

INTERACTIVE ENVY IN THE LIFE OF THE COUPLE: FROM “THE ORESTEIA” TO THE PRESENT*

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Periklis Antoniou photo

With her iconic paper “Envy and Gratitude”, Melanie Klein brought a huge shift to Freudianism and to psychoanalytic thinking in general.

M. Klein’s theoretical contribution to the concept of envy led her to observe and describe the mechanism of projective identification that became the bridge between the intrapsychic and the interactive and offered psychoanalysis tools for the understanding of interaction and communication. According to this viewpoint, envy is not only an intrapsychic phenomenon, a personality trait but also an interpersonal process.

In a similar manner, another psychoanalyst, Otto Kernberg made a special contribution to the understanding of envy among couples with his work “Love Relations”.

It is interesting to note that every school of thought in psychotherapy needs to integrate concepts from other scientific fields in order to explain the phenomena that emerge through experience. It needs to produce theory through “insemination” rather than “parthenogenesis” (Paolo Bertrando’s “epigenetic” concept).

Gregory Bateson for instance described the concept of “Schismogenesis” after observing, through anthropological studies, neighbouring tribes, neighbours in general, people in very close relationships. This concept is very reminiscent of the concept of envy.



In Complementary Schismogenesis, the relationships that form are dominance-submission, succoring-dependence, exhibitionism-spectatorship.

In Symmetrical Schismogenesis there is hostility and competition.

What is interesting is that Bateson, in writing about Schismogenesis, returned to the intrapsychic, to “drives” and “sexual relations”. He mentioned “erogenous zones”, “orgasm”, Love and War.

“The link with erogenous zones that we ought, perhaps, think of phenomena comparable to orgasm-that the achievement of a certain degree of bodily or neural involvement or intensity may be followed by a release of schismogenic tension”.

“If there be any basic human characteristic which makes man prone to struggle, it would seem to be this hope of release from tension through total involvement. In the case of war, this factor is undoubtedly often potent”.

“... it was suggested that the phenomenon of "falling in love" might be comparable to a schismogenesis” (G.Bateson, Steps to an Ecology of Mind),

Paul Watzlawick (in Pragmatics of Human Communications) suggested the axiom for the two types of communication: Complementary and Symmetrical.

George and Martha, in Albee’s play “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf?” are an example of a couple communicating symmetrically. All these games for the “up” and “down position” are nothing more than the acting-out of the envious attacks of one against the other, and against their bond.

Luchino Visconti’s “The Innocent” is the epitome of the obviously catastrophic complementary couple’s relationship, where, ultimately, the innermost fears of the envious husband become reality.

THE ORESTEIA

But what does Aeschylus have to do with all this?

It might not be coincidental that the main implementation of the concept of envy by M. Klein (“Some Reflections on The Oresteia”) concerned a certain couple: Agamemnon and Clytemnestra!

To clarify things, I discuss here “The Oresteia” mainly referring to Aeschylus’ trilogy, but I also include the other five surviving tragedies: Sophocles’ “Electra”, “Iphigenia in Aulis” and “Iphigenia in Tauris”, as well as Euripides’ “Electra” and “Orestes”.

The concept of envy as well as other relevant terms can be found in the works of all three poets. They form an atmosphere of emotional gloom, in which the drama of the House of the Atreides takes place, especially the interpersonal relationships between the couple of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon.

In Aeschylus’ “Agamemnon”, Clytemnestra responds to Agamemnon’s “And do not draw down envy upon my path by strewing it with tapestries” (line 921), with “yet he who is unenvied is unenviable” (line 940).



In Sophocles' "Electra", when a yet unrecognized Orestes presents Aegisthus with a covered dead body, the latter believes it to be that of Orestes – when in reality it is that of the murdered Clytemnestra – and exclaims "I see an image which could not have fallen without divine spite" (line 1466).

In Euripides' "Electra", the Peasant at the beginning of the tragedy recounts the story and says that after the murder Aegisthus wanted to kill Iphigenia "but he feared that she would be despised for the murder of her children" (line 30).

MANIFESTATION OF ENVY IN COMPLEMENTARY COUPLES

The spouses belittling one another.

M1: "As you can see, my wife has become so fat that I despise her. I tell her constantly, but she ignores me. She's always at the fridge eating".

When Agamemnon arrives at the palace and Clytemnestra welcomes him warmly, he replies proudly with Cassandra at his side: "pamper me not as if I were a woman, nor, like some barbarian, grovel before me with widemouthed acclaim" (Aeschylus, Agamemnon, line 920), thus, belittling women.

M2 and W2 are attending their 10-year-old daughter's ballet recital.

M2 to W2: "Your daughter is as clumsy as you are!"

"The mother of what is called her child is not the parent... The one who mounts is the parent, whereas she, as a stranger for a stranger" (Aeschylus, Eumenides, line 657). According to the beliefs of the era, man's superiority over women is indisputable.

Envy between the sexes.

W3: She is married to a man that has two male friends, who are also married with children. Her sister is also married with children. The four families are close. They meet on the weekends and on vacations and their children are all friends. In a period of 20 years G3 has had affairs with both friends of her husband as well as with her sister's husband. One night, after the latest of the affairs, has ended, the couple has just left the movies and goes to a bar for a drink. G3 "confesses" all three affairs to her husband. The husband feels sad but has no further reaction. G3 becomes depressed. The couple came to therapy, where they both agreed that they are "generally very happy". They discontinued couple's therapy after six months and G3 decided to attend a psychotherapy seminar in order to become a couple's therapist herself (she "appropriated" three men that belonged to other women, she derided her partner, she invalidated therapy and she "appropriated" the therapist's profession).

In "The Oresteia", the model of the complementary relationship is idealised in a discreetly sarcastic manner, when Clytemnestra (hypocritically and deceitfully) welcomes Agamemnon only a few minutes before stabbing the victorious general, her husband that has arrived in Argos after a decade-long absence.

"For what joy is sweeter in a woman's eyes than to unbar the gates for her husband when God has spared him to return from war?" (Aeschylus, Agamemnon, line 602).



MANIFESTATION OF ENVY IN SYMMETRICAL COUPLES

Provoking jealousy

M4: "If we didn't have children I would surely have asked for a divorce".

W4: "What I need right now is to fall in love again with someone else".

When Agamemnon arrives in Argos, Clytemnestra addresses the Chorus and says about Cassandra: "No, she is mad and listens to her wild mood, since she has come here from a newly captured city, and does not know how to tolerate the bit until she has foamed away her fretfulness in blood. No! I will waste no more words upon her to be insulted thus" (line 1065).

Incriminating one's partner, "tit for tat", neglecting one's partner, position of weakness.

M5: "My wife has been treating me like a dog since I lost my job. She says that I'm useless and lazy".

W5: "When I was at the hospital to give birth to our baby, my husband visited me for less than half an hour a day. He said that he was too busy with his job. I felt so alone..."

In her triumphant return to the stage after having slayed her husband, Clytemnestra accuses him: "And yet he, valuing no more than if it had been a beast that perished—though sheep were plenty in his fleecy folds—he sacrificed his own child, she whom I bore with dearest travail" (line 1415). This is an opinion that neither the children nor the chorus – that plays the part of the impartial judge – share.

A continuous and relentless power play between the couple. A continuous struggle for the up and down position. Control over the partner through control of the money.

M6 asks W6 to sell the house they live in that belongs to her in order for them to build a new house on a plot of land he owns with his siblings. W6 refuses. Ten years later, W6 asks for a divorce, accusing her husband (among other things) that despite making a lot of money, he does not bring enough home and has "secret" bank accounts. After the divorce, in a meeting concerning the children, W6 claims her small business is struggling due to the financial crisis. M6 suggests she sells the business!

