

Circumcision on the Couch: The Cultural Psychological and Gendered Dimensions of the World's Oldest Surgery

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The following is an extract from my book, Circumcision on the Couch: The Cultural, Psychological and Gendered Dimensions of the World's Oldest Surgery, published in 2022 with Bloomsbury Academic Press. The book is a psychoanalytic study of the practice of male circumcision that focuses on three case studies: the significance of St Paul's abrogation of Jewish circumcision for theories of universalism; the medicalisation of circumcision as a cure for nervous disorders in the nineteenth century and its relationship to Freud's early work; and contemporary debates over the ethical permissibility of routine infant circumcision.

For Sitegeist, I've selected a section from the first chapter of my book, 'Freud's Foreskin: Psychoanalytic Interpretations of Circumcision', where I explore classical psychoanalytic theories on the meaning of ritual circumcision alongside an interrogation of the impact of anti-Semitic views about circumcision in Freud's own thinking. I identify a contradiction between those, such as Theodor Reik and Freud, who view circumcision rituals as 'masculinising', because they involve the consolidation of bond between fathers and sons and establishment of a patriarchal order – and those, such as Bruno Bettelheim, who emphasise 'feminising' aspects of the rite, including its relationship to fantasies of childbirth and the ritualistic links between circumcision blood and menstrual blood. In the extract below I attempt to synthesize these divergent perspectives by arguing that circumcision is fundamentally ambivalent, giving form to an originary signifying 'cut' through which masculinity and femininity emerge as simultaneous possibilities. This ambivalence, I argue, may be the source of circumcision's seductive power. The below text also therefore establishes the primary theory of circumcision that I explore throughout the rest of the book.

If you'd like to receive a discounted copy of the book, or share any questions or thoughts, please get in touch: jordan.osserman@gmail.com.

Circumcision's Ambivalence

In his study of castration in Seminar Ten, after some idiosyncratic comments on the aesthetic superiority of the circumcised penis, Lacan remarks, 'Circumcision embodies . . . the fact that something akin to an order may be brought into this hole, into this constitutive failing of primordial castration.'¹ Here, he suggests that the function of circumcision is to provide some kind of 'order,' perhaps to compensate for the abyss of castration. A piece of the penis is sacrificed to represent the lack that founds the subject. In a sense, it is similar to Freud's views on circumcision and castration, yet it suggests a pacifying dimension of circumcision against Freud's emphasis on guilt and fear. Circumcision does not castrate you; rather, by symbolizing castration as a mark on the penis, it relieves the unbearable trauma of the more fundamental, 'primordial castration.'

Similarly, Luce Irigaray writes that Jewish circumcision 'lies in the realm of the sign. What is cut away is only cut away in order to make a sign. . . . But almost the reverse of castrating, this excision is what marks the body's entry into the world of signs.'² Castration represents the failure or limit point of language, whereas circumcision marks the possibility of the subject's embodied participation in language. Although both Lacan and Irigaray are here posing an opposition between circumcision and castration, I suggest we view the two as interdependent. Signification is possible only insofar as it incorporates a limit; language must be constitutively incomplete in order for us to go on saying different things. Likewise, to make use of signification, something of the body must also be incomplete; there must be an embodied experience of lack compelling us to engage in 'the world of signs.' More than solely symbolizing castration to mitigate its effects, circumcision marks – represents – this very moebius-like interrelation between lack (or castration) and signification.

Related to this is a complicated interplay of singularity and universality: the question of the subject's insertion into the symbolic and the nature of the wound thereby encountered. Is circumcision the 'collective wound,' the identifying mark, of a particular community or

‘symbolic order’ (Jewish, Muslim, etc.)? Or does circumcision give a particular form to the universal entry into ‘the symbolic’ as such? In an interview exploring his views on Jewishness, Derrida highlights this ambiguity:

On the one hand, I insist on the singularity, the irrepressibility of the wound, circumcision, my own circumcision, which is irreplaceable, it’s a wound which structures myself as an absolute singularity. But, on the other hand, I suggest that there are analogies between the Jewish circumcision and every kind of wound which constitutes a community. At the origin of any identity, or cultural identity or nationality, there is something like a circumcision, there is a mark on the body, an ineffaceable mark on the body and this wound is universal. So I postulate between the two and I want to say both things at the same time. On the one hand it is absolutely irreplaceable and on the other hand there are circumcisions everywhere, even outside the Jewish or Islamic communities. That’s the ambiguity of the mark on the body.³

Derrida’s comments situate circumcision at the level of particular communal identity and universality at the same time. He moves between circumcision as something that ‘structures’ him as an ‘absolute singularity,’ and as a wound which ‘constitutes a community.’ Singularity indicates something beyond the level of communal identification, something absolutely specific to an individual subject; Derrida’s circumcision is his wound alone. Yet, for him, this singularity occurs against the backdrop of his communal constitution, his Jewish identity – which then extends further, into the conditions for the constitution of community as such. In Lacanian terms, Derrida appears to argue that circumcision illuminates how the encounter with castration and inscription into the symbolic order are simultaneously the universal conditions for subject formation *and* are undergone by each desiring subject in his or her ultimately singular way.

