The Postmodern Quandary:

Looking for Meaning in Cixous’ ‘Castration or Decapitation?’

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When I came across Helene Cixous’ paper ‘Castration or Decapitation’ whilst completing an Arts degree course, I was intrigued not only by the paper itself, which I found difficult, but by my peer’s and teacher’s responses to it. They varied from loving it to hating it, but when questioned they could not articulate why or what they thought it meant. I felt it was important to interpret this text, not to venerate it as one of a canon of postmodern feminist texts. These texts are significant documents as they are part of present day intellectual discourse, but I find they reflect the confusion that characterises a great deal of postmodern thought. I have chosen to interpret Cixous’ text in the context of contemporary developmental psychoanalytic theory and research. This is the theoretical paradigm I find most likely to help in understanding complexity and subjectivity in the discourse of the humanities.

Cixous uses the language of psychoanalysis in her text ‘Castration or Decapitation’ and then seems to subvert it using feminist deconstruction. The result is a text that is on the surface confronting but at the same time confusing and disconnected. The obscurity of the text, the direct hostile references to psychoanalysis and the psychically rich and emotionally provocative images Cixous conjures suggest an underlying landscape to the text. In this paper I attempt to interpret and expose this latent content in order to understand the text.

First a word on the application of psychoanalytic insights to the criticism and interpretation of texts—some people feel this should be confined to the consultation room and not applied to writers, authors and artists. The unconscious is not only revealed via reported dreams and free association but is behind all the choices of behaviour. It is revealed in the expressive traces of language, and as such has been used to investigate written material. Authors such as Abraham and Torok suggest that psychoanalysis is a theoretical tool used to explore textual meaning. They say the theory is used to investigate ‘the domain and configuration of incoherence, discontinuity, disruption and disintegration …’ (Abraham & Torok, 1994, p.6) which they propose is suggestive of mental disorganisation resulting from a lack of capacity for introjection.

Cixous is writing to an audience, her readers. There is a relationship, albeit a distant and disconnected one. The nature of this relationship is that the writer offers her thoughts as a result of her unique experience and the readers must interpret the meaning on the basis of their own experience. This leads to conflict over the control of meaning of the text. In trying to interpret
the meaning readers are affected by the words. For example they might be bored, frustrated, interested, moved or excited by Cixous' text, which is extreme in its capacity to produce a myriad of affective responses.

Perry Nodelman says:

If the experience of literature is genuinely transactional, it always represents a meeting point of what texts invite from readers and what readers do in response to the invitation. (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 24)

So what are the manifest features of Cixous' text? What is she inviting from the reader? I will begin by reproducing some of my earliest reactions to the text. Cixous begins with a series of anecdotes, which she says illustrates the theme, 'on sexual difference'. (Cixous, 1981, p. 41) She outlines an argument between Zeus and Hera about which of the sexes receives greater sexual pleasure. Cixous then emphatically declares that this argument should be of the greatest interest to psychoanalysts'. (Cixous, 1981, p. 41) Tiresias, the blind seer, was called on to arbitrate as he had spent seven years a man and seven a woman. Only he could know! Cixous declares 'obviously neither Zeus nor Hera could answer this without giving their own answer'. (Cixous, 1981, p. 41) However, this awareness of subjectivity is exactly what psychoanalysts would be interested in and that it equally applied to the extraordinary Tiresias who also could only give his own answer. In fact, psychoanalysts would only be interested in an individual's subjective experience of sex. Why would Cixous make such a strange attribution to psychoanalysts?

In this first anecdote Tiresias declared that in his experience nine out of ten parts of sexual pleasure is a woman's. In the second anecdote, Cixous says 'It's no coincidence that Tiresias makes another appearance in none other than the oedipal scene,' (Cixous, 1981, p. 41–42) that it was Tiresias who made Oedipus see clearly that his lover is his mother. Cixous states, We should note that these things are all linked together and bear some relation to the question “What is woman for man?” (Cixous, 1981, p. 42) But how are we the readers meant to link these things? I could not make a meaningful link here and Cixous does not elucidate what she understands the link to be. And what do we therefore understand in relation to the question ‘what is woman for man?’ (Cixous, 1981, p. 42) Again Cixous leaves us alone here. And again I was at a loss, hoping all would be revealed later in the paper. But there was only more confusion. She seemed to later contradict the idea that women gain more pleasure, suggesting that women are either asleep, hysterical, at war with men or learning how to speak.

The next paragraph follows in a freely associative style without any explicit link. Cixous reminisces then proceeds to the next anecdote, the Chinese story of the King who commanded his General to train his one hundred and eighty wives to be soldiers. This strange request was carried out with success only after two senior wives lost their heads as punishment for not complying. The whole group had fallen about laughing at the drum signals for different actions. Cixous says this demonstrates the masculine economy, which has rules taught and ordered by the castration complex as opposed to the feminine economy of disorder and laughter that cannot be taught unless the females realise the threat of loss of their heads and then lose them ‘to complete silence, turned into automatons.’ (Cixous, 1981, p. 43)

As readers, are we also to ‘lose our heads?’ Should we not question this interpretation of the anecdote? Would not the men in the story also operate under the same threat of decapitation? Would not men who were unfamiliar with a culture where the drum beat was a language for rules of warfare also think that this was funny and absurd and fall about laughing, that is until
someone lost his head? Also, I question why Cixous expressly says ‘Every detail of this story counts.’ (Cixous, 1981, p. 42) But why and to what end? Again the details are neither explained nor are they self-evident. What does this mean? Does this mean I am stupid? Fear, panic, confusion—these are some of the words that came to mind when I read this text. I am led to think of a story where a small voice cries out from the crowd ‘but the emperor has no clothes on!’ Is Cixous a master weaver of a text where all is not as it seems?

I think back to reactions of my peers who read this text. Most of them said they really liked it but they did not know why. When I asked what it meant to them they replied that they did not know. I asked a communications lecturer and his reply was something to the effect of, ‘Cixous? What? Oh, a Phallocentric French Feminist! I don’t read them!’

In my reflections on this paper, I spent time wondering about my peers reactions to it. I thought of the idea of what a text is and how the complexity of life is massively and drastically compressed into a linear string of words selected to suit the purpose of the text. So an academic text is a string of words that argues a particular line. Cixous’ text is not like an academic essay. It is a presentation of anecdotes and ideas that abruptly stop and start, that seem related but are unrelated at the same time. It is a text that excites and frightens and resonates at a deep psychic level. I think that people like her text because they feel it somehow captures a chaotic sense of the rich multifaceted, multidimensional tapestry of life that is reminiscent of a Picasso painting, offering different perspectives at once.

These paragraphs describe my initial reactions to the text. Unlike those of my peers who appeared to accept this text without understanding or those who rejected it totally, I attempt to understand it. In this essay, I will limit myself to looking at some of the opening themes and assertions and see whether psychoanalytic interpretation of the material can offer any clarity to this text.

If we think about Tiresias and his subjective assertion, which is presented as a global given, that nine parts out of ten of all sexual pleasure is the woman’s, the only way to make sense of this in relation to the rest of the text, which presents women as powerless, asleep, hysterical, and lesser than men, is to think that Tiresias represents something.

In order to understand my interpretations of the latent content of Cixous’ paper it is essential that I outline very clearly the notion of self that underpins these interpretations. This notion is based on those parts of psychoanalytic theory that I can understand in the context of attachment theory and contemporary developmental neurology. This conceptualisation is of self as a complex dynamic system, which is influenced and shaped by a person’s experience of being and interacting in the world and with others. These interactions begin with conception and develop during infancy. They profoundly effect the way that individual will interact in the future, as models of attachment and interaction. From those interactions, the most primitive notions of the self are internalised. There are deterministic features that vary with each individual such as an infant’s temperament, the mother’s and the father’s personality functioning and the socioeconomic conditions. As well as this, there are deterministic features which are constant for all healthy individuals, such as striving for survival and homeostasis.

Solms and Turnbull state that survival means being conscious of how you feel in relation to inner states of awareness and outer realities. They quote Damasio who
… concluded that consciousness consists of more than mere awareness of our inner states; rather, it consists of fluctuating couplings of the current state of the self with the current state of the object world. Each unit of consciousness forges a link between the self and objects. (Solms & Turnbull, 2002, p. 92)

Survival for infants means engaging the most basic care from a primary caregiver. This is the attachment figure and for convenience I will call this person mother. Babies’ brains from birth are wired to relate to others, they will focus on faces, (Murray & Andrews, 2001, p. 21, 34–35) recognise familiar voices and, prefer the odour of their own mother’s milk to that of a stranger. (Murray & Andrews, 2001, p. 41) Given an undifferentiated field of vision, brain activity is chaotic. However, the presence of a face or a picture of facial features will cause the baby’s brain to be excited to organise and produce a basic cognition. Cognition, memory, recognition, and representation not associated with language thoughts but with body sensation. This is important as babies are highly attuned to the body sensations of the caregiver with whom they are engaging. That is, not what the voice is saying but how the voice is saying it. Babies will be soothed (feel safe, achieve homeostasis) or feel distressed depending on how the voice is associated with the baby’s experience of being in the mother’s womb.

The voice heard by the baby in the womb that is associated with comfort and homeostasis in the womb is one free of the distressing presence of stressor hormones produced by the stressed mother’s body. Foetal research has shown infants recognise tunes. For example, they may respond, by settling, to the title song from Neighbours if the mother watched the show while pregnant. (Hepper, 2002) I think the womb experience, in terms of sounds and the shared physiology that the mother and baby experience, is crucial in determining meaning assigned to sensations. So we can say the baby experiences the sensations of the mother in the womb and that this experience is continued out of the womb by association. The baby’s experience of self is determined by its experience of the mother. This linking of perceptual stimulation and bodily sensation continues after birth in relation to the mother. In a primitive cognitive process, the infant may register a familiar voice, such as the mother’s and link it to her face, as a visual representation, while also linking it with the affects associated with the mother’s voice, returned gaze and touch. That such linking occurs is further demonstrated by the newborn baby’s capacity to match an unusual oral sensation (a ridged pacifier unseen by the baby) and a visual representation of this (the baby’s preference for a similar ridged pattern over other patterns). (Murray & Andrews, 2001, p. 81) This suggests that the baby has representative images that it associates with stimuli and bodily sensations these provide a confirming basis for the developing sense of self. Thus there is a link between developmental neurology and the psychoanalytic theory of internal object relations.

This matching of objects on the outside to feelings on the inside also happens in relation to human objects. Babies from birth will mirror parental facial expressions such as tongue-poking, and parents mirror infants expressions and gestures. Murray and Andrews summarise Winnicott’s belief

that mirroring the baby’s experience has the important function of helping the baby to establish a ‘sense of self; he believed that the experience of having her own actions and feelings reflected back in the behaviour of someone else affirms, enriches, and gives greater coherence to the baby’s original experience. (Murray & Andrews, 2001, p. 51)
If we stop here and think about what Tiresias might represent in this context, things begin to make more sense. What if he represents the undifferentiated, unseparated baby that feels part of the mother, the baby that has not yet attained an independent sense of self? To explore this possibility we need to think about psychic aspects of gender to understand his assertion that nine parts out of ten of sexual pleasure is the woman’s.

In this paper I assert that sexual difference is clear, and dependent upon the biological differences between man and woman. The man has a penis. It projects out of his body and is only potent in terms of primary creativity (making babies) when it projects into a woman’s actively receptive vagina. This process can be seen being repeated with the projectiles of sperm, which actively seek out the egg, and the egg, which actively takes in the sperm. This active interaction of both parts represents primary creativity that is essential for the survival of our species. On the basis of these biological functions, I define masculine energy as any action of projecting out of one’s self, doing things in the world and seeking objects of attachment outside of oneself. This includes speaking and writing. Conversely, feminine energy is about taking in, introjecting, objects and people. This includes listening and reading. Successful relationships between people are based on both mindful projections and introjections. So if someone does not see you, take you in, you feel literally cut off. But I will return to this later.

A primary site of sensual pleasure in infancy is the mouth. Babies literally take things inside and link the physical sensations with the associated objects that are felt to be part of the baby and that tell the baby how it is. The first object from the world that goes into a baby’s mouth is the breast or the bottle teat, and it provides pleasure as well as easing the pain of hunger. Forme, the baby’s mouth represents a feminine energy. The mouth actively takes in the breast and the milk. As I see it, for breast fed babies this can be truly orgasmic as the baby actively sucks and waits in excited anticipation for the let down of milk. This feeding pleasure is associated with the breast. The breast represents a masculine part-object representation in the baby’s mind, with no direct erogenous sensations for the baby. As Freud stated it, sexual pleasure for the baby is associated with orality—the feminine erogenous active mouth. The breast is experienced as a male part-object of the baby with no erogenous sensations for the baby except by virtue of its presence, and as such the one-tenth pleasure associated with the masculine experience of sexual pleasure begins to make sense.

Tiresias represents the baby who doesn’t realise that the breast is in fact a separate entity. He is blind. He cannot differentiate between self and other and he is forever stuck, frozen at this point of development. His view of the world is skewed from this angle. Cixous associates Tiresias with Oedipus who is also blinded, he is also stuck developmentally. Having been originally abandoned on a hillside as a baby, he could not separate from his mother, which leads to the mother infecting all his sexual relationships on a psychic level. His perception of how things are is also skewed. He has a lover, but it is not until Tiresias tells him how things are that he realises the separation. It is so painful that he literally blinds himself.

Why does Cixous begin with these things? Her view of the world as she presents it in this paper is skewed and she blinds her readers with a mass of words. Cixous’ discourse about words, speaking, and writing is conflicted and confused. She feels that women need to ‘start speaking, stop saying that’ they have ‘nothing to say.’ (Cixous, 1981, p. 50) This suggests being mindful, but then she wants women’s writing to be all about the body, to be primitive and visceral, not connected and mindful. She seems to be actually provoking the analyst to see through the words and imagine how things really are for her, although she is enraged with psychoanalysis and the possible visibility of the pain of separation.
Cixous uses the story of the king who wishes his wives to be soldiers to conclude that the whole masculine economy is ruled by the castration complex and the whole feminine economy by decapitation. These attributions do not seem valid. In order to make sense of them we need to go back and think about development.

We left off thinking about the baby linking sensation and experience with primitive mental (preverbal) representation of part-objects inside itself. It is important to understand how this process progresses to a state where the individual develops a whole sense of self. What happens if the sense of self is not achieved and the individual is psychically frozen? We need to think about what happens to the capacity to introject and project in both these cases and the difference between them in relation to thinking about sexual difference.

As previously stated Winnicott identified adequate mirroring of the baby by the mother as a precursor to development of self. This implies a relationship in which the mother responds with a contingent liveliness to the baby’s physiological and psychological states. A good object is an internalisation based on the experience of being held by touch, sound, taste, or looks associated with comfort and pleasure. This situation requires that the mother can see her baby as it is—that she can introject. She can feel how her baby is, so that she can empathize. She can be mindful of how her baby is, so that she can mentalize or reflect on it, (Fonagy et al, 2003, p. 3) and so that she can offer (project) some containing expression to the baby, who cannot be mindful in the same way that she can. It is the mother’s ability to match thought and feeling that helps the baby to re-regulate.

Under optimal conditions a baby’s capacity for self-regulation increases with its capacity to maintain a good image, internal object or feeling of the mother, which in turn is related to the baby’s increasing ability to regulate its own affect, increasing its capacity for its reflective functioning and the generation of mentalization. Peter Fonagy and his colleagues see this mentalization as the ability to think about oneself and others in the world. (Fonagy et al, 2003, p. 3) The presence of good objects inside the baby is projected in turn to the mother as the display of contingent liveliness, comfort and good feeling on the part of the baby.

Neurobiologist Allan Schore summarizes what happens in the brain in the first year of development. The mother’s brain’s capacity to regulate for herself and her baby is located in the right hemisphere, and her actions associated with self and other regulation are imprinted on the infant’s right hemisphere, through their interactions associated with shared, reflected and imitated good feeling. The mother’s ability to empathize with the baby’s distress in a way that reflects the feeling back to the infant in a held form allows for re-regulation by the baby. This imprinting, or generation of neuronal pathways based on experience, is the foundation of all future intimate relational attachments for the baby. (Schore, 1998, p. 13–18)