Clytemnestra, having gotten rid of her murdered husband, tells Aegisthus in the closing line of the tragedy, within earshot from the Chorus of Elders that is on the verge of uprising despite the armed guards: "Do no care for their idle yelpings. I and you will be masters of this house and order it aright" (line 1649).

Generally speaking, the extremely symmetrical relationship of the couple, with envy as its main characteristic, is predominant in "The Oresteia". The curse of the Atreides – the transgenerational burden of the ancestors that fans the sparks of vengeance - contributes to this. The Chorus of Elders says: "Who can cast from out the house the seed of the curse? The race is bound fast in calamity" (line 1565) .

In the same manner, the confrontational couple bestows its curse on future generations.

"They who killed shall be killed in turn" (line 144), says Electra in Aeschylus' Libation Bearers.

The parents, in their fierce and constant conflict, triangulate their children in hostile constellations, according to each one's ability for manipulation, persuasion and enforcement, and the child's



temperament. This is masterfully shown in Sophocles' "Electra" in the lengthy dialogue between Electra and her sister Chrysothemis.

Chrysothemis: "But if I am to live the life of the freeborn, those in power must be obeyed in all things".
Electra: "It is strange, indeed, that you, the daughter of our father from whom you grew, should forget him and instead show concern for your mother!" (lines 339-340).

A dark cloud descends over the family suffocating the children. "Grief especially has ruined me" (line 398) says a weak from the persecution of the Erinyes Orestes, in Sophocles' "Orestes".

Envy in the Oresteia reaches the most extreme points, where words surpass even the most heinous of actions in ferocity. Describing how she stabbed Agamemnon, Clytemnestra tells the people: "Fallen thus, he gasped away his life, and as he breathed forth quick spurts of blood, he struck me with dark drops of gory dew; while I rejoiced no less than the sown earth is gladdened in heaven's refreshing rain at the birthtime of the flower buds" (Aeschylus, Agamemnon, line 1390).

INTERACTIVE ENVY IN THE COUPLE'S EVERYDAY LIFE

Under certain circumstances, envy can reignite in a couple's life, in a circular process even if the partners are not narcissistic – envious personalities. These circumstances are often shaped by environmental factors, or by triangulation with children, members of the extended family, friends, colleagues, work and free time.

In recent years this reignition is also definitely due to the financial crisis that has resulted in an invasion of corruption into the couple's value system and fear regarding emotional stability.

We often observe a deterioration of the capability for symbolisation by the partners, and it is very common to hear them arguing over money, food and material goods per se, and not over what these represent.

When we hear partners tell each other "You're lying!", regarding whether something happened on Wednesday evening or Friday evening, as therapists we must be alert and attempt to restore the capability for more abstract thought, distinction and meta-communication, for the construction of meaning.

One of the most common manifestations of envy in therapy is when partners act as siblings, with each one attempting to become the therapist's "favourite" or even seduce him (as Murray Bowen used to tell couples "Have you finally decided who's side I should be on?").

Occasionally, we see one of the two partners participating freely and genuinely in the conversation, while the other is defensive and reluctant. Suddenly, the silent partner has a fertile discussion with the therapist, as if something abruptly motivated them. The other partner then becomes stressed and angry, threatening to even leave therapy.

IN COUPLE'S THERAPY WE TRY TO:

Discuss about envy as a human trait that may be catastrophic, but in its mildest forms it may be tolerated by both the self and the partner.



Reinforce the partners' capability to "receive" (which also makes them capable of "giving").

Help them tolerate independence and differentiation as opposed to enmeshment, but to also tolerate some degree of enmeshment.

Help them find milder ways to express envious, competitive impulses (i.e. who wins a game of chess or scrabble, verbal "nastiness" through humour).

Help them search for emotions of gratitude for both the therapist and their partner.

Ultimately achieve what Agamemnon says when he arrives in Argos:

"For few there are among men in whom it is inborn to admire without envy a friend's good fortune"
(Aeschylus, Agamemnon, line 831).