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### The Concept of Penis Envy Revisited: A Child Analyst Listens to Adult Women

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Current psychoanalytic scholarship concerning gender development rejects recognition of the genital difference, or "penis envy," as central to the construction of "femininity," substituting the concept of "primary femininity." This shift in the paradigm of gender construction has occurred in part because of contributions from child-observational research showing that "gender identity" is acquired by age three. It has also been stimulated by the observations of adult analysts that interpretations organized around the concept of penis envy appear to have little mutative value in contrast to the communications in play and action from the analyses of preschool girls, which seem to reflect intense intrapsychic conflict stimulated by the girls' recognition of the genital difference. Using clinical material, this paper contrasts fantasies of gender found in oedipal girls with those presented in the analyses of adult women. The differences reflect not only the vicissitudes of gender construction and developmental changes in the mind's capacity to adapt to the demands of reality but also the fate of aggressive and narcissistic derivatives as they become entangled in conflict created by recognition of the inherent limitations of the body. The fantasies referred to by the concept "penis envy" are not constitutive of femininity; however, they reflect one approach to a defensive solution to intrapsychic dilemmas stemming from awareness of bodily and generational limits.

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During the 1920s and 1930s, when the psychoanalytic theory of gender construction was developed, Freud (1925, 1931, 1933) and his followers (Abraham, 1922; Lampl-de Groot, 1927; Deutsch, 1930, 1932; Brunswick, 1940) argued that the girl's discovery of the anatomical difference between the sexes was a critically motivating factor in her entry into the Oedipus complex and her subsequent construction of femininity. Although Horney (1924, 1926), Klein (1932), and Jones (1927, 1935) disagreed with Freud's formulation concerning the centrality of the discovery of anatomical differences to the construction of gender, they did not reject the clinical usefulness of some aspects of the concept of penis envy. When female analysts of this period, notably Lampl-de Groot (1927) and Deutsch (1930, 1932), discovered the importance of the girl's preoedipal tie to her mother in the development of the Oedipus complex and femininity, it led to a richer and more complex understanding of the vicissitudes of female development, with an appreciation of the multiplicity of contributory factors. The concept of penis envy lost its status as a necessary and sufficient cause in the construction of femininity and became one of several dilemmas facing the little girl.<sup>1</sup>

With the linked concepts of penis envy and castration anxiety, Freud argued that at its core the construction of femininity and masculinity involve an attempt to repair the narcissistic damage inflicted by the recognition of genital difference and bodily vulnerability. In his view, the paired domains of femininity and masculinity connote fantasies that function to represent, defend against, and contain the anxiety stemming from awareness of the inherent limits and immutability of the body.

In the past twenty years, psychoanalytic theory has again become interested in the construction of gender and feminine development. Current psychoanalytic scholarship rejects recognition of the genital difference as central to the construction of femininity, substituting the concept of "primary femininity." The formation of gender identity is now placed at an earlier developmental period during which the child's identifications with the parents, self-object differentiation, and body ego schematization are central. In this view (Tyson, 1994), the concept

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<sup>1</sup>. For an excellent reconstruction of this historical debate, see Fliegel (1973).

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of “core gender identity” is privileged over the earlier concepts of femininity and masculinity. The girl’s identification with her mother (Kleeman, 1976; Stoller, 1985) and of the mother’s response to her daughter’s body (Lerner, 1976) are seen as important contributors to the small girl’s intrapsychic reaction to discovery of the anatomical difference. Although some psychoanalytic observers of young children (Tyson, 1989; Galenson and Roiphe, 1980, 1976) use the concept of penis envy in reporting their data, many writers ignore the concept or suggest that it is best understood as a metaphor for something else (Kaplan, 1991; Mitchell, 1984; Lerner, 1976). In this view, the girl’s sense of vulnerability concerning femininity is linked to the contribution of hostile aggression to difficulties in separating from the mother during the pre-oedipal period (Tyson, 1994).

The shift in the paradigm of gender construction has occurred in part because of contributions from child observational research showing that children acquire gender identity by age three. Starting in infancy, the girl develops a sense of her body as anatomically intact and female (Kleeman, 1976); she does not view herself as a “disappointed little boy” (Mayer, 1995). Most modern analysts would agree that both boys and girls develop at an early age a sense of being anatomically intact and gendered. To the degree that the concept penis envy is seen as useful at all (Mayer, 1995), it is taken to refer to a complex web of *fantasies* created by the little girl as she struggles to understand what meaning to give to the genital difference, rather than to a perception on her part that she suffers from some actual anatomical defect. The waning of the usefulness of the concept has also been stimulated by the observations of adult analysts that interpretations organized around it appear to have little mutative value (Grossman and Stewart, 1976; Tyson, 1994; Mayer, 1995), especially in contrast to the communications in play and action from the analyses of preschool girls, which seem to reflect intense intrapsychic conflict stimulated by the girl’s recognition of the genital difference. I have been struck by the clarity with which material concerning reactions to the genital difference between the sexes is presented in the analyses of young girls in contrast to the lack of clarity, even obscurity, of such clinical material in the analyses of adult women. In this paper, I present, explore and contrast fantasies of gender in four- to six-year-old girls and those presented in the analyses of adult women. I argue that the marked differences between the clinical phenomena reflect not only the vicissitudes of gender construction and developmental changes in the mind’s capacity to adapt to the demands of reality but also the fate of aggressive and

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narcissistic derivatives as they become entangled in conflict created by recognition of the inherent limitations of the body. In the course of development, fantasies having to do with the meaning of the genital difference, which may be expressed so directly in the play of the young girl, are transformed by the demands of the ego and superego (A. Freud, 1936, 1965). These fantasies are not *constitutive* of femininity. Under the developmental transformations of puberty and young adulthood, however, such fantasies may serve as a defensive solution to intrapsychic dilemmas stemming from awareness of bodily and generational limits.

