

## Review Article

# "Father, can't you see I'm burning?"

## A reexamination of the Freudian dream from the perspective of the paternal function and cross-generational transmission

Dionisios Bratis<sup>1,2</sup>, Georgios Zafeiropoulos<sup>2</sup>, Theodoros Kotrotsos<sup>3</sup>, Georgios Giakoumakis<sup>2</sup>, Maria Anagnostopoulou<sup>1,2</sup>, Athanasios Tselebis<sup>1</sup>, Argyro Pachi<sup>1</sup>

### Summary

*This article is partly based on the preface presented on behalf of the Forum of Athens, Member of the International of Forums of the School of Psychoanalysis of the Forums of the Lacanian Field (IF-EPFCL) as an introduction to the 1st Meeting of the Multilingual Zone of the IF-EPFCL in May 2021, on the topic of "What is a Father?" Today, and in light of the debate surrounding the high-profile case of the death of three young children in Greece, we revisit the fundamental psychoanalytic issue of the function of the father, beginning with an attempt to reexamine the much discussed dream reported by Sigmund Freud in the "Interpretation of Dreams", known to many thanks to the famous phrase "Father, can't you see I'm burning?" Following that, we will touch on the concept of the symbolic father, as construed by Jacques Lacan, and on the questions that arise for the subject with regard to the signifier "I am a father".*

**Keywords:** psychoanalysis, symbolic father, paternal function

### Freud and the father

*"I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father's protection" [1]*

Freud's categorical statement in "Civilization and its Discontents", along with the latest current affairs in Greece, has given rise to our need to revisit classical psychoanalytic literature in an attempt to reexamine the issue of the paternal function through the work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan.

It is well known that Freud's magnum opus, "The Interpretation of Dreams" - a work inaugurating his theory on the unconscious and its mechanisms - emerged from the grief brought on by his own father's death in October 1896 [2, 3]. In response to Fliess's letter of condolence, Freud writes: "By one of those dark pathways behind the official consciousness, the old man's death has affected me deeply. I valued him highly, understood him completely, and with his peculiar mixture of profound wisdom and fantastic lightheartedness, he had a significant effect on my life. By the time he died, his life had long been over, but in my inner self the whole past has been awakened by this event. I now feel quite uprooted" [2].

It is, therefore, in our view, no coincidence that Freud elected to place the dream of a father, as narrated by a female patient, at the frontispiece of the famous seventh chapter of his "interpretation of dreams". The story, in brief, goes as follows: A father cared for his gravely ill child for a long time until the child ultimately died. Exhausted, he went into an adjoining room to rest, leaving someone else to stand by the child's deathbed. As he fell asleep, the father dreamt that his child, standing by his bedside, grabbed his arm and whispered to him, admonishingly: "Father, can't you see I'm burning?" The father awoke and ran to the child's room, only to find that the man tasked with waking his dead son had fallen asleep while one of the candles placed around the bed had toppled over, burning the child's hand [4].

Although Freud's interpretative approach to the material from this dream falls within his general principle on wish fulfillment (in this case that, through the dream, the father managed to momentarily prolong his child's life), it allows room for further speculation concerning certain elements of the dream, particularly with regard to the signifier "I am burning" as well as the phrase "Father, can't you see?" [4]. Drawing from the Lacanian theory on the paternal function, we will

<sup>1</sup> Psychiatric Department, "Sotiria" General Hospital of Chest Diseases, Athens, Greece.

<sup>2</sup> Forum of Athens, IF, School of Psychoanalysis of the Forums of the Lacanian Field.

<sup>3</sup> Clinical Education Program, Forum of Athens, IF, School of Psychoanalysis of the Forums of the Lacanian Field.

\*Corresponding author:

Dionisios Bratis  
Mesogeion 152, 11527, Athens, Greece  
Email: dionbratis@yahoo.gr

propose an interpretative approach relevant to the issue we are concerned with here.

### From the mythical father to the symbolic father

The story of the invention of the father-protector, inscribed in Freudian mythology, is more or less well known. Composed within the constructs constituting "totem and taboo" and "Moses and monotheism", the father-protector is inextricably linked to the very genealogy of law, since totemic rules constitute precisely the first legal system of rules [5, 6]. However, if law stems from the function of the father - a law whose foundations lie on the abnegation of the drive - it is that same function that establishes the history of civilization:

"Under the influence of external conditions (...) it happened that the matriarchal structure of society was replaced by a patriarchal one. This naturally brought with it a revolution in the existing state of the law (...). This turning from the mother to the father, however, signifies above all a victory of spirituality over the senses, that is to say a step forward in culture, since maternity is proved by the senses whereas paternity is a surmise based on a deduction and a premise" [7].

To put it succinctly, what this boils down to is the antithesis between that which is and that which it ought to be, a distinction introduced in relation to the father [6]. However, if it is indeed the father who establishes law and civilization, this occurs a posteriori, inasmuch as the father is dead. As Lacan emphatically illustrates, the association of the signifier of the father, the creator of Law, to death - to his murder at the hands of the sons of the horde, to be precise - signals the moment of the emergence of debt, through which the subject is hereafter inscribed into Law, that is, into the Symbolic [3]. The symbolic father is, therefore, the dead father, an excellent depiction of whom can be found in Dora's dream, where her entire neurotic "scenography" illustrates how a father, even an impotent one, is always a father [8, 9]. If the allusion to the father comprises the bedrock for every form of religious faith, it is also he who, "deserving of love", generously offers his protection to the child [3, 10].

It is important to dwell on this point, since, at first sight, it may appear surprising, granted that it seems to contradict the prevalent assumption on the primacy of the child-mother relationship. Here, however, we are well within the field of identification and, although primary identifications often refer to the relationship with the mother, Freud himself in "group psychology and the analysis of the ego" subverts this notion by proposing that the primary identification is with the father, since he is the one who prevails in terms of an absolute first identification [3, 11].

But, if love and protection are interwoven with the figure of the father, what kind of protection is this? Obviously, it is the duty of every father - and of course, equally so, of every mother or adult - to protect the young defenseless child from everyday malignancies, and it is a fact that is usually unnecessary to dwell on the question what their fundamental and self-evident function indeed is, until reality itself, through extreme events, begs us to reopen the question.

In an insightful essay, Alain Badiou, posing the question from the viewpoint of the son (and of the child in general), writes that his fate, his destiny, is love, as an act negating murder, as so mediated by the Law. At least, that is how it so appeared. For, as he approaches the issue in relation to the mandates of our postmodern reality, the author confesses his qualms regarding both the fate of the father and that of the child. Observed from the side of the latter, the father, either as a bearer of jouissance or as the representative of an external - anonymous - law, constitutes a fragile image that allows for an equally uncertain sonship. The infamous youth gangs, hordes with no father, deprived of the "opportunity to appeal to a redeeming murder and to come to an authentic agreement between them", seem doomed to a perpetual repetitiveness, indicative of the death drive's predominance [12].

The question of the paternal function appears, therefore, to be inherent to the issue of what it is that is transmitted from generation to generation. If, indeed, "the true function of the Father is fundamentally to unite (and not to oppose) a desire to the Law" [13], this appears as the sole route for the humanization of the son, the singular form of protection a father can offer, his principal legacy, his invaluable gift for the next generations.

Castration, as Lacan suggested at one point, is transmitted from father to son [3]. And since poets always prove to be, as Freud pointed out early on [14], pioneers in the conception of the encrypted, we would like to refer those who are not already familiar with the text, to Philip Roth's autobiographical novel "patrimony: a true story" [15]. There, the author, while caring for his dying father, discovers the content of his true inheritance, which is nothing more than his father's own symbolic castration, that is, his own inscription into Law.

If, therefore, we chose the dead child's plea that appears to the grieving father in his dream, as the title to this short essay, it is because it encapsulates, in a heartbreaking way, precisely what we attempted to articulate here. And, we postulate, that this plea contains something that is inherent in the father's own, subjective, tragically experienced boundary, as a subject inscribed into Law, that is, into the symbolic order.

### What is a father?

Indeed, it can be argued that the entirety of Freud's work revolves around the question of "what does it mean to be a father?" If this is indeed true, we could agree with Lacan's observation that posing this question is an entirely separate matter than actually being a father. This is because the only one who could offer an absolute, categorical answer to this question from the position of the father - of the symbolic father - would be someone who, like the God of monotheism, could say "I am who I am". This, of course, is a statement that no human subject can make. If, therefore, the symbolic father remains inaccessible, Freud's construction of the totemic myth is nothing more than an attempt to provide an answer to the question of "where is the father?" From the perspective of structural anthropology, with particular ref-

erence to the work of Claude Levi-Strauss [16], and through a structural reading of myth, what clearly emerges as the sine qua non condition for the existence of all other fathers is that the singular father - the primordial, the mythical father - must be dead [17]. Consequently, if the murder of the father at the hands of the sons of the primitive horde is not introduced into Freudian theory as a kind of explanation of what it means to "copulate with the mother", what it ultimately signals is the prohibition of this jouissance, the introduction, that is, of the primal prohibition that opens the way for the subject's inscription into Law and for its passage into the symbolic order and to the function of language [3, 18].

Going back to the question of what the declaration "I am a father" could actually mean, and since we are within the realm of language, we must accept that no answer can be provided to the issue of the constitution of the paternal function outside the logic of the signifier. For, indeed, if we narrow down the issue to a matter of biological process - sexual intercourse between a man and a woman leading to conception, pregnancy, and, ultimately, the birth of a child - we will be left with nothing that allows us to construct a signifier for fatherhood with all the resulting functions we would logically expect from it, namely, those pertaining to the love and protection of the child: The extreme nature of the consequences of this absence is dramatically confirmed by current events.

As Lacan asserts, a kind of retrospective activity is required for the act of sexual intercourse and procreation to acquire its real meaning for a man. However, for this retrospective activity to be possible, the prior presence, the affirmation, of a primary signifier, that of the "Name of the Father", is required. For a man, "the signifier I am a father," Lacan states, "is that which also lays out the central avenue in the sexual relations with a woman. If this central avenue does not exist, one is faced with some elementary pathways" [19]. These "elementary pathways", which are not sufficient and do not provide the guarantees required for a subject to accept paternity, lead one to the enigmatic phenomena often encountered in clinical practice and which, through different psychopathological variations, express what is now the enigma - and not the question - of paternity.

## Conclusion

If the father and his function lie at the origins of psychoanalysis, as all Freudian thought suggests, it is Lacan who elevates the term "father" to a guiding thread for all psychoanalytic theory. From this point of view, the function of the symbolic father, a concept central to Lacanian theory, is crucial to the constitution of the subject, since the foreclosure of the "Name of the Father" - the primary signifier - leads to the absence of the subject's ability to assume the paternal function, often with tragic consequences.

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