

The Disappearing of Women Psychoanalytic Theorists by Men and Faux-Feminists

By Phyllis Chesler

Many moons ago, I sent my response to Dr. Inna Rozentsvit at *Clio's Psyche*—a most fascinating journal of psychoanalysis. It has just now been published. I obtained permission to share my thoughts with you here.

Abstract: This is my response to Dr. Inna Rozentsvit's compelling article about the complex reasons for the marginalization and disappearance of the work of women psychoanalytic theorists. I point out that men have generally been the reason behind the disappearance of women's intellectual contributions; however, it is now also being carried out by women, especially faux-feminists.

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I welcome Inna Rozentsvit's excellent article on the complex reasons for the marginalization and disappearance of women psychoanalysts, theorists, and therapists from the "canonical history of psychoanalysis." She explains this as partly due to the patriarchal biases of their male colleagues, which were typical for their time—but also due to a different and less valued theoretical course charted by many women psychoanalytic theorists—that, in turn, might have been caused by neurobiological differences in the male and female brain.

This is an utterly fascinating thesis and is far more measured than the original feminist-era critiques (including my own) of Freud's refusal to admit the reality of incest—which might

also have been due to his precarious position as the allegedly filthy-minded “Jewish” scientist, who might expose proper Austrians—fathers!—of such a crime. Freud was already in trouble over his theories about childhood sexuality in general. Never mind his views about penis envy as opposed to power envy, something that Karen Horney criticized early on and with which second-wave feminists agreed.

In the beginning, few such critics of psychoanalysis knew or acknowledged the major roles played by Bertha Pappenheim (Anna O), who invented the “talking cure,” and Russian-born psychoanalyst Sabina Spielrein, with whom Jung had the most outrageous affair when she was his patient (see Chesler, 2017, for more information)—and who first suggested the role of the death instinct, which both Freud and Jung appropriated in different ways. Spielrein was the first child psychoanalyst in the world (yes, even before Anna Freud). Spielrein’s biography by Angela Sells, *Sabina Spielrein: The Woman and the Myth* (2017), provides more context about this important psychoanalytic figure.

Generally, men beyond the psychoanalytic world have ignored the work of women in science and the humanities or taken credit for women’s work. The late great Australian scholar Dale Spender documented the systematic disappearance of feminist knowledge, century after century, mainly by men, in her book *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them: From Aphra Ben to Adrienne Rich* (1982).

However, while Rozentsvit is right about male psychoanalysts disappearing the work of their female colleagues and mentors, I must point out that, from 1980–2024, contemporary feminist theorists and therapists, primarily women, have participated in an equally Electra-like form of matricide in their rather savage disappearance of women’s contributions to psychology and psychoanalytic theory. In fact, faux-feminist therapists and academics have moved rather radically from a psychoanalytic vision of the individual or the individual

patient (or paying customer) to an obsession that their role as therapists is to indoctrinate all who seek to understand themselves or to ease their suffering into a politically correct politics. This privileges race and class over sex or gender. It focuses on the transgender issues; the persecution of African Americans; the evil nature of having been born White or male, being heterosexual, not "queer;" and, of course, on the cause of all human suffering: the irredeemably sinful West and the presumably even more Satanic, Jews and their tiny Jewish state, Israel. Worse: Such theorists view classical psychoanalysis as a Jewish perversion and wish to overthrow it entirely.

Before I give some examples of this, please understand that psychoanalysis is both a personal as well as an intellectual matter to me. As a child, when I suffered from nightmares, my mother found a child psychoanalyst for me in Brooklyn, Melitta Shmideberg—Melanie Klein's daughter. I must admit that she frightened me as she re-enacted my dreams. I may even have fled her office from time to time. I did not yet know that she had publicly broken up with her mother (whose theories I've always valued).



As a child, I immersed myself in Greek myths and plays. By the time I was about 15 years old, I had begun reading Freud and Horney entirely on my own. I never discussed this with anyone; their work was not part of my high school or college curriculum.

Some years after I completed graduate school, I trained at a psychoanalytic institute in New York City and, after that, entered an analysis with Dr. Susan Deri, who had trained in Hungary and escaped the Nazi scourge. At that time, I was a firebrand feminist in the midst of writing *Women and Madness* (1972), and thus, I criticized Freud rather hotly and prematurely. Although I thought Dr. Susan was probably too much of a Freudian, I loved her. (Transference? Sure.) Once, Dr. Melitta joined her for dinner and remembered me as one of her child patients: "Ach, yes, she had headaches and nightmares." I left Dr. Susan only because a close friend of mine began dating her son, Peter, and kept telling me all about their social interactions. It was more than I could handle, but I still remember my Hungarian-born analyst with great warmth and fondness.

Finally, in 1982, after lecturing in Salzburg, I visited what is now the Freud Museum at Berggasse 19. The President allowed me to be alone in Freud's waiting room (or in his consulting

room, I am no longer sure). Once there, I listened to Freud tell me *his* problems. Unsurprisingly, he attributed many of his sorrows to his life as a Jew in antisemitic, hypocritical, and “Victorian” Austria. The President, whose name I forget, asked me to convene a conference on Freud and Women. I agreed to do so, but a month later, as a passenger, I suffered a near-fatal car accident and was laid up for many years. I could not convene this conference, something that I very much regret.

I once had dinner with Karen Horney’s daughters, who arranged for psychoanalyst Anna Aragno to review my book, *Woman’s Inhumanity to Woman* (2002), in the *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*. I mentioned to them that I took their mother’s work very seriously and had published a chapter in my book *About Men* (1978) about male uterus envy.

So, although I am not a practicing psychoanalyst and have never worked full-time as a psychoanalytically oriented therapist, the ideas, history, controversies, and historical figures in the psychoanalytic world are long familiar to me and cherished. Therefore, in my view, the savaging of this extraordinary way of thinking is unwarranted and unacceptable.

Now, here’s one of the many examples of how contemporary academic feminists, mostly women, have disappeared leading women theorists and practitioners in the world of psychology and psychoanalysis. In 2022, the Barnard Center for Research on Women held a feminist conference about “Living in Madness: Decolonization, Creation, Healing.” I was more than a little interested—I attended their opening panel via Zoom. Most of the opening panelists spoke in a pseudo-scientific language I could barely comprehend. One speaker mentioned only one female theorist in mental health, Sarah Ahmed, a British Australian Pakistani “queer lesbian” of color.

They all seemed to romanticize madness as yet another way of destroying boundaries, which, in their collective view, was

revolutionary or liberating. In my experience, schizophrenia, manic-depression, anxiety, panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorders, and suicidal ideation are all one-way tickets to Hell—not Paradise. None of the panelists mentioned even one of the female foremothers included by Rozentsvit in her article. These panelists were no longer concerned with psychoanalysis as a process of self-education, a way of understanding the human psyche, or of reducing suffering but as a way of indoctrinating people into a politically correct way of thinking.

One panelist, Dr. Camille Robcis, focused on France. However, she “referred to Lacan, Foucault, Fanon, and Tosquelles—all men—but not to any of their major French female counterparts, e.g., Marie Balmary, Ilse (Rothschild) Barande, Simone de Beauvoir, Princess Marie Bonaparte, Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, etc.,” and adds that “Although Dr. Robcis mentioned Nazi camps and Nazi fascism again and again, the word ‘Jews’ never crossed her lips” (Chesler, 2022, para 10).

The panelists never mentioned the 20th century pioneers of feminist psychology and feminist psychoanalysis. I am thinking of Drs. Sandra Bem, Paula Joan Caplan, Helene Deutsch, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Anna Freud, Frieda Fromm-Reichman, Carol Gilligan, Karen Horney, Judith Lewis Herman, Ellyn Kaschak, Melanie Klein, Margaret Mahler, Alice Miller, Jean Baker Miller, Juliet Mitchell, Sabina Spielrein, Clara Thompson. My work was never mentioned either.

Dr. Lara Sheehi, formerly of Georgetown University in DC and currently based in Qatar, was another panelist. (Sheehi was the President of the Society of Psychoanalysis and Psychoanalytic Psychology, a Division 39 of the American Psychological Association.) Former President Sheehi kept tossing her hair and, as I’ve written before, she talked about “‘stolen land,’ ‘solidarity with political prisoners everywhere, especially in Palestine;’ about ‘de-colonial

feminist solidarity' which opposes 'settler colonial logic,' 'brutal occupation,' and 'settler soldiers'" (Chesler, 2022, para 19). Sheehi aimed to defame Israel, employing terms like "'de-colonial and queer methodology'" against "'heteronormative patriarchy,'" "'the chokeholds of Zionist practices,'" and called to "'practice liberation'" (Chesler, 2022, paras 18-19). Perhaps she thinks this is a form of political psychotherapy—or a way to rise swiftly in the contemporary academic world.

The whole discourse was politically conformist, incomprehensible, and never used the word "woman."

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