## Clinical Material from Children

### VIGNETTE ONE

One warm spring day a nursery-school teacher set up a water table outside for the children with a variety of objects—squeeze bottles, funnels, basters, egg beaters, measuring cups and spoons—that could be used in the water. As the morning progressed most of the children in the class spent some time playing at the table. Toward the end of the morning a group of boys was playing a loud, exciting, socio-dramatic game while riding around on trikes. Several girls were at the water table. Suddenly, one of the girls picked up a squeeze bottle and laughingly called to the other girls, “Look, we can make water too!” The other girls also grabbed squeeze bottles and immediately began to parade around holding the bottles between their legs and excitedly squirting water into the air. With much giggling, they shouted, “We’re making peepee. We can do it too! Look at us!” Although the boys appeared oblivious to this play, the girls’ hilarity brought them to the attention of the boys, who watched briefly and laughed but then returned to their own tricycle play. Laughing teasingly, the girls dashed ever closer to the boys, who were apparently ignoring them. Finally one girl rushed at the boys, squirted them, and shouted, “You *can’t* do it! We *can* do it!” At this point, fearing an outbreak of hostilities between the boys and girls, the teacher intervened.

### VIGNETTE TWO

Four-and-a-half-year-old Clarissa entered analysis because of her symptoms of elective mutism, general inhibition, and her fear that there was something wrong with her toes.<sup>2</sup> She was the only daughter

<sup>2</sup>. Clarissa’s analysis is described in detail in Dahl, 1983.

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of a professional couple and had an adored brother two years younger. A bright, engaging child who revealed a talent for imaginative play, Clarissa began to speak to her analyst in the fifth week of analysis. Although her mutism persisted outside the sessions for the first year of treatment, Clarissa proved to be quite articulate within her sessions. During the third month of her analysis, she depicted in play as well as speaking directly about her fantasies concerning the anatomical differences between boys and girls. She had a girl doll that she had named "First Class" and identified as being like herself become angry at some boy dolls. Clarissa said angrily about one of the boy dolls, "He's a show off, 'peepee' boy, and First Class doesn't like that. He makes her mad!" Later in this session Clarissa made the boy doll dance about, gaily calling attention to himself. Then she announced that First Class felt very jealous of "the peepee boy." I wondered whether First Class was mad because she wanted to be able to show off as the boy did. Clarissa responded gravely, "Yes, she does—she wishes she could be fancy on the outside like a boy and she's not and she gets so *mad* about that!" Noticing a pretty star in the playroom closet, Clarissa had First Class clamor for it, saying, "I want that star to wear! Then I can be fancy on the outside too!" I commented that sometimes girls thought boys were special because they were fancy on the outside. Clarissa said solemnly, "Yes, girls do get mad—they don't like those fancy boys." Then, leaning against me, she said, "You know, a long time ago First Class *was* fancy on the outside and you know what happened? A bad witch-monster came along and this witch cursed First Class and made her be a girl and be cursed and be not fancy—and First Class feels so sad all the time and she worries and worries about this. She needs help."

Although Clarissa's envy of fancy boys was by no means her only worry, she continued to grapple with this issue during the first year of her three-year analysis. In Clarissa's mind, maleness, anatomical "fanciness," activity, and exhibitionism were linked. She directly expressed her envy of boys and their capacity to be and do what she felt had been denied her. The mother depicted in these fantasies curtailed the little girl's activity and exhibitionism. It was only later in Clarissa's analysis that material emerged to suggest that she now viewed the mother as envious of and potentially damaging to her daughter's feminine desires to be beautiful, to be loved by a man, and to have children.

### VIGNETTE THREE

Six-year-old Katie was referred for analysis because of temper tantrums and provocative behavior, both directed primarily toward her

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mother. The younger of two daughters, Katie was often cranky and bossy toward her very bright and bossy older sister. Her parents wondered whether Katie felt overshadowed by her. Katie was reported to be performing well in school academically and socially. Her parents worried, however, that their daughter was too hard on herself, failing to appreciate how well she was doing and pressuring herself to do better.

In her fifth session, Katie told a story about a complicated, but somewhat obscure, contest between a group of boys and a group of girls. At first it seemed that the contest involved running up and down a long ladder trying to be the first to get a mysterious present with a big bow. Gradually this contest evolved into one in which running up and down was to determine who had the real pencil and who had the rubber pencil. With great fierceness, Katie announced, "The boys always win because they have the real pencil, and that's the only way you can ever get the rubber pencil." She seemed at a loss to explain why either type of pencil was so desirable, answering, "They just are. That's what the kids want!"

Following this session, there was a blossoming during her analytic sessions of play focussing directly on competitive themes. Katie announced, grinning, that the basic rule in any game was that she should win and I lose; rules would suddenly be altered to insure that this fundamental rule was upheld. At first, Katie was a smiling, timid player whose anxiety about competition was revealed only by the quickness with which she would announce a change in the rules if she appeared to be losing. However, when I drew attention to her discomfort with her wish to win, Katie began to be openly competitive and to develop more age-appropriate rule-based strategies. Often, after a winning at checkers, Katie would turn to an imaginative story in which a little girl named Christy had a stallion named Speedy, the fastest horse in the world. Christy was the only one who could ride Speedy, and she was forever challenging "the boy who lived next door" to a race to demonstrate her prowess. Sometimes Christy would generously offer to slow down so the boy would not be left behind. When he appeared to be almost catching up, however, Katie would make Christy speed ahead, laughingly calling to the boy, "I'm winning! You're losing! I have the fastest horse in the world!"

In conversation, Katie referred contemptuously to the boys in her first-grade class as "dumb" and "yucky"; "I would *never* want to play with a boy!" In fact, her mother reported, at home Katie had a friend who was a little boy. Although there was certainly nothing markedly

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"boyish" about Katie's style of dressing, the analyst gradually became aware that she rarely wore a dress. Toward the end of her first year of analysis, Katie asked to have her hair cut quite short. The haircut gave Katie a kind of gamin appearance. Katie herself came in angrily to one session announcing that a classmate had asked if she were a boy! When the analyst attempted to explore with her

why the classmate might have wondered, Katie responded adamantly that she *didn't* look like a boy and she *didn't want* to look like a boy. She then began to play out a story in which Christy, surrounded by neighbor children and siblings, “raced like the wind on Speedy” while the other children expressed envious admiration. Katie said, “They’ll never be as fast as Christy because they’ll never have a horse like Speedy. Speedy is just Christy’s. And she can ride him so well it’s like Speedy is a part of Christy.” When the analyst commented that Christy seemed to feel she was better and faster than any boy, Katie laughed approvingly.

As Katie and her analyst continued to explore Katie’s conflicts around her wishes to win, to be the best, and to be admired, Katie began to talk more about her father and all the special things she did with him. She drew a picture of a bride and groom getting married. Off to the side of the picture was a cross looking figure of indeterminate sex whom Katie described as “an angry lady. She’s watching and she wishes she could be in that wedding, but she can’t. All she can do is watch.”

All three of these vignettes suggest the young girl’s preoccupation with the meaning of the anatomical difference. As I have argued elsewhere (Dahl, 1993, 1983), both boys and girls during the oedipal period struggle to make sense of the anatomical distinction between the sexes as an aspect of their intrapsychic dialogue concerning what it means to be either masculine or feminine. The oedipal-age girl is often preoccupied with complicated thoughts and attendant fantasies about her body and its intactness, about her relationships to and with her father and mother, and about sexual excitement. These thoughts are associated with complicated affects of envy, jealousy, rage, love, affection, anxiety, and transient depression. Girls of this age frequently represent in play fantasies such as Clarissa’s suggesting envy of male “fanciness” and a concern that they have been deprived of some important body part. Like Clarissa and Katie, many oedipal-age girls wonder whether possession of a penis is a necessary condition for being active and admirable. And as with Clarissa and Katie, such fantasies find direct representation in their imaginative play; often such play material appears relatively early in the analysis of the oedipal-age girl. For

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this reason child analysts may disagree about the role envious fantasies about the penis play in the construction of gender and the Oedipus complex,<sup>3</sup> but there is little disagreement that such fantasies, wishes, and fears are part of the mental life of young girls.

I have never heard material from an adult analysis presented as directly as that reported in Clarissa’s session. It has been my experience that far along in an analysis, material may appear that can be understood as referring to fantasies of bodily lack, damage, or, more usually, dissatisfaction with the attractiveness of the body. Such fantasies are often represented indirectly by notions of gender stereotype (men have privilege, they can have adventures, they can be active, they rule the world; whereas women are supposed to be passive, can’t do anything, should be neat and tidy) or thoughts about having a defective mind, not being able to keep it all together (Kalinich, 1993). In general these archaic fantasies are highly defended against. However much we may hypothesize their motive force, in the absence of more direct expressions, the analyst is likely to become aware of their presence only through elusive derivatives, obscure references—thoughts hinted at through dreams and their associations, particular choices of words or defensive patterns. In marked contrast to analytic work with little girls like Clarissa or Katie, in analytic work with adult women, such fantasies may be inferred from more complex, even obscure, material but are not seen or heard directly.

The following brief vignettes from the analyses of three women illustrate the ways in which themes having to do with the body and its femininity or masculinity typically present.

## Clinical Material from Adults

### VIGNETTE ONE

An attractive, spirited woman whose self-presentation was reminiscent of a young Katherine Hepburn, Inge sought analysis because she felt confused about the directions she should pursue in both her professional and personal life. She felt intensely self-critical of what she

<sup>3</sup>. This argument began during the 1920s with the debate concerning the construction of femininity (Fliegel, 1973). Freud (1925, 1931, 1933) argued that the development of penis envy was a critical motivating factor for the girl’s entry into the Oedipus complex. Karen Horney (1924, 1926, 1931) countered that there were two forms of penis envy, a primary, transitory form rooted in exhibitionistic and scopophilic desires and a secondary defensive form employed in efforts to resolve the Oedipal complex through regression. Klein (1932) and Jones (1927, 1935) argued in favor of the notion of primary femininity as “bedrock” with penis envy seen as a transitory dilemma.

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regarded as her professional underachievement. Inge was engaged to be married to a longtime beau but said she was uncertain about whether she would consider marriage to him or anyone. Although she had lived independently for several years, she said she still felt like her mother’s baby. She viewed her older brothers, much admired by her mother, as accomplished “men of the world” and worried that she would never become as successful or worldly as they were. Inge thought she was postponing growing up and she said she was stuck— she could neither turn the clock backward and be a child again nor could she seem to bring herself to take those steps

she regarded as quintessentially adult.

In the middle of her third year of analysis, Inge recalled a vivid daydream she had during latency; in this conscious fantasy she was a boy who could best her brothers in all sorts of athletic competitions. She remembered that she had in reality been a tomboy, hanging out with a gang of boys who got into mischief throughout the neighborhood. It was at this time as well that she had begun to play tennis, a sport in which she continued to excel. Although as an adult she had a number of close female friends, she recalled that as a child she had hated girls, thinking they were dumb and ugly. She had gone through a period during latency when she had refused to wear dresses and for a time had even worn underwear handed down from her brothers. Although Inge consciously looked forward to marriage and children, as she explored this childhood daydream during her analysis, she became aware that “to some extent I still think of myself as being a boy—or at least as not being female.” To Inge this meant trying not to pay attention to her female body and its demands, instead emphasizing her athletic prowess and training. She liked her body best when it was in top athletic condition, “lean and mean.” She began to realize that the very qualities she consciously prized in her fiancé—his gentleness, his uncompetitiveness, and his somewhat plump body—she secretly, and somewhat contemptuously, viewed as passive, even effeminate. Inge wondered whether her scrupulous insistence on following the cultural, gender-stereotyped conventions in her relationship with her boyfriend might not mask a pleasurable fantasy, that in their relationship it was really *she* who “had what it takes,” “had the get up and go,” “had the right stuff.” She found herself feeling very uncomfortable with the competitive aspects of these thoughts. Suddenly she became aware of how furious she was with her boyfriend for what she insisted was his inability to be more assertive and self-promoting at work. She began to recognize that rage was a common feature in all her significant relationships in which she inevitably felt unappreciated.

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## VIGNETTE TWO

Eleanor, a successful professional in her mid-thirties, sought analysis because of a chronic depressive mood. Her malaise did not appear to interfere seriously with her work or her friendships, but it cast everything she did in a somewhat gray, sad light. She felt inadequate at work and unappreciated by her female friends, even at times unloved and unlovable. In the fourth year of her analysis, some time after her depression had lifted, Eleanor began to observe that she frequently felt in a “one-down position” in her relationships with men. For a person with a keenly analytic mind, Eleanor was remarkably uncritical of her deeply held conviction that men were inherently assertive and active while it was women’s “nature” to be passive and dependently connected to others. Eleanor insisted that there was a biological basis to these gender differences; because she could not change them, she would just have to learn to live with them. She judged herself to be an unfeminine woman because she experienced herself as “messy and smelly” and because she so valued her independence. “A real woman should be neat, tidy, and compliant,” Eleanor said forcefully, recalling that when she was a child, her mother had always worn white gloves when she went shopping. Although Eleanor presented as a carefully groomed, attractively dressed woman, she was irritated by her mother’s occasional criticism of her appearance. Exploration of the gender stereotypes Eleanor cherished revealed that she viewed men and women as polar opposites, virtually “different species,” with men embodying all positive attributes and women representing everything Eleanor held to be negative. Although she was an active and accomplished woman, in her inner world Eleanor experienced herself as a dependent, helpless female continually in danger of being exposed as inadequate and held in contempt by powerful, competitive, competent men. She realized that she was very much attracted to men like this, even though the price of a relationship with such a man seemed to be that she feel humiliated and dumb. Often Eleanor felt during an affair with a man that she wanted more than he would ever give her; sometimes the “more” had to do with sexual desire, but it referred to other desires as well. Eleanor believed it was important to conceal the extent of her desire because it would frighten the man. She then resented what she experienced as masculine insensitivity. At those moments during an analytic hour when she was puzzling over whether she had sufficiently concealed her desires and whether she could trust that the man would nevertheless satisfy her desire, her thoughts often became confusingly circular. “Well, you know how it is with me—I’m always having trouble keeping

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my thoughts straight just at the critical point. Just like a woman, I guess,” she said sadly.

## VIGNETTE THREE

Alice began analysis because she viewed herself as having a tendency toward damaging inhibition in her work life. She hated her job, which she felt was beneath her level of professional training, but she couldn’t imagine holding a more responsible position. She described herself as “creeping along,” trying to do a good job without ever feeling that her skills were recognized. During the first four years of her analysis, Alice’s conflicts around aggression were prominent. Much of the time she felt that she struggled against a depressive mood by making conscious attempts to engage in many activities and make new friends. However, she continually found herself in situations in which she felt both unrecognized and pushed aside by very “narcissistic, competitive” women; Alice would feel furious but would “bite back” her anger and give way politely.

Alice recalled her mother's emphasis on appearances; as a small child she was expected to be neat, tidy, pleasant, and silent. In contrast, her older brother, Sam, had been an unruly and impulsive child, demanding and, Alice felt, consuming all his parents' attention. She remembered watching silently, frightened, during Sam's temper tantrums. Alice expressed fury that Sam had not failed in life as an adult, as she had once expected him to do. Sam's professional success was astonishing to her, and she felt rageful envy that he seemed to be the apple of her mother's eye.

As the analysis proceeded, we began to appreciate the intensity of Alice's wish to be desired and admired, besting all rivals, like Sam. At times she experienced the analyst as a "briefcase woman," by which she meant a woman successful (like a man) in a man's world. She became aware that she often felt very angry at her husband for his success in the world. As she explored this theme, her relationship with her husband became quite stormy. She spoke of what she felt was a dangerous wish to be "swept away by desire" and of her anger that her husband worked so late that Alice was often exhausted by the time they went to bed. She reported that sometimes she felt frightened by the fury she felt toward her husband during intercourse; she contained her anger by "detaching from him." And added, "but then I don't come." I commented that she surrendered her orgasm in the service of containing her rage and desire; she kept herself from being "swept away," but then she felt frozen.

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In the months following this hour, Alice's conflict between suppressing or surrendering deepened. She felt increasingly angry at her husband, whom she condemned as exhibitionistic and impulsive. She remembered her love of pocket treasures as a child. With bitterness she recalled how once her mother had cleaned out her pockets, throwing away some of Alice's treasures. This recollection led directly to her recall of a movie scene in which a little boy, afraid of the rage of his terminally ill and bedridden mother, hides under her bed. Alice thought the boy longed for closeness with his mother but was driven away; how terrified he was of her anger! I realized, having also seen the film, that what was striking in Alice's recall of the movie scene was her failure to notice that as the little boy hides under the bed he is angrily mocking his mother, who is yelling at him for having made a mess. When I drew Alice's attention to her omission, she wondered whether the little boy felt he had made his mother sick. In a way, thought Alice, he had made his mother sick, because he was too much for her. We began to understand Alice's confusion surrounding who was angry—she, her mother, or both together—and how scary for a child to feel such "killing" fury.

Although a theme of envy toward men, especially her brother, flickered through the clinical material during the first five years of analysis, Alice's conflicts around aggression were most salient in our work together. These conflicts and her habitual defenses against aggression—"biting it back," "surrendering" her desires, being a "good soldier," and feeling "frozen"—were the dominant issues. The transference became organized around negative maternal themes in which Alice experienced herself as longing for my help and for greater intimacy with me, but experienced me as withholding, icily distant, and silently critical of her. Our work led us to appreciate the malignant identifications Alice had made with her mother that were employed in the service of her harsh, punitive superego. This seemed, at times, to prohibit any expression of desire, need, or aggression. During this period, Alice's envy was directed primarily toward women whom she thought were more expressive of their desires, and more successful in achieving them, than Alice felt able to be. From Alice's point of view, the most difficult aspect of her envious feelings was the associated aggression, which she felt was unacceptable and to which she responded with an intensification of her defensive maneuvers.

Gradually we were able to understand that as a little girl Alice had taken great pride in her competence; she wasn't naughty, messy, or out of control like her brother Sam. We recognized that being a "good soldier" not only was about suffering silently but had originated in the

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pride of being a "big girl." But no one seemed to appreciate what a big girl she was being; it was always Sam who was "center stage." I commented that being a good soldier did not lessen her hateful, envious feelings, and, as a result, she feared that she would be swept away by them, as had seemed to happen to Sam in his rages. As Alice began to rely less on being a good soldier in the service of disavowing and regulating her aggression, she began to acknowledge the intensity of her professional ambition.

In the sixth year of her analysis Alice reported a dream:

*I'm walking with Sam and I feel sort of wet, like I'm aroused. Then I'm sitting at a word processor typing but the master processor is on my right. Then my husband and I are in the examining room with a nurse. She says to him, "You are in fine shape." He is ahead of me. The nurse wants me to walk toward her. I don't have any clothes on, and I feel juicy and I'm afraid she can hear that juicy sound as I walk. She makes a gesture like an X over my torso and I have the feeling something is wrong with me.*

Alice's associations led first to a report of brother-sister incest that she had read, then to her small daughter's excited pleasure in a tickling game. Alice said she didn't like the Freudian view that her daughter's excitement had "something sexual in it." She was quite sure she and Sam had never played any tickling games like that. She noted that in the dream she felt she was not allowed to touch the "master computer—I'm just at the little one." She reported that in reality she had never been able to master the computer

and still typed on a standard typewriter, even though her husband used a computer at home. I wondered about the nurse making an X over her torso; Alice said it made her think of healing, the laying on of hands—"a way of curing the body in a deep way." She commented that somehow in the dream there was something wrong with her body in contrast to her husband's. "Juicy?" Alice laughed, "Well, that has to do with being a woman—all those ways your body betrays you, all that leaking, dripping, *juiciness*—no *man* can really understand that—this is what I have to contend with—my body, my sexual body." When I wondered about her walking toward the nurse, Alice suddenly recalled that when she was thirteen, because there was concern about the possibility of a physical anomaly, she had been examined by a senior orthopedist at a teaching hospital. "I had to take off all my clothes, and he and his residents were looking at me standing there all naked. I knew my body was defective. I wanted to hide. I felt I must look grotesque to them." This memory led to her recall that she had felt ashamed when first attempting to nurse her

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newborn daughter because of an inverted nipple. Alice remembered that she had wondered briefly whether her breast was deformed.

In Alice's dream and her associations we can see a complex interweaving of thoughts and feelings about her body. Her sexual excitement, while pleasurable, arouses anxiety that she will be swept away, embarrassed by and ashamed of her loss of control. Her thoughts suggest an unconscious linkage between being swept away by desire, being female, and feeling defective contrasted with being in control, having mastery, and having a body that is "fine" (and probably masculine). What was most useful to Alice in our analytic work together was her becoming more aware of how she employed "hiding away" and "being a good soldier" as ways of containing the anxiety generated by her own desires.

A month later Alice reported another dream: I am sitting in the living room quietly. There are a lot of people in the room, but no one seems to notice me. Suddenly everyone is looking up—there's a stage with a rock musician—he's really strutting his stuff. Alice's associations had to do with her husband's occasionally exhibitionistic behavior at parties and her own admiration of certain male rock stars. She said, "Boy, those guys really know how to strut their stuff—and everybody loves watching them!" She said enviously, "Guys just get away with that kind of thing—it's a male thing, I guess." Naming a female rock star famous for "strutting her stuff," I commented that I hadn't realized she was a *man*. Alice laughed, "I wonder why I forgot all about *her*." Following this session, Alice began to explore her own professional ambitions more directly. During one hour she exclaimed, "You know, it's not just that I'm sort of competitive. I am incredibly competitive. I don't want to be one of the best—I want to be the best."

In these sessions, Alice's associative links connected being admired and being successfully competitive with being a man, as if competitive, even exhibitionistic, activity is a *masculine* prerogative. However, in the context of the earlier clinical material, we can see that this fantasy has been shaped by defensive activity aimed at containing or warding off Alice's recognition of her own aggression. In her effort to avoid being "swept away" Alice tries to "hide," to make herself unnoticed and unnoticeable, which she links to being a "good *girl*." Her shame, her sense of *defect*, is linked to the shame she anticipates she would feel if she were to be overwhelmed by her desires, both erotic and aggressive. The fantasy of "being a man" is employed to represent the wish to be active and competitive. The fantasy also functions as a defense in denial: *only* men can be active and competitive. Alice, a "good *girl*," doesn't have these wishes and so does not need to fear being swept away.

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The clinical material presented by Inge, Eleanor, and Alice suggests some shared thematic ground. For all three, their thoughts during these hours seem to be shaped by fantasies having to do with the differences between men and women, ideas about what it means to be masculine or feminine, the nature of the female body, the relationship to the mother, and perceptions of the mother's views regarding masculinity and femininity. For all three women, representations of the tie to both the preoedipal and oedipal mother remain a salient part of their mental life. There are also notable differences.

Inge's material is suggestive of an unconscious fantasy structure in which being active, assertive, and athletic is equated with being masculine; to a large extent, femininity, which she sees as entailing an intolerable degree of passivity and inadequacy, is rejected. One could speculate that her notion of having a "lean and mean" body may derive from an archaic belief in the entire body as phallus.

Similar issues, although organized quite differently, are represented in Eleanor's material. Eleanor's view of femininity also involves a fantasy of the feminine as signifying defect or relative inadequacy. There is an anal cast to her perception of the female body as smelly and messy as well as in her conviction that a truly feminine woman would conceal this. Her masochistically tinged relationships with men suggest the centrality of aggressive conflicts to her construction of femininity.

Alice also appears to make an unconscious equation between being masculine and being competitive; in addition, she links masculinity with an exhibitionistic presentation of sexuality. Like Eleanor, Alice associates the female body with a messiness that should be tidied up or a defect that must be hidden. However, we can see that Alice employs these fantasies in the service of warding off her perception of her *own* aggressive and competitive strivings, which she experiences as dangerously intense, possibly overwhelming, and certainly destructive of her relations to others.

## Discussion

A hallmark of the oedipal period is the appearance of the capacity to represent complex fantasies, desires, fears, and defensive maneuvers in imaginative play (A. Freud, 1965; Cohen et al., 1987). This play appears to give the analyst a direct window on the child's inner world and its wishes, fears, and characteristic defenses. What is presented in play, however, represents a compromise between the demands of the ego, defenses, and the desires of the id; it does not represent direct transcription of unconscious fantasy (A. Freud, 1965). Imaginative

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play allows the child to engage in conversations with different aspects of herself; play permits the child to hold in mind many different possibilities simultaneously, as well as to try out various combinations of and balances between fantasies (Cohen et al., 1987; Dahl, 1993). Through play the child is able to represent thoughts, wishes, and fears in a far more complex fashion than would be possible if she had to rely solely on her verbal abilities. Although linguistically competent, the oedipal-age girl still organizes her most complex thoughts through action and imaginative play. Nevertheless, the analyst, guided by theory, often can feel reasonably certain that the derivatives of unconscious fantasy structures are given dramatic representation in play. Not only is play for the oedipal-age child stimulated by the central desires, fears, associated conflicts and characteristic modes of defense of the period; play gives visible representation to these complex fantasy structures. This capacity to represent the mind in play serves the child's developmental needs as she struggles to reach some agreement within herself concerning the resolution of the central dilemmas of the oedipal period: What does it mean to be little? Does it necessarily mean weak, broken, or vulnerable? Am I too little to have such big, exciting feelings? What does it mean to be big? Does it necessarily mean powerful, intact, destructive? What if I am big and my parents are little? What would it be like if my parents and I were big together? How can I hate and want to destroy those I love most in the world? Am I bad because I want to be big? What if I am good and they are bad? (Cohen et al., 1987) As the child analyst watches and listens to the play, the child's inner world appears to come to life on the play stage.

The situation is inherently very different with adults who have left the world of the imaginative play stage far behind; consciously, adults rely on their verbal abilities to give shape to their inner world. In contrast to the young child, who frequently represents her defenses in action, the defensive activity of adults is usually silent and often not easily observed (A. Freud, 1936). The ego, too, has become more complex and its activities are no longer so clearly observable. These developmental changes in the ego brought about by the transformations entailed in puberty and adolescence mean that by adulthood the ego is firmly consolidated. As Anna Freud points out (1936) the ego of the young child is quite capable of sudden revolts against the outside world in favor of the gratification of infantile desires. For the adult, such a rebellion brings the ego in conflict with the superego. By adulthood there is a firmly established relationship between the id and the superego embodied in character structure that the ego is committed to preserving. For this reason the fantasies of early childhood become

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densely layered by adulthood, having been substantially transformed by being reworked and reorganized many times in light of later experience and cognitive development. This retroactive transformation of childhood fantasies involves the recasting of old issues in a new light, influenced by experiences in reality, advances in ego structuralization, superego development, and defensive activity (Freud, 1913; Grossman and Kaplan, 1989). Adult thinking is dominated by the capacity for representing itself linguistically. The permission the young child analyst grants the analyst to view the play as a communication is not available to be granted by the adult analyst. Even if the analyst is able to "read" the unconscious fantasy being alluded to in the words of the adult, an interpretation that simply spoke to the unconscious, bypassing the ego and its defenses, could not be heard; to the degree that it is actually heard it is experienced as an assault or a seduction.

