

How to Do Things with Fetishism

Fetishism bears upon our thinking wherever we broach questions of difference, the exercise of power in a heterogeneous field, or the intersection of knowledge and desire. The version of fetishism developed by psychoanalysis shows fetishism to be an act of interpretation that serves as a theory about sexual difference. In this light, fetishism is not only a sexual practice, but it also has epistemological consequences, insofar as it frames knowledge and belief about sexual difference for the fetishist. Through this interpretive framework, the fetishist comes to know the world and to construct a sense of self in relation to that world, since sexual differences are a fundamental category for how humans organize their knowledge of the world. These epistemological consequences redound upon the fetishist as well, for fetishism's contribution to the interpretation of sexual differences is not only a new theory of relating to objects but a new identity for those doing this relating. Yet as this analysis will show, this new identity is one which cannot simply assimilate to one side or the other of a binary system of sexual differences. This chapter will examine how fetishism operates rhetorically in Freud's texts in order to demonstrate that fetishism's inability to assimilate into binary sexual differences provides both a broad insight on an alternative model for knowledge and a particular theory of sexual differences which moves beyond dualistic thinking.

Psychoanalysis's gloss on fetishism is not only relatively late in relation to the term's overall history, but fetishism as psychoanalytic concept at first glance appears to be a relative latecomer in Freud's thinking. His article on "Fetishism" dates from 1927, two years after "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes," and a few years before "Female Sexuality" (1931) and "Femininity" (1933), which both pick up on themes set out in the 1925 essay. This chronology prompts us to explore how his ideas on fetishism connect to his concern with issues of sexual difference, since his theories of both fetishism and sexual difference are explicitly formulated in the later years.

Given the historical lineage of the term, we might expect to find Freud considering fetishism in his works about “primitive” man and the idea of civilization. But there is no discussion of fetishism as such in either *Totem and Taboo* (1913) or *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). However, fetishism does appear in a number of Freud’s earlier works—most notably in the first essay of his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), but also in his analysis of Jensen’s novel *Gradiva* (1907), his case study of the Rat Man (1909), a 1909 lecture given to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, and his essay on Leonardo da Vinci (1910). These are all works which address issues of sexuality, and thus to see fetishism as a late-developed concept is a mistake. Rather, this context supports the idea that fetishism is at the root of Freud’s thinking not only about sexual difference but also sexuality (or what might now be called sexual identity); fetishism is thus not only a theory of sexuality for the fetishist, but may also be instrumental in Freud’s theories of sexuality and ideas about the development of subjectivity.

Freud fundamentally shifted the study of sexuality from the problem of how to account for deviance, with the implication that we would thereby learn to correct it, to the question of how “normal” sexual identity and practice are achieved. This shift challenged the corrective bias and led to understanding deviations from the norm as interpretations of that norm. We would thus do well to question how fetishism fits in with his challenge to interpretations of sexuality and sexual difference. Indeed, Freud’s emphasis on variation rather than deviation in his descriptions of sexuality and sexual difference provides an important model for how we can understand difference differently, through some nonbinary pattern like a spectrum. Yet Freud’s texts display a peculiar ambivalence around the formulation of difference, and it is this ambivalence that most interests me. Freud’s texts vacillate between being progressive—offering a fundamental challenge to how we think about ourselves—and conservative—failing to follow through on that basic challenge of our assumptions and lapsing instead into the accepted wisdom of the day.

This vacillation is clearest and most tightly interwoven in his discussions of sexual difference, a division he both emphasizes and ignores. “Fetishism” replicates that logic; contrary to its simple or straightforward appearance, the text explicitly and complexly foregrounds questions of sexual differences and Freud’s ambivalent handling of them. Through Freud’s work we come to understand sexual difference not just as the binary gender difference of masculine and feminine, but also as the differences apparently within one gender, between straight and queer, perverse and normal, chaste and promiscu-

ous. Freud's texts do tend to undermine the rigid boundaries delineating these differences—most famously, they deconstruct the separation between normal and perverse and thus make it possible to perceive homosexuality as neither criminal nor pathological. At the same time, however, there are moments in Freud's texts that obstruct this undermining force and tend to reinforce the conservative cultural assumptions which hold these binaries together. Which of these readings, progressive or conservative, comes to the fore is very much a matter of interpretation.

This tension between Freud's radical interrogation of certain categories and unquestioning reliance upon the context in which those categories are constructed thus provides an important reason for turning to the work of Freud. "Fetishism" (Freud's lecture) and fetishism (the practice or concept) foreground the issue that lies at the heart of psychoanalysis: the question of interpretation and the relation of interpretation to knowledge, belief, desire, and truth. Psychoanalysis's concern with the unconscious raises the problem of the representability of the unrepresentable, tapping directly into the basic hermeneutic problem of how one can grasp, or even approach, the radically different, and communicate it to those like oneself without compromising the difference of the other.

Fetishism is a dense metaphor for this hermeneutic problem. At a basic level, fetishism is one strategy for negotiating the unsettling otherness of sexual difference through the interpretive act of giving the mother a penis. This attribution both admits and denies the mother's sexual difference; it makes the mother's sexual difference representable through the fetish, and yet at the same time also renders that difference unrepresentable by denying or disavowing its specificity. At a different, epistemological level, fetishism operates like an open secret. While fetishism conceals its private significance, its otherness, from the world at large, thereby denying difference or impeding interpretation, it is never entirely categorically indecipherable: the objects of the fetishist's attention are commonly known and available for interpretation. Thus fetishism itself is both representable as publicly available knowledge that certain objects may contain a private and titillating significance, and unrepresentable insofar as the public never knows precisely for whom, and for which items, that significance exists. This aspect of interpretation in fetishism is consistent with fetishism's history, where the fetