

BETWEEN LIFE AND WORK

A review of Lisa Appignanesi and John Forrester's **Freud's women** and Janet Sayers' **Mothering psychoanalysis**

Susan Van Zyl

*University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg*

Writing a combined review of Liza Appignanesi and John Forrester's **Freud's women** and Janet Sayers' **Mothering psychoanalysis**, two books which seem appropriately united by a common project, has turned out to be a task of a demanding and somewhat disconcerting kind. What is disconcerting about this task stems from the fact that despite their common ground - and the promise of an interesting comparison this brings - even on a first reading the two works turn out to be of such different levels and qualities that one is left wondering whether they are, in fact, comparable at all. Is **Mothering psychoanalysis** put at a unfair disadvantage from the start by being compared with a work of the sheer size, let alone stature, of **Freud's women**? After all, double reviews are inevitably competitive in some sense and it is only in fairy stories that David stands anything like a real chance against Goliath.

But, having said all this, I still think the two books can justly, be compared. Firstly, against the possible charge that **Mothering psychoanalysis** is intended to be a short, popular, polemical work which must be judged as such, it must be said at once that my objections to it are not on any of these grounds. There are some very good short, popular books on psychoanalysis and some of these (Janet Malcolm's **Psychoanalysis: The impossible profession** for example) confront topics nearly as tricky and controversial as Sayers's conjunction of psychoanalysis and feminist questions.

What makes **Mothering psychoanalysis** a disappointing book is in the end quite independent of its being compared with **Freud's women**. The problem does not lie with its chosen aims but with the fact that it does not seem to have what it takes to tackle these aims themselves - that task reflected in the title, which indicates that it is a book which concerns the nature of a change in focus and direction in psychoanalysis. Sayers (1991:3) herself describes her text as aiming to tell the "story of this revolution (the mothering of psychoanalysis) through the biographies of first women architects", so I doubt that she would disagree with this characterization of her task.

As these words indicate, the work falls broadly into the category of a history of ideas and the method Janet Sayers adopts is biographical. Surely what is needed to write a book which sets itself these goals is a knowledge of the field both past and present (in order to trace the change), and the kind of biographical skills necessary to do so via an account of the life and work of those women architects? Alas neither of these skills are on show in **Mothering psychoanalysis**. Sayers does not emerge as either an engaging or convincing biographer and, in this book at least, she does appear to know enough about psychoanalysis or its history, to make a good job of tracing the evolution she claims to be focusing upon.

And, to focus on the second attribute, I think most people would agree that biographers need to share with novelists the capacity to make the person they are writing about into a character, to be seriously engaged with them in some visible way. It is not enough to simply approve or disapprove of the person you are writing about. The biographer needs to think and feel a range of modulated things about her subjects, for which Sayers's liberal approval and disapproval are poor substitutes.

While she obviously approves of her "mothers" and as obviously disapproves of Freud, she shows very little sense of being really fascinated with any of her subjects. In fact, when it comes to Freud, the emotion she conveys is far more like self-righteous spite than anything else. The overall result is an unexpected one. However hard it might seem to be to make a combination of psychoanalytic and feminist material boring, this is just what Sayers does. Except for her chapter on Anna Freud, for whom she seems to feel some real interest and something like warmth, much of the book is simply uninteresting.

In comparison I found the 550 (as opposed to **Mothering psychoanalysis'** 150) pages of **Freud's women** virtually impossible to put down. Some of this problem is due to Janet Sayers's style, which is clumsy, often on the edge of being plainly ungrammatical, whereas Lisa Appignanesi and John Forrester write superbly.

One's reaction to Sayers' presentation of Freud's and other case histories is a good example of this stylistic problem. In my opinion it is the rich detail, the sense of continuity in a case history that must be conveyed to the reader. Janet Sayers does not seem to understand this. She treats case histories as if they were something one could reel off - at worst an item in a list, at best anecdotes - and she sometimes merely strings together, beginning with the same phrase such as "and then there was the one in which..."

What is more it is not as if Sayers did not have enough space to give some real sense of an author's life or work or, for that matter, as if we could not compare this sense with that provided by Appignanesi and Forrester. There are only four sections in **Mothering psychoanalysis** which are devoted to Helene Deutsch, Karen Horney, Anna Freud and Melanie Klein respectively, and both Anna Freud and Helene Deutsch are written about in **Freud's women**. One can, therefore, compare these lives themselves and the quality of the writing in each case directly. And in my opinion **Freud's women** wins each time.

However, more important than their respective styles, is the nature and quality of the feminist material which links the two books. For Janet Sayers, psychoanalysis,

at least of the original Freudian variety, is a *cause célèbre* in which Freud's manifold sins are paraded. For Forrester and Appignanesi, by contrast, the question of women in psychoanalysis remains controversial, unresolved terrain. For, despite the fact that some of Freud's views or remarks on women are undoubtedly hard for anyone to take lying down, in the end it is clear that cries of chauvinism around Freud are simply not enough.

To tackle the task which the authors of both texts set themselves simply by way of taking up a standard PC view is to underestimate the difficulty of presenting the issue intelligently. Whether classical Freudian psychoanalysis is chauvinistic or not is a serious question, but there is more to attempting to answer it than demonstrating, with glee, that Freud the man was a chauvinist.

The problem with **Mothering psychoanalysis** is not only that when it comes to Freud himself Janet Sayers is undoubtedly biased - she is in some sense entitled to be. But, less legitimately, in confusing psychoanalysis's chauvinism with Freud's, she seems unable to think the difference between the two.

1. **Mothering psychoanalysis** is founded on the statement that "psychoanalysis which was once patriarchal and phallocentric is now almost entirely mother centred" (p2). The choice of such fashionably pejorative terms as "patriarchal" and "phallocentric", which skew both the content and the tone of the opening sections make the problems I have with the book as a whole clear from start. But, perhaps because this point is so explicit and obvious, it would not be worth pointing to if it were not connected to the more interesting question of Sayers's method.

While the whole of the fourth part of **Freud's women** entitled "The question of femininity" deals with psychoanalysis and women, Sayers tries to read the key issues directly off the lives of her subjects, Freud and the women analysts, themselves.

Sayers herself makes how she sees this relationship between life and work quite clear early on in her text. She writes, for example: "Freud's sexism as much as his sex shaped the patriarchal and phallocentric bias of his theory and therapy. Not only did his sex, indeed his status with time as grand old man of psychoanalysis, elicit his patients' memories of their fathers. In a sense, and unlike subsequent male analysts, Freud also courted such reminiscences through his patriarchal stance in therapy. Certainly he wanted authority over his patients. Indeed one of the reasons he abandoned the use of hypnosis in treatment was because his patients resisted his authority in trying to hypnotize them. Even after he gave up hypnosis for free association, he still acknowledged to his analysand Abram Kardiner, that he was too much the father with his patients. 'I do not like to be the mother in the transference', he told another patient, the symbolist poet HD, 'it always surprises me and shocks me a little. I feel so very masculine.'" (p8)

This deliberately long quotation illustrates in detail a position which the book never seems to really question or move beyond - the assumption that there is a direct relationship between sexism and sex, between someone's own sex and what they think about gender issues. The implication is that the main reason Freud gave up hypnosis had to do with a personal style or predilection and there is no sense of

the theoretical issues at stake. Freud is indeed reputed to have admitted that he gave up hypnosis because he was not very good at it, and Sigmund Freud may not have liked having his authority resisted. But to suggest that this is the main reason he gave up using hypnosis in psychoanalysis is simply fatuous. In psychoanalytic terms there is much more at stake in moving from hypnosis to free association than Freud's own preferences or abilities. There is, for example, the question of who it is that actually remembers in hypnosis, of the circulation of symptoms and of the kind of transferences hypnosis elicits. The move away from hypnosis to free association is hardly motivated by a bossy old man's dislike of being defied.