If the mother has not had an adequate experience of being regulated in infancy by her own mother, then the interaction may actually traumatise the infant’s brain in a manner that interferes with development at biochemical, physiological and structural levels. (Schore, 1998, p. 17–18) Damage to the right hemisphere may result, interfering with the development of capacity for self-regulation and empathy. Poorly regulating environments affect individual infant constitutions in various ways to generate psychopathologies. Schore (1998, p. 15) states that ‘emotional psychopathologies are expressed in an inability to repair and recover from intense affective states.’
Let us consider a neuropsychoanalytic theory of the internalisation of objects of attachment. A bad internal object may result from an internalisation based on sustained maternal hostility, intrusiveness or emotional unavailability, which leaves the baby poorly affectively regulated, feeling attacked and stressed. The absence of maternal soothing may be experienced by the baby as the attacking presence of its own internal distress. To achieve homeostasis, the developing infant psyche may attempt to obliterate these attacking presences, leaving the infant with nothing but fragmented bits of hostile internal objects.

These fragmentary internal objects are not introjected in such a way that the baby can make meaningful links between its inside states and the outside objects. The incongruence between how the baby feels and how the mother is leads to shock and fear. The non-mirroring aspect of the mother is what is taken in. Abraham and Torak (1994 p. 16) call this ‘incorporation’, a sort of swallowing whole, while Fonagy et al (2002, p. 11) call it an ‘alien self-object’. The mother’s failure derives from her lack of capacity to properly introject the baby. Instead of seeing the baby as it is, she is doomed to project into the baby the alien bits that she took in herself as an infant.

In turn, as Guedeney states, ‘the child is persecuted by the relationship with the caregiver, or rather, by the loss of it, and exposes this by a massive projective identification’ (Guedeney, 1995, p. 10) of its own. This is seen not in the comfortable state of the regulated baby, but manifest in the uncomfortable crying with intense distress when such an infant is approached, or in floppy muscle tone and indifference to contact. This persecuted feeling is projected into others and ‘attacks every kind of relationship which the child might have’. (Guedeney, 1995, p. 11) These are visible manifestations of the destructive effect on neural activity that may result in infants from poorly attuned interactions with caregivers.

The capacity of the brain to cut off pain is humanity’s greatest creative survival strategy, saving the baby from the chaos of abandonment and death. This strategy can be thought of as a kind of decapitation, in the sense of the resultant split between mind and body, thought and affect. In place of Cixous’ proposition, ‘Castration or decapitation?’, I propose that castration leads to decapitation. The baby cuts itself off from the mother when the pain of the mother’s failure to respond empathically becomes too great. This arises when the mother in turn cuts off from the baby’s projections, leaving the baby castrated of its capacity to influence its environment.

Cixous’ need to split her ideas about masculine and feminine economy is related to the rigid notion that for males there is the castration complex and for females there is decapitation. Most contemporary psychoanalytic thinking has little place for gender division at this level.

The expressive traces of her text give clues as to why she chooses this rigid and illogical division of the sexes. She continuously relegates females in culture to the position of the powerless babies and places males in the position of the powerful mothers, rather than seeing an underlying equality and complementarity. She says, ‘Man/ Woman automatically means great/small, superior/inferior … means high/low’ (Cixous, 1981, p. 44) and so on. These are the positions of the baby who does not have the fantasy of omnipotence from having been empowered by the mother’s loving, empathy and thoughtfulness; a baby that is stuck in a situation of powerlessness, only to survive via psychopathological fantasies. This promoted me to speculation regarding the projection of authorial personal experience of environmental failure in Cixous’ cultural critique.

Cixous’ focuses on the phallus as a male attribute. She negates the masculine power that women
possess. Her preoccupation with castration as ruler of the male economy suggests penis envy. Torok argues against the Freudian notion of anatomical lack. Rand describes her concept of penis envy as:

A mere fantasy, a belief or myth, invented by the little girl to mask an inhibited and therefore inexpressible desire for her own orgasm. It is the prohibition against approaching her sexuality that constrains the little girl to imagine the plenitude of the other sex, to fantasise the boy’s penis as an idealised object. Ultimately, penis envy is the symptom of a fixation on the mother who prohibits autoerotic libidinal contact. As long as girls fantasize about privileges enjoyed by boys, they do not recognize their repressive environments. By the same token, the fantasy or myth of penis envy allays the fear of losing the mother, should the child/woman’s underlying wish to free her sexuality be fulfilled.

