

“Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama’s Hung You in the Closet and I’m Feelin’ so Sad”

William Willeford

This title of a play by Arthur Kopit is a mocking exclamation about a sorry state of affairs. More than forty years after the play was first performed we can still recognize Dad as dangling where Kopit’s title left him. The image tells us something important about the role of this version of Dad in our lives, a role that expresses assumptions resistant to conscious criticism and hence slow to change. In a broader sense Dad has also, of course, assumed forms more robust. If he had not, he would not be threatening, whereas when he is not blamed for being absent, he often is for being nasty, even dangerously so. And these forms, too, are part of the larger picture that has him dangling in the closet.

Various images of the father have been prominent in the history of depth psychology. The main current of it, the psychoanalysis that Freud brought into being, has been usefully father-centered in ways that have helped us understand many things. But the same bias has sometimes allowed the figure of the father to take over the psychological stage. I think now of ways in which the notion of the Oedipus complex, with father as central, has been invoked to explain more than it can. In response to this one-sidedness, psychoanalysis has come to grant more attention to mothers and to the crucial psychological importance of the early mother-infant relationship. Despite the great benefits of this development, it has left us with much obscurity about fathers. This becomes evident if we try to think of a movie from recent decades in which a compellingly and sympathetically presented paternal figure has made us feel that he has enhanced our respect for fatherhood or even our interest in it.

The image of Dad absent while dangling in the closet is, we should bear in mind, an exaggeration of the autonomy essential to normal adulthood. And Mama’s rage, of which he is there the victim—as she presumably acts also on behalf of their children—is an exaggeration of the aggression that is part of sexual and family life, as when males fight over a female and the winner mates with her, or when a member of a family is chastised in the interest of making it function decently.

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An article and a book, both recent, should interest anyone wishing to explore such matters further. The article is “Female and Male Androgynes in the Work of Freud, Neumann, and Jung” by Stella Richards in [The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal](#), 81 (21, 1, 2002). The book is [The Father: Historical, Psychological and Cultural Perspectives](#) by Luigi Zoja (Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis, 2001). I wish to comment on illustrations in both that help to elucidate some steps on Dad’s way to the top of the authoritative heap and from there to the closet and then out of it.

The female androgynes about which Richards writes are female divinities having penises, known to archeologists from prehistoric figurines. Many such figures have a clearly maternal character and are by implication able to impregnate themselves. Interestingly they are often associated with semi-divine animal-human figures who are ithyphallic—they are portrayed with erect penises. The much later male androgynes about which she writes are mythical or myth-inspired, imaginative beings some of whom have male and female heads and no penises, a lack that sometimes implies castration. The Egyptian Osiris, for example, is androgynous both in having breasts that flood the Nile with milk and in having been castrated, so that his consort Isis must create a penis of her own to mate with him and so re-create him in the form of their son Horus.

The matriarchal female androgynes with their penises and their tolerance of semi-divine phallus-bearing creatures give the impression of ample phallic power. Moreover, this power does not seem inclined to become problematic. The more patriarchal androgynes, in contrast, evoke castration anxiety. If, for example, one studies some of the androgynous, alchemical illustrations that interested Jung, one may wonder uneasily what happened to the penises the figures might be expected to have but do not.

We might account for the difference between female and male androgynes by thinking that matriarchy is more good-heartedly accepting of sexuality and patriarchy more restrictive, competitive, and repressing. But this oversimplification, probably not entirely wrong, needs a number of qualifications. The more matriarchal goddesses often had as consorts son-lovers destined for early death. This death was followed by rebirth but also meant that the male vigor and the very lives of these consorts was in the shadow of death, which was not inflicted by some male authority but was already there. Then, too, priests of the early mother goddesses were often castrated. Moreover, as more patriarchal world-views emerged, they brought with them potentialities for psychic and cultural development with their own allure and promise. Patriarchy also brought its own severities—Freud spoke of (patriarchal) civilization and its attendant “discontents.” But part of what has made them tolerable has been the prospect of expansion and differentiation of capacities—just as affirming one’s ability to play a complex piece of music becomes a motive for taking it on. And this strand of motivation—and not just the need to modulate sex and aggression—plays a role in larger shifts of cultural attitude, such as those apportioning social status to mothers and fathers.

When Jung used the phrase “the reality of the psyche,” he did so to make the point that we cannot reach beyond it. We might

find it obvious that males have penises and females not, but at the same time the psyche was recording this general fact it was also creating countless sculptures giving penises to mothers. And so who has a penis and who not is not in every respect a simple matter. And similarly complex is the nature and social role of human fathers.

Zoja (In chapter 18 of his book) moves from nineteenth-century family portraits to contemporary photographs, common in ads, of a bare-chested young father with his baby. In these earlier portraits the father is shown with his whole family and is generally at its center. Exercising a profession and membership in a social class, he is well defended, highly dressed, and clearly defined by his role in a comprehensible cultural and social geography. He is the main link between the family and the larger social world. In the contemporary photographs, in contrast, all signs of such linkage have been erased. "The new father," Koja comments, "removes his clothes, the garments placed on his back by society, metaphysics and history. He proceeds toward a nudity as free, intimate and oceanic as symbiosis."

By oceanic symbiosis Zoja means a basic level of the connection between mother and infant. In a less cheerful reading of his words, the bare-chested "new father" is becoming a fundamentally defective imitation of a nursing mother, or is himself becoming a nursing infant. In a more cheerful reading, he has opened himself to the formerly segregated world of the mother-infant relationship and is in a position to reimagine and redefine fatherhood accordingly. In any case, he is neither arrested at the center of the patriarchal family nor hanging in the closet but is in movement, even if its direction is uncharted. All of the images I have mentioned suggest that such movements are deep and slow ■