These developmental differences between child and adult analysands and their developmentally characteristic modes of representing the inner world account only partially for the differences between the clarity with which the oedipal-age girl represents fantasies stimulated by the awareness of the anatomical difference and the relative paucity of such clear material in adult women analysands.

Many of the questions that so preoccupy the oedipal girl seem to concern what the early psychoanalytic theorists intended to connote by the concept of penis envy. Under the pressure of a biologically driven upsurge in genital arousal, increased cognitive capacities and greater ego structuralization, earlier fantasies and experiences become recast in a new light. The puzzle of what it means to have *this* body and not some other body takes on a new urgency in light of the intensification and increased organization of genital sensation. At its core, one strand of the oedipal story for the young child involves the wish to experience genital pleasure with another body. In this segment of the oedipal narrative, the body and its desires and the bodies of others and their desires hold center stage. In this narrative, the young girl must grapple with such dilemmas as: How is it that my body is little and the other's is big? Why is my body different from his? What is the meaning of these differences? Are they significant differences? Does "different" have some kind of explanatory power for all my grievances? Is it best understood in terms of presence/absence, intact/defective,

plus/minus? Should this difference be viewed in pejorative terms?

This dilemma is given dramatic representation in the play of the nursery school girls reported by their teacher. Squeeze bottles in hand, the girls are experimenting with what it might be like to have a penis. What seems to be revealed to the observer appears to be a fantasy of

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how much fun it would be to have a penis. By their hilarity and provocative insistence that the boys watch, the girls suggest that they imagine they would feel powerful and excited (**A. Freud, 1992**).

For the oedipal-age child, more is almost always better. The clinical material from Clarissa and Katie suggests that some girls construct a fantasy in which the presence of the penis signifies permission to be exhibitionistic and powerful. Cognitively, the oedipal-age child's mind is drawn to the construction of binary oppositions—good/bad; more/less; big/little; male/female, etc. It is along this line that the meaning of bodily, especially genital, differences becomes an intriguing, potentially disturbing puzzle for the oedipal girl. She plays with the question of whether to give the genital difference meaning through the principle of binary opposition. As she struggles with the anxiety-generating questions this cognitive approach raises, earlier experiences and fantasies are reworked. It is here, I think, that a theory of gender construction based on the concept of primary femininity fails to address the complexity of the psychological tasks facing the little girl. It is not that she doesn't know she is anatomically female or that the schematization of her intact female body has not been imbued with psychological meaning derived in part from her identification with her mother. It is that in light of this newly charged information—that there are differences between bodies having to do with the highly pleasurable genitals—the question of what it means to have one genitally configured body and not the other becomes salient. The central dilemma of the oedipal narrative is driven by the child's developing psychological capacity to recognize the limits imposed by the *generational* difference. The strand of the narrative that involves the body and its desires also entails the dilemma posed by limitations—in this case the body's limits and its inherent immutability. For the girl, this dilemma is stimulated by awareness that intact though her body may be, other bodies may have “more” or be visibly “fancy.” It is this fantasy that possession of the penis signifies “more” or “fancier” that stimulates envy in the small girl. For both the boy and the girl, the recognition that the body is inherently limited and immutable functions as a narcissistic threat and excites envy. As Clarissa imagines that having a penis would make her feel “fancy” and give her permission to be exhibitionistic, she says she feels “cursed” that her fanciness is not “outside.”

By locating the construction of femininity and masculinity in the need to ward off narcissistic danger to the desiring body, Freud and his followers made a crucial psychological link between gender construction and desire. This theoretical approach also recognizes that gender may become entwined with those defensive strategies intended to ward

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off narcissistic threats stemming from a perception of the body's inherent limitations and vulnerabilities.

We now know that during the preoedipal period both the boy and the girl achieve a schematization of a genitally intact body (**Galenson and Roiphe, 1976, 1980; Kleeman, 1976; Fast, 1978**). This body schematization is given psychological meaning in part from identifications with the parents and their bodies (**Tyson, 1994; Mayer, 1995**). However, recognition of the anatomical difference in the light of the oedipal narrative ushers in a new dilemma stimulated by the question of what meaning, if any, to assign to bodily, especially genital, differences. It is this developmental dilemma that retroactively transforms earlier fantasies, creating new meanings for previously acquired libidinal and aggressive aims (**Grossman and Kaplan, 1989**). Recognition of the genital difference is a significant psychic organizer (**Grossman, 1976**). At their core, the fantasies created in response to the dilemma of what meaning to give the genital difference are concerned with the limits of the body and its immutability and are associated with feelings of envy. The fantasy is structured along the lines of “If I had that body (in addition to my own) I would have more and then I could really be the best. I would be first. I'd be loved the most.” Katie's play suggests she imagines that if she had her own “stallion” or “real pencil” she would win all competitions (oedipal or otherwise). She has imbued the possession of a penis with a state in which all wishes are realizable and no superego retaliation occurs.