And this is not the last of it. Sayers quotes to misuse. The real interest of Freud's confession to his analysand surely lies in the fact that someone, especially someone who felt so masculine, could be the mother in the transference, and Freud is clearly being self critical when he writes of his surprise and shock at this fact. But in her desire to suggest that Freud is celebrating his own masculinity and somehow denigrating the mother, or transferences to the mother, Sayers ignores the real point once more.

One cannot help feeling that someone more serious about psychoanalysis itself would know that what is really involved here is much more important than Freud's supposedly phallocentric therapy. But Sayers does not seem to have this sort of interest in her material. Another even more vivid example of her method of moving directly from life to work to make a jibe occurs when she writes of some of Freud's women that: "All three (Mathilde, Sophie and Anna) enjoyed smart clothes, handicraft and knitting - pastimes Freud later dismissed as motivated by women's desire 'to make concealment of their genital deficiency'. Whatever his attitude, Anna struggled to gain a place in her mother's knitting circle." (p147)

It is difficult to keep a more or less objective tone oneself when reading a passage as snide as this one. Apart from the fact that the question of the nature and origins of a woman's sense of deficiency is a complex one, and knitting is hardly the central issue, there is the question of the origins of the views and actions represented. Writing of this kind makes Anna and Freud look extremely foolish: Freud because a theoretical point appears to have its origins in some unfortunate personal reaction to his daughter's interests and Anna for making such a fuss about a knitting circle.

But Sayers does not confine herself to personal digs of this kind, and is also not above subtly misrepresenting Freud's ideas when she can do so to score a point. "Ironically Jeanne de Groot (analyzed by Freud in 1922) used Anna's beating fantasy paper to illustrate her thesis (based on de Groot's patients' experience of her as mother) that the girl's first love is the mother, not the father, as Freud and Anna then claimed." (p149)

While it is true that the phrase "then claimed" might cover Sayers from the charge of actual untruth, she nevertheless gives the seriously misleading impression that this view of the father as the girl child's main object is characteristic of Freud. What Sayers wants to suggest is that nothing which emphasises women originates with Freud and that all the changes made in that direction were made by women alone. This is, surely, especially unjust when it comes to the question of femininity - of

female Oedipus - in particular. In fact central to Freud's view of female sexuality, the topic of one of his best and best known papers (*Female sexuality, 1931*) is the length and strength of girl child's attachment to the mother and the central role this plays in the development of her sexuality.

If the emphasis I have placed on passages like those quoted above suggests that all the problems in **Mothering psychoanalysis** have to do with prejudice against Freud (in particular), then it must be said at once that this is not the intention. The problem goes deeper than this. It is not only with regard to Freud that Sayers's confuses life and work, people and their attitudes to each other with intellectual differences. In the context of a passage which talks about the rivalry between Anna and her sister Sophie and with Helene Deutsch, Sayers writes that "Anna could never stomach Klein's appropriation of her father's work" (p267), and a little later goes on to talk of Klein's own wish to be loved by her father suggesting that she conflicted with Anna for similarly Oedipal reasons. Once again Sayers adopts the, in my opinion, very patronizing view that Anna and Melanie Klein only hold, or change, intellectual positions for personal reasons.

The problem with this stance is that within it everything becomes a question of "personalities" in the pejorative sense. Sayers seldom gives the impression that the most important conflict between Anna Freud and Melanie Klein was the intellectual or theoretical one, or to be fair, where this is suggested (after all the title of Sayers's book implies an orientation to ideas) it is never quite right. The real conflict between Anna Freud and Klein does not turn on their respective emphasis on maternal care but upon the relative importance of Oedipus and Eros on the one hand and pre-Oedipus and Thanatos on the other.