These problematics are also addressed in Lacan's remarks in Seminar Five, where he contrasts the mark a shepherd leaves on his flock of sheep with the mark of circumcision:

It's indeed true that, in a certain way, circumcision presents itself as constituting a particular flock, the flock of God's chosen ones. Are we not merely rediscovering this? Certainly not. What analytic experience, and Freud, brought us at the beginning is that there is a close, even intimate relationship between desire and the mark. The mark is not simply there as a sign of recognition for the shepherd. . . . Where man is concerned, the marked living being has a desire which does not fail to have a certain intimate relationship with the mark.⁴

Unlike a simple identifying badge, circumcision, both Lacan's and Derrida's comments suggest, marks simultaneously one's communal identity *and* the individual desire that emerges out of the process of inscribing oneself *into* a community; both of these circulate around the subjection to a wound, at once singular and universal. As Reinhard Lupton writes, 'Circumcision separates the individual from the nation in the very act of joining him to it, naming his strangeness *to* the symbolic in the moment of estranging him within it.'⁵ The cut traverses the imaginary, symbolic, and real: it imaginarily represents symbolic castration (referencing the penis as the imaginary origin of the symbolic phallus, as well as generating an identitarian mark that serves as the imaginary signified of a symbolic community) and in the process circumscribes the 'hole' of the real. It both offers us the captivating image of the introduction of lack into the subject and repudiates this moment through the establishment of law and the invocation of the desired qualities of the Other sex – the attempt to eliminate the threat of difference.

These Lacanian reflections on circumcision bring us to my key argument regarding the moebius-like nature of the practice with respect to sexual difference. I propose we view acts of circumcision as fundamentally ambivalent, involving both a 'masculine' attempt to secure

the phallus and a 'feminine' undermining of this pursuit or showing up of its fraudulence. In the former, circumcision mobilizes the logic of the phallus in an attempt to master the trauma of castration. The rite is inserted into a system of meaning that reassures the subject that something can be done with the trauma of the cut; it can be harnessed toward membership of a social order regulated by paternal law. (This corresponds to Eilberg-Schwartz's formulation, 'One must have a [circumcised] member to be a member.'⁶) Additionally, at the imaginary level, circumcision appears to appropriate and master enigmatic and threatening aspects of femininity. Circumcision thus transforms the penis into the phallus, an instrument of signification and social order, enabling members of the male sex to negotiate difference through the phallic pursuit of representing and mastering the unrepresentable. *Yet*, circumcision does this only by disavowing the phallus's emptiness. Thus, at another level, circumcision restages (and even valorizes) the very moment when the splitting of the subject takes place. The removal of the foreskin confronts men with the fundamental lack imposed by the symbolic order and the fraudulence of any subsequent claims to phallic wholeness (the same dilemma that faces women). In the final analysis, circumcision and its attendant significations can be seen as giving form to the originary signifying cut, and an attempt to respond to the problems it raises. This is not to negate specificity or context; for, in each case, circumcision (and the stances and controversies surrounding it) are, as the chapters of this book show, extremely particular. In any given moment in the history of circumcision, the problem of phallic (dis)possession plays itself out differently; yet, this irresolvable problem is always at play. Moreover, as is the case with signification as such, for any one meaning that circumcision accrues in a particular context, its inverse always threatens to emerge.

Viewing circumcision in this way helps us understand how the rite can hold such contradictory meanings for different groups of people; how, for example, it renders Jews into castrated women in anti-Semitic fantasy while at the same time appearing as a sign of 'manliness' for many of its proponents.⁷ Like the cut of sexual difference, circumcision symbolizes the moment at which both masculinity and femininity emerge as distinct,

asymmetrical 'solutions' to the structural antagonism of subjectivity.

Eric Silverman, in his psychoanalytically informed study of the symbolism of Jewish circumcision, reaches a similar conclusion. Inspired by Bettelheim, he interprets the Jewish rite as in part an envious appropriation of female parturitive powers; while its manifest purpose is to enhance and consolidate phallic masculinity, it carries with it the shadow of its opposite, the feminization of the male. He emphasizes how circumcision is mobilized, in both biblical texts and rabbinical literature, as a means of forging a patriarchal community bounded by law which nevertheless constantly threatens to undo itself; the 'cut' paradoxically promises a sense of wholeness which, 'like culture in Lacan's theory, inevitably fails.'⁸ Hence, he concludes, 'circumcision dramatizes unease over separation-individuation through a symbolism that affirms yet blurs the normative boundaries between masculinity and motherhood.'⁹ Circumcision separates men from women and boys from mothers; yet, through its emphasis on father to son initiation, it induces its practitioners into the very maternal and feminine identifications that, he argues, it simultaneously repudiates. This ambivalence, Silverman claims, is the very source of its power; covenants 'often derive their sacred character from otherwise immoral or taboo expressions of violence or intimacy.'¹⁰

While Silverman limits his study primarily to the Jewish, religious context, this book will examine how circumcision's ambivalence makes itself manifest in spaces beyond the religious, including medicine and politics.

Notes

For bibliography, please consult the full published text.

- 1 Lacan, *X*, 206; see also 90, where Lacan cites Nunberg as inspiration for his views on circumcision.
- 2 Irigaray, *Marine Lover*, 81.
- 3 Cixous and Derrida, 'Language of Others.'
- 4 Lacan, *V*, 290–1.
- 5 Lupton, 'Ethnos and Circumcision,' 198.
- 6 Eilberg-Schwartz, *Savage in Judaism*, 145.

- 7 The crime of forced circumcision perpetrated by the Kikuyu ethnic group in Kenya against the Luo ethnic group is a recent, gruesome illustration of this point. For the Kikuyu, circumcision is understood as a rite of passage into manhood; however, when they forcibly circumcised Luo men (who did not ordinarily practice the rite), they intended it to humiliate and emasculate them – and sometimes they would castrate rather than circumcise them. See Auchter, “Forced Male Circumcision.”
- 8 Silverman, *Abraham to America*, 64.
- 9 Silverman, ‘Anthropology and Circumcision,’ 423.
- 10 Silverman, xviii.