(Abraham & Torok, 1994, p. 38)

Cixous’ interpretation of the story of Little Red Riding Hood seems to be further evidence that this is going on. She says the hood is the clitoris and the story is about prohibition of masturbation, punishment for exploring the forest rather than sticking to the path. She links the prohibition of masturbation with grandmother, but then suggests that it is mother envy when she says:

And grandmothers are always wicked: she is the bad mother who always shuts the daughter in whenever the daughter might by chance want to live or take pleasure. So shell always be carrying her little pot of butter and her little jar of honey to grandmother, who is there as jealousy … the jealousy of the woman who can’t let her daughter go.

(Cixous, 1981, p. 44)

This anger towards the mother is displaced first to the big bad wolf, then to the psychoanalyst. She says, ‘the wolf is grandmother,’ who represents ‘that great superego that threatens all the little female red riding hoods who try to go out and explore their forest without the psychoanalyst’s permission.’ (Cixous, 1981, p. 44)

Maternal prohibition of masturbation constitutes a castration of the masculine energy used to masturbate, as fingers explore erogenous zones. This cutting off of sexual feeling fuses to the older castration and frustration of the earlier oral stage. This seems to explain the continuous displacement of infantile aspects to adult sites.

Cixous again angrily focuses on men in the Sleeping Beauty tale. She says ‘Sleeping Beauty is lifted from her bed by a man because, as we all know, women don’t wake up by themselves: man has to intervene …’ (Cixous, 1981, p. 43) He lifts her up and ‘will lay her in her next bed.’ (Cixous, 1981, p. 43) She seems to forget that here again it is a hostile and envious mother, the bad fairy, who generates the sleep. The mother is envious of the child’s potential to be in the world in a creative way, to make meaningful introjections and projections in future relationships. The needy mother experiences the threat of being left behind. The envy manifests as a destructive projection: the spindle that pricks the beauty’s finger, inducing sleep. Clinically, the Sleeping Beauty state is not just reserved for females. It affects males also. In fact, it affects anybody who has suffered from a maternal object that is needy and can not introject the child’s pleasure and striving to be in the world, instead cutting it off, castrating it, in a hostile and destructive way. The developing child suppresses distressing feelings of rage and hatred for the mother and internalises them as feelings of self-contempt and self-loathing and when these are suppressed the child feels dead and thus becomes the Sleeping Beauty.
My view of the myth is that she has resigned herself to sleep, that is, she has relinquished lively presence in the world. I say she but, she has neither female nor male energy. She is frozen with no ability to introject or project. To do so would be dangerous, for the feelings are suppressed for a good reason. These feelings are usually anger and pain, a rage with the mother who was jealous of the Beauty’s potential to be in the world. In the story, in order to be enlivened, the Beauty must be kissed by the masculine part of the self, which has battled and hacked his way through the oppressive defences of the enchanted forest that protects the mother from Beauty’s rage.

I think that this vital masculine energy is the part that has been cut off, castrated: this is the part that Cixous does not want to recognise in herself. It is decapitated. Like Tiresias and Oedipus, she is blinded. Her focus is on the phallus and on masculine power as the sole domain of men. Thereby she avoids the pain and confusion of not having separated from the maternal hostile introjects inside herself. She does not recognise this. She cannot be reflective and mentalize, and she globally displaces the conflicts into the cultural relations of men and women.

In conclusion, I think that Cixous’ paper can be more fully understood by using developmental and psychoanalytic theory to interpret the latent content of the text. I feel this approach shows that the confusion and discontinuity of her paper ‘Castration or Decapitation’ is a result of an infantile perspective, lacking the capacity to mentalize and reflect more clearly about self and other. In spite of this, I feel that Cixous is trying to say something about a problem in our society that is very concerning: the faulty relationship. In order to understand her text I have discussed an alternative to the possible origins of the faulty relationship as resulting from faulty maternal introjections in infancy, that are psychically experienced as castrating and decapitating and lead to the perpetuation of failure in all future intimate relationships.

References


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