In other words **Mothering psychoanalysis** does not focus on the fact that the conflict between Anna Freud and Melanie Klein is of no less importance than that of two of the major routes out of Freud and this extremely important juncture has little or nothing to do with questions of gender - be they that of the two thinkers themselves or as subject matter. Surely what really counts at this point are differences which arise from an emphasis on very early life and the surreptitious constitutional theory or "biologism" of Klein on the one hand and the increasingly "social" theory of Anna on the other. From the one, with its emphasis on ontogenesis characteristic of Freud's middle period will come ego psychology, while from the other with its focus on the phylogeny and fantasy associated with the later Freud comes much that we now associate with object relations. In the end ego psychology leaves psychoanalysis without its most distinctive project, while Klein's "innate superego" robs psychoanalysis of its most important social dimension. Surely it is things of this kind that count in a conflict between the two thinkers, Anna Freud and Melanie Klein, and not their ordinarily patchy relationships to sisters and fathers.

It may not be accidental that much of importance in psychoanalysis at the time was done by women about women, but lots was done by men too and with nothing to do with questions of gender. It seems in the end as if Janet Sayers does not think it necessary to point to the difference between examples where the person writing (or written about) happens to be female, where the topic generally is women and women's experience, or where it is the issue of mothering itself (usually associated with Winnicott) which is directly at stake.

In fact one's overall impression of **Mothering psychoanalysis** is of a project founded on slips, confusions and prejudices so that right up to the end one is left with a sense of blur. All in all not I think a thoughtful book.

2. If **Mothering psychoanalysis** is disappointing the question of the origins of this disappointment is far from uninteresting. It goes without saying that the history of ideas could not proceed without intellectual biography. Watching the task go wrong as I have suggested it does in **Mothering psychoanalysis** is rewarding because it tells us something about the task and its stress points.

Freud's women and **Mothering psychoanalysis** are interesting to compare because both are by men and women, about men and women theorising about men and women which brings an added edge to the issue of writing intellectual biography and to the central question of the relationship between life and work. What, one immediately asks, are the different effects of putting the two - the lives and the theory - separately as in **Freud's women** and combining them as in **Mothering psychoanalysis**.

The belief that ideas and lives (the nature of one's thoughts and experience of their originators) are interrelated is a long one. Foucault's "What is an author" may be more circumspect than Barthes' "Death of the author", but both articulate the potentially problematic relation in a way that only literary theory seems to have embraced. Some schools of literary theory and criticism may have argued that the life of the author is no place to turn in an attempt to explain, or interpret a work, but most other writers (especially intellectual biographers) simply proceed on the apparently commonsensical assumption that works and lives belong together.

In fact many post-modern social theorists often go further and it is now common to use the personal fallibility of the scientist as the basis of an attack. **Mothering psychoanalysis**, it seems has embraced just this view and in its most naive form. Implicit in Janet Sayers's book (and this in my opinion is responsible for some of its least successful aspects) is the apparently commonsensical, but finally crude, view that an author's gender (for better if you are a woman, for worse if you are man) is directly and problematically expressed in their work.

Freud's women differs from **Mothering psychoanalysis** not just in its relative even-handedness but in its clear grasp of the both the similarities and differences between the lives and the projects of Freud's women. And, despite making it quite plain that life and work will, must, intersect in some important ways, the structure of the book itself indicates that the lives and the theory should be separated at key points in order to do justice to both.

A more detailed look at how **Freud's women** is constructed might help to make this clear. The book has four main sections which follow in roughly chronological order. The first section entitled "The Freud family romance" concerns Freud's early life and his famous courtship of Martha. Part 2 entitled "Inventing psychoanalysis" deals with the first patients and contains a wonderful section on Dora which is described as an "exemplary failure". (Given the amount of controversy the case has stirred up it should be read as an example of Appignanesi and Forrester's way of keeping their heads when many around have lost theirs.)

Part 3 entitled "A woman's profession" takes the form of short biographies of Sabina Spielrein and Loe Kann, Lou Andreas-Salome, Anna Freud, Helene Deutsch, Marie Bonaparte, Joan Riviere and Alix Strachey.

The fourth and last section called "The question of femininity" (which is made up of three sections "Freuds' femininity: Theoretical investigations", "The dispute over woman", and "Feminism and psychoanalysis") contains some of the best discussions on the topic of psychoanalysis and women I know. If being able to write well - be it theory or biography - involves the perfect combination of cool passion and fascination with the issues, John Forrester and Lisa Appignanesi have these too.

But if this account of the separation of theory and biography suggests that the two never intersect in **Freud's women**, this is not intended. Forrester and Appignanesi have the, in my view, rare ability to consider the relationship between lives and thought in the light of psychoanalysis itself, and in a way which does not prioritise either.

The chapter entitled "Two analytic triangles", which is about Sabina Spielrein and Jung, Lou Kahn and Ernst Jones is a good example. The success of the chapter lies not only in its style, its novelistic skill, and the detailed scholarship it displays but in the way it uses the concept of Oedipus as a kind of *leitmotif* running through the real life material. In the process the chapter conveys, without moralism or idealisation, the sense of Freud's loyalty to people who were in the very complex position of being analysands, colleagues and friends simultaneously. "We also observe how adept Freud was at negotiating analytic triangles - as if such analytic *menage a trois* expedited the appearance and resolution of that more theoretical and universal triangle, that of Oedipus." (Appignanesi & Forrester, 1992:226)

And with similar sureness of touch when describing Freud's relationship with his very first love Gisela Fluss and her mother, Forrester and Appignanesi write: "Discoverer of the Oedipus complex that he was to be, at sixteen the young Freud was already aware of this generational fluidity in the fantasies of love, whereby he might love both mother and daughter. After all, the slippage between generations in his own family meant that he was never sure that Phillippe or Jakob was the man who held the key to the maternal secrets." (p24)

But, and this is perhaps the most point important of all, when it comes to the theoretical chapters Appignanesi and Forrester demonstrate that they have a clear grasp of "Freud's femininity", and what is at stake in it, both within and outside psychoanalysis. In this they avoid all the common misconstruals Sayers is heir too.

As examples, and in marked contrast to those in **Mothering psychoanalysis**, let us look at some of the ways in which Appignanesi and Forrester handle issues involved in the dispute between Freud and his followers over femininity - an issue made no easier by having consequences outside the technical papers of psychoanalytic theory. One of the first things that strikes one is the emphasis Forrester and Appignanesi place on what is arguably Freud's most important premise - the bisexuality thesis and the consequences this in turn has for an understanding of the way in which the intersection between culture and nature is thought in Freud.

One of the most important consequences of Freud's bisexuality thesis is, as they put it, that psychoanalysis does not try to describe what a woman is, but how a woman comes into being or develops out of a child with a bisexual disposition. In other words, if the starting point is bisexuality Freud's task is thus one which seeks to examine how children "become psychically man or woman, and not ... to determine the properties *essential* to being man or woman." (p325) And what this implies (and surely what is most novel about Freud's position) that any stable erotic orientation, even that which is taken to be normal (thus heterosexual as much as homosexual) has to be explained. Freud thus abandons the traditional naturalistic model of human sexuality, "detaching it from the biologicistic view which grounds sexuality in reproduction" (p406).

What is interesting about this view for a discussion of female sexuality in particular is the fact that, for Freud, it is imperative to explain subsequent sexual differences in social or cultural terms. If in its earliest forms the sexuality of boys and girls is closely aligned in a common bisexual identity then it is later differences which must be explained - and this Freud does by means of Oedipus and especially, as Forrester and Appignanesi point out, the drama of castration. Starting from this uncharacteristic and certainly not chauvinistic point, the authors of **Freud's women** show that the unfolding of views or theories of female sexuality (as much in the hands of the "mothers" as in that of "fathers") does not always - and certainly not depending on gender- move towards unambiguously more enlightened views about female sexuality.