The waning of the oedipal period is associated with new cognitive and social-emotional capacities that permit the child's move into the wider world of school and peer groups. This developmental progression is spurred, in part, by the waning of the intensity of the oedipal conflicts as the child achieves some resolution of its central dilemmas. For a young latency child like Katie, internal conflict stimulated by newly enhanced cognitive capacities involving competitive strivings and the superego may, via regression, be given an oedipal valence. Katie alludes in her drawing to the earlier oedipal competition, which she “lost.” Her play makes clear, however, that newer competitions have greater salience for her; she not only fears the shame of losing, she fears that winning will put her in conflict with superego injunctions to control her aggression, to be likable and “good.” Her play employs body imagery in order to give representation to this dilemma: If I had a speedy stallion or a real pencil I would not only be able to win the race but I would not feel bad about winning.

The developmental transformations brought by puberty, adolescence, and young adulthood, especially menstruation, sexual

intercourse,

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and pregnancy, spur further consolidation of the body/genital schema as functional and intact. Throughout the lifespan, the centrality of the body, its needs and demands, must be balanced against the demands of reality; this is a potential source of conflict. Because the body is close to the drives it also functions well as a medium for representation of internal conflict. In adulthood, fantasies constructed around the notion of the feminine body as limited and the masculine body as unlimited may be employed in the service of representing the dilemma inherent in body immutability. The adult ego recognizes the limitations imposed by the demands of reality, but for some women wishes for limitless possibility may continue to be salient as an imagined solution to inner conflict. Inge's perception of herself as developmentally "stuck" was a clue to the competing demands imposed by her psychologically intact ego, refusing her relief via regression, by her superego's insistence that she "grow up," and by her *wish* that all libidinal and aggressive possibilities remain open to her. Moving forward developmentally, whether by marriage and children or by taking her professional life more seriously, was linked in Inge's mind to accepting her body as feminine—that is, limited in its capacity to be active and invulnerable. This dilemma and Inge's attempted solution of postponement was given representation in Inge's inner world through her fantasy that it was she, not her boyfriend, who was the "real man."

Other women may use the fantasy of the male body as limitless in the service of attempting to placate superego criticism through defensive disavowal via externalization of conflicted aggressive or libidinal desires. "If I had that body I wouldn't feel limited and therefore vulnerable to aggressive or libidinal urges." Eleanor's fantasy of a dichotomous world in which women are contained, tidy, and passive and men are powerfully competitive and competent gives representation to her defensive attempts to deny her own competitive strivings and to conceal her "messy, smelly" sexual desires, which she fears will sweep her away. Her insistence on the biology of gender difference and her envy of male prerogative functions to permit her to disavow her own competitive wishes just as her fantasy of a messy, smelly, desiring, female body which must be tidied up embodies and defends against anticipated shame.

As the experiences of puberty and adolescence help to consolidate the girl's schematization of her female body as intact and functional, so traumatic experiences centering on the body may reawaken the fantasy that in its vulnerability, the body is defective. We can speculate that for Alice, the experience in early adolescence of the repeated medical examinations in which she felt her developing body exposed to the eyes

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of men contributed to the development of her fantasy of masculine privilege containing permission to "strut your stuff." For Alice, the fantasy of "being a man" has been shaped by defensive activity aimed at containing or warding off recognition of her own aggression. In her effort to avoid being overwhelmed by her aggression, as perhaps she once felt as a child, Alice tries to hide by making herself unnoticeable, which she links to being a "good girl." The fantasy of the rock-and-roll star strutting about on stage represents her disavowed wish to be active and competitive: if only men can be actively competitive, then Alice doesn't have to fear being swept away by her aggressive and libidinal urges.

For all three women, the complex fantasy structures described include notions of what it is to be masculine or feminine, aggressive and libidinal wishes, fears of being overwhelmed by the drives, superego prohibitions, and efforts to adapt to the demands imposed by reality; these fantasy structures employ representations of the male and female bodies. In the fantasy, men are envied as having the capacity to be active or having permission to exhibit themselves, attributes that the subject disavows in herself but presents herself as wishing for and feeling denied. Because these fantasies are organized around what it means to the subject to be feminine or masculine and contain envious feelings directed toward men, the concept penis envy is a useful and appropriate designator. Penis envy should be understood, however, not as the bedrock of what it is to be feminine, but rather as a compromise formation involving both drive and defense created by the dilemma of the inherent immutability and limitations of the body. This dilemma is most salient for the young girl during the oedipal period as she struggles to accept the implications for her of generational and anatomical difference. For each girl there are costs and gains, specific to her, in becoming a gendered subject. The fantasies encompassed by the term penis envy represent one aspect of these childhood explorations of what it means to become gendered. Analogous fantasies may emerge in the course of an adult woman's analysis that contain pejorative notions of masculinity and femininity and associated feelings of envy. Although such fantasies bear a relationship to those of the oedipal period, they have been transformed through many reworkings and reorganizations in the service of new libidinal and aggressive aims. The thread common to the transformations is the recognition of the body's inherent limitations and vulnerabilities. These fantasies appear with such regularity in the mental life of women because they are closely associated with the body, the drives, and the demands of reality and are, therefore, extremely useful in representing core psychological

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dilemmas. The fantasies referred to as penis envy may be employed in a number of ways: in the avoidance of superego conflict, in the service of defense against drives, or in the representation of the drives. Like any other product of the mind, these fantasies should not be accepted at the level of manifest content; rather, the questions to be asked are: To what purpose are they being put in this woman's mental economy and why? What dilemma is being solved by their construction? What does this particular woman gain in employing such a fantasy, and at what cost? To answer these questions with a particular female analysis is to understand what are the costs and benefits for her of becoming one gender and not the other.

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