a further addition to the same footnote of the *Three Essays* in its third edition of 1915. Another similar case history was reported very briefly by Freud in Lecture XXII of his *Introductory Lectures* (1916–17). But though the present paper is of importance as bringing together and enlarging on Freud's earlier views on fetishism, its major interest lies in a very different direction—namely, in a fresh metapsychological development which it introduces. For several years past Freud had been using the concept of 'disavowal' (*Verleugnung*) especially in relation to children's reactions to the observation of the anatomical distinction between the sexes.¹ And in the present paper, basing himself on fresh clinical observations, he puts forward reasons for supposing that this 'disavowal' necessarily implies a split in the subject's ego. At the end of his life Freud took up this question again and widened its scope: in an unfinished and posthumously

¹ See, for instance, the paper dealing explicitly with that subject (1925*j*) as well as the earlier ones on 'The Infantile Genital Organization' (1923*e*), 'The Economic Problem of Masochism' (1924*c*) and 'The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis' (1924*e*).

published paper on 'Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence' (1940*e* [1938]) and in the last paragraphs of Chapter VIII of *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* (1940*a* [1938]). But though fetishism is specially considered in both these works, Freud there points out that this 'splitting of the ego' is not peculiar to fetishism but is in fact to be found in many other situations in which the ego is faced with the necessity of constructing a defence, and that it occurs not only in disavowal but also in repression.¹

¹ It is perhaps not entirely fanciful to see a beginning of these ideas in a paper sent by Freud to Fliess on January 1, 1896 (Freud, 1950*a*, Draft K). In that paper Freud speaks of the final stage of the 'neuroses of defence' as involving a 'malformation' or 'alteration' of the ego. Something similar is even to be found still earlier, in the third section of the first paper on the neuro-psychoses of defence (1894*a*).

FETISHISM

IN the last few years I have had an opportunity of studying analytically a number of men whose object-choice was dominated by a fetish. There is no need to expect that these people came to analysis on account of their fetish. For though no doubt a fetish is recognized by its adherents as an abnormality, it is seldom felt by them as the symptom of an ailment accompanied by suffering. Usually they are quite satisfied with it, or even praise the way in which it eases their erotic life. As a rule, therefore, the fetish made its appearance in analysis as a subsidiary finding.

For obvious reasons the details of these cases must be withheld from publication; I cannot, therefore, show in what way accidental circumstances have contributed to the choice of a fetish. The most extraordinary case seemed to me to be one in which a young man had exalted a certain sort of 'shine on the nose' into a fetishistic precondition. The surprising explanation of this was that the patient had been brought up in an English nursery but had later come to Germany, where he forgot his mother-tongue almost completely. The fetish, which originated from his earliest childhood, had to be understood in English, not German. The 'shine on the nose' [in German '*Glanz auf der Nase*']—was in reality a '*glance* at the nose'. The nose was thus the fetish, which, incidentally, he endowed at will with the luminous shine which was not perceptible to others.

In every instance, the meaning and the purpose of the fetish turned out, in analysis, to be the same. It revealed itself so naturally and seemed to me so compelling that I am prepared to expect the same solution in all cases of fetishism. When now I announce that the fetish is a substitute for the penis, I shall certainly create disappointment; so I hasten to add that it is not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular and quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but had later been lost. That is to say, it should normally have been given up, but the fetish is precisely designed to preserve it from extinction. To put it more plainly: the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little

boy once believed in and—for reasons familiar to us—does not want to give up.¹

What happened, therefore, was that the boy refused to take cognizance of the fact of his having perceived that a woman does not possess a penis. No, that could not be true: for if a woman had been castrated, then his own possession of a penis was in danger; and against that there rose in rebellion the portion of his narcissism which Nature has, as a precaution, attached to that particular organ. In later life a grown man may perhaps experience a similar panic when the cry goes up that Throne and Altar are in danger, and similar illogical consequences will ensue. If I am not mistaken, Laforgue would say in this case that the boy 'scotomizes' his perception of the woman's lack of a penis.² A new technical term is justified when it describes a new fact or emphasizes it. This is not so here. The oldest word in our psycho-analytic terminology, 'repression', already relates to this pathological process. If we wanted to differentiate more sharply between the vicissitude of the *idea* as distinct from that of the *affect*,³ and reserve the word '*Verdrängung*' ['repression'] for the affect, then the correct German word for the vicissitude of the *idea* would be '*Verleugnung*' ['disavowal'].⁴ 'Scotomization' seems to me particularly unsuitable, for it suggests that the perception is entirely wiped

¹ This interpretation was made as early as 1910, in my study on Leonardo da Vinci, without any reasons being given for it. [*Standard Ed.*, 11, 96. Cf. Editor's Note above, p. 150.]

² I correct myself, however, by adding that I have the best reasons for supposing that Laforgue would not say anything of the sort. It is clear from his own remarks [Laforgue, 1926] that 'scotomization' is a term which derives from descriptions of dementia praecox, which does not arise from a carrying-over of psycho-analytic concepts to the psychoses and which has no application to developmental processes or to the formation of neuroses. In his exposition in the text of his paper, the author has been at pains to make this incompatibility clear.

³ [Cf. 'Repression' (1915*d*), *Standard Ed.*, 14, 152*f*. and the Appendix to the first paper on the neuro-psychoses of defence (1894*a*).]

⁴ [Some discussion of Freud's use of this term and of the English rendering of it appears in an Editor's footnote to the paper on 'The Infantile Genital Organization' (1923*e*), *Standard Ed.*, 19, 143. It may be remarked that in Chapter VIII of the *Outline of Psycho-Analysis* (1940*a* [1938]) Freud makes a different distinction between the uses of the two words: 'repression' applies to defence against internal instinctual demands and 'disavowal' to defence against the claims of external reality.]

out, so that the result is the same as when a visual impression falls on the blind spot in the retina. In the situation we are considering, on the contrary, we see that the perception has persisted, and that a very energetic action has been undertaken to maintain the disavowal. It is not true that, after the child has made his observation of the woman, he has preserved unaltered his belief that women have a phallus. He has retained that belief, but he has also given it up. In the conflict between the weight of the unwelcome perception and the force of his counter-wish, a compromise has been reached, as is only possible under the dominance of the unconscious laws of thought—the primary processes. Yes, in his mind the woman *has* got a penis, in spite of everything; but this penis is no longer the same as it was before. Something else has taken its place, has been appointed its substitute, as it were, and now inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor. But this interest suffers an extraordinary increase as well, because the horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of this substitute. Furthermore, an aversion, which is never absent in any fetishist, to the real female genitals remains a *stigma indelebile* of the repression that has taken place. We can now see what the fetish achieves and what it is that maintains it. It remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it. It also saves the fetishist from becoming a homosexual, by endowing women with the characteristic which makes them tolerable as sexual objects. In later life, the fetishist feels that he enjoys yet another advantage from his substitute for a genital. The meaning of the fetish is not known to other people, so the fetish is not withheld from him: it is easily accessible and he can readily obtain the sexual satisfaction attached to it. What other men have to woo and make exertions for can be had by the fetishist with no trouble at all.

Probably no male human being is spared the fright of castration at the sight of a female genital. Why some people become homosexual as a consequence of that impression, while others fend it off by creating a fetish, and the great majority surmount it, we are frankly not able to explain. It is possible that, among all the factors at work, we do not yet know those which are decisive for the rare pathological results. We must be content if we can explain what has happened, and may for the

present leave on one side the task of explaining why something has *not* happened.

One would expect that the organs or objects chosen as substitutes for the absent female phallus would be such as appear as symbols of the penis in other connections as well. This may happen often enough, but is certainly not a deciding factor. It seems rather that when the fetish is instituted some process occurs which reminds one of the stopping of memory in traumatic amnesia. As in this latter case, the subject's interest comes to a halt half-way, as it were; it is as though the last impression before the uncanny and traumatic one is retained as a fetish. Thus the foot or shoe owes its preference as a fetish—or a part of it—to the circumstance that the inquisitive boy peered at the woman's genitals from below, from her legs up;¹ fur and velvet—as has long been suspected—are a fixation of the sight of the pubic hair, which should have been followed by the longed-for sight of the female member; pieces of underclothing, which are so often chosen as a fetish, crystallize the moment of undressing, the last moment in which the woman could still be regarded as phallic. But I do not maintain that it is invariably possible to discover with certainty how the fetish was determined.

An investigation of fetishism is strongly recommended to anyone who still doubts the existence of the castration complex or who can still believe that fright at the sight of the female genital has some other ground—for instance, that it is derived from a supposed recollection of the trauma of birth.²

For me, the explanation of fetishism had another point of theoretical interest as well. Recently, along quite speculative lines, I arrived at the proposition that the essential difference between neurosis and psychosis was that in the former the ego, in the service of reality, suppresses a piece of the id, whereas in a psychosis it lets itself be induced by the id to detach itself from a piece of reality. I returned to this theme once again later on.³ But soon after this I had reason to regret that I had ventured so far. In the analysis of two young men I learned that each—one when he was two years old and the other when he was ten—had failed to take cognizance of the death of his

¹ [Cf. Editor's Note, p. 150 above.]

² [Cf. Rank, 1924, 22-4.]

³ 'Neurosis and Psychosis' (1924*b*) and 'The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis' (1924*e*).

beloved father—had 'scotomized' it—and yet neither of them had developed a psychosis. Thus a piece of reality which was undoubtedly important had been disavowed by the ego, just as the unwelcome fact of women's castration is disavowed in fetishists. I also began to suspect that similar occurrences in childhood are by no means rare, and I believed that I had been guilty of an error in my characterization of neurosis and psychosis. It is true that there was one way out of the difficulty. My formula needed only to hold good where there was a higher degree of differentiation in the psychological apparatus; things might be permissible to a child which would entail severe injury to an adult.

But further research led to another solution of the contradiction. It turned out that the two young men had no more 'scotomized' their father's death than a fetishist does the castration of women. It was only one current in their mental life that had not recognized their father's death; there was another current which took full account of that fact. The attitude which fitted in with the wish and the attitude which fitted in with reality existed side by side. In one of my two cases this split had formed the basis of a moderately severe obsessional neurosis. The patient oscillated in every situation in life between two assumptions: the one, that his father was still alive and was hindering his activities; the other, opposite one, that he was entitled to regard himself as his father's successor. I may thus keep to the expectation that in a psychosis the one current—that which fitted in with reality—would have in fact been absent.

Returning to my description of fetishism, I may say that there are many and weighty additional proofs of the divided attitude of fetishists to the question of the castration of women. In very subtle instances both the disavowal and the affirmation of the castration have found their way into the construction of the fetish itself. This was so in the case of a man whose fetish was an athletic support-belt which could also be worn as bathing drawers. This piece of clothing covered up the genitals entirely and concealed the distinction between them. Analysis showed that it signified that women were castrated and that they were not castrated; and it also allowed of the hypothesis that men were castrated, for all these possibilities could equally well be concealed under the belt—the earliest rudiment of

which in his childhood had been the fig-leaf on a statue. A fetish of this sort, doubly derived from contrary ideas, is of course especially durable. In other instances the divided attitude shows itself in what the fetishist does with his fetish, whether in reality or in his imagination. To point out that he reveres his fetish is not the whole story; in many cases he treats it in a way which is obviously equivalent to a representation of castration. This happens particularly if he has developed a strong identification with his father and plays the part of the latter; for it is to him that as a child he ascribed the woman's castration. Affection and hostility in the treatment of the fetish—which run parallel with the disavowal and the acknowledgment of castration—are mixed in unequal proportions in different cases, so that the one or the other is more clearly recognizable. We seem here to approach an understanding, even if a distant one, of the behaviour of the '*coupeur de nattes*'.¹ In him the need to carry out the castration which he disavows has come to the front. His action contains in itself the two mutually incompatible assertions: 'the woman has still got a penis' and 'my father has castrated the woman'. Another variant, which is also a parallel to fetishism in social psychology, might be seen in the Chinese custom of mutilating the female foot and then revering it like a fetish after it has been mutilated. It seems as though the Chinese male wants to thank the woman for having submitted to being castrated.

In conclusion we may say that the normal prototype of fetishes is a man's penis, just as the normal prototype of inferior organs is a woman's real small penis, the clitoris.²

¹ [A pervert who enjoys cutting off the hair of females. Part of the present explanation was given by Freud in his study of Leonardo (1910c), *Standard Ed.*, 11, 96.]

² [This is an allusion to Adler's insistence on 'organ-inferiority' as the basis of all neuroses. Cf. a footnote to the paper on 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes' (1925j), *Standard Ed.*, 19, 253-4, and a longer discussion in Lecture XXXI of the *New Introductory Lectures* (1933a).]