In other words Forrester and Appignanesi's sophisticated account of the differences between Freud and his followers shows that these divergences do not necessarily lead to more progressive or feminist views of female sexuality. In fact in some respects their views could be described as regressive. Karen Horney's reinterpretation of Freud, for example, moves back towards the kind of biologism which argues for the importance of a natural attraction between sexes. Of Horney's approach, Appignanesi and Forrester write: "This fresh start to the problem of sexual difference was to have an influential future: it forms the basis of object-relations theory of sexual difference. Instead of forming the identification with the parent as a result of the catastrophe of the castration complex, the identification precedes it, is in some sense given (biologically, usually) and is certainly normative in a sociological sense." (p435)

What they seem to suggest in this is that there is a price to be paid for moving away from Freud in this way - one which sees the socially accepted position as natural. In fact, even more strongly, when discussing Deutsch's position Appignanesi and Forrester write that her reinterpretation of Freud ushers in a view which became widely perceived as the Freudian orthodoxy after the Second World War. This view, as they point out, saw the sexual life of the woman as dominated by the masochistic trio of castration, rape (coitus) and parturition, each linked in the mother-daughter cycle. And this characteristic emphasis on the subordination of femininity to the rigours of reproduction is, they argue, a distinctive feature of Deutsch's work. (cf pp440-441)

But, one must hasten to add, this broadly biological view - which I am suggesting could well be regarded as regressive - is not of course confined to those who are "mothers" themselves. Forrester and Appignanesi make a similar point about Ernest Jones's position. In pointing out that in Jones's account, "the subject is already sexed: she gives up her sex to enter into penis envy; whereas in Freud, the girl only becomes sexed when penis envy is transformed into something else" (p444), they make it clear that Jones also moves his explanatory account back towards a position in which naturally grounded gender differences precede the cultural intervention represented by penis envy and castration.

The importance of this brief excursion into the vicissitudes of psychoanalytic views of female sexuality has to do with the comparison between the two texts it makes possible. Apart from its relatively unsophisticated grasp of content, and the simplistic connection between life and work which it assumes, what interests me here is the wider question of the implications of Janet Sayers's uncritical view of the "mothering of psychoanalysis". Unlike **Freud's women**, which always does justice to the complexity of the ideas and material it presents, **Mothering psychoanalysis** parades its supposedly PC credentials at every turn. It does not at any point ask whether moving to the mother, (and always by implication away from Freud), is in fact progressive. Being a woman writer and placing an emphasis on women's experience are simply assumed to be "good" things.

It seems to me, however, that one of the serious problems associated with feminism of this uncritical variety is its naive and finally ironic "re-gendering" of thought.

There is no doubt that human beings (who, equally undoubtedly, are influenced by their own by historical settings, genders and classes) make knowledges. There is also no doubt that where those knowledges are about what is most complex, intimate and varied about human beings they are especially vulnerable to charges of prejudice. But there is equally no reason to believe that one's sex, particularly if it is male, is some especially polluting phenomenon which calls for this anxious, obsessive vigilance. Knowledge is not, after all, commonsense nor is it helplessly subject to the vagaries of experience. All knowledges, to count as knowledges at all, come equipped with techniques, instruments, standards and concepts by means of which to judge themselves, and the obligation to qualify the beliefs and knowledge claims they make. Freudian psychoanalysis is no exception.

REFERENCES.

Appignanesi, L & Forrester, J (1992) **Freud's women**. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, hbk; London: Virago, 1993, pbk.

Freud, S (1931/1977) Female sexuality, in **On sexuality**. (Volume 7, Penguin Freud Library.) Harmondsworth: Penguin. (Standard Edition Vol 21)

Sayers, J (1991) **Mothering psychoanalysis**. Harmondsworth: Penguin.