Early Origins of Envy and Devaluation of Women
Implications for Sex-Role Stereotypes

HARRIET E. LERNER

Psychoanalysts have long believed that penis envy is central to the understanding of women and have invoked this concept to explain everything from a woman's desire for a husband and child to her strivings to work and compete in traditionally masculine fields. Those outside psychoanalytic circles have shown less enthusiasm for such explanations—particularly members of the Women's Liberation Movement who angrily protest that women have cause to be envious of men's position in society for reasons other than their possession of the desired penis. Certain psychoanalysts have, in turn, insisted that the Women's Liberation Movement is itself a manifestation of penis envy and that discontent with the female role is a psychiatric problem.

Narrow and stereotyped notions concerning women's appropriate place in society are not confined to a mere handful of psychoanalysts. The most authoritative of psychoanalysts have concurred that the "true" nature of women is to find fulfillment in the traditional role of wife and mother (Chesler, 1972). Without sharing Freud's views of the oedipus complex and penis envy, Jung (1928) nevertheless stated, "that in taking up a masculine calling, studying, and working in a man's way, woman is doing something not wholly in agreement with, if not directly injurious to, her feminine nature" (p. 169). Bettelheim (1965) commented, "as much as women want to be good scientists or engineers, they want first and foremost to be womanly companions of men and to be mothers" (p. 15). Women who are not happy with this state of affairs, according to Freud (1925), have refused adaptively to come to grips with their sexual inferiority and still have the "hope of some day obtaining a penis in spite of everything . . ." (p. 191).

Reprinted from Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic 38(6):538-553, 1974. Copyright © 1974, The Menninger Foundation. Reprinted by permission. The author would like to express her gratitude to Dr. Otto Kernberg, Dr. Paul Pruyser, and Dr. Tobias Brocher for their helpful comments and criticisms.
While I am not in agreement with those who discredit the importance of penis envy, I do believe psychoanalysts who rationalize certain maladaptive aspects of femininity as unavoidable biological necessities court contempt by carrying the concept of penis envy to untenable extremes. As Chesler (1972) has commented, "The 'Freudian' vision beholds women as essentially 'breeders and bearers' as potentially warm-hearted creatures, but more often as cranky children with uteruses, forever mourning the loss of male organs and male identity" (p. 79).

It is unfortunate, however, that feminist anger and misunderstanding have led to a global damnation of all psychoanalytic thinking, as well as a somewhat more benign condemnation of other established modes of treatment. There have been numerous revisions of Freud's viewpoints on women with frequent references to the unfortunate "phallocentric" bias of his theorizing and open acknowledgment that femininity and female sexuality are insufficiently understood (David, 1970; Torok, 1970). Even Freud expressed reticence and insecurity in the face of that "dark continent" of femininity and never failed to stress the incomplete and tentative nature of his theorizing. Recent psychoanalytic writers have, in fact, shown considerable appreciation of feminist protests and of the intense cultural pressures that combine with intrapsychic factors to encourage "women [to] accept [a] ... neurotically dependent, self-effacing solution in life" (Symonds, 1971–72, p. 224).

Long before the current feminist movement, however, there existed wide recognition that femininity in most cultures is much devalued and that frequent exaltation and idealization of women hardly mask the underlying contempt for them (Horney, 1932). Writers from many disciplines, psychoanalysts among them, have written about the quasi-racial discrimination that exists against women. David (1970), for example, has noted one primitive tribe that refers to women as "the race which is not entitled to speak" (p. 50); and anthropologists have observed that the devaluation of women in many cultures is no less intense than the oppression of racial or ethnic minority groups.

The oppression of women is unique, however, in one important respect: Women participate as vigorously in their own depreciation as do men. The "masochistic attitude" of many women can be easily recognized, and women's belittling of their own sex is observed daily in our consulting rooms, demonstrated in experimental research (Goldberg, 1968), and is inherent in cultural institutions around the world (Lederer, 1968).

The devaluation of women is readily documented, but the reasons behind the complicity of both sexes are less than clear. In addition to powerful cultural pressures on women to devalue themselves, there must be strong internal pressures as well, for institutionalized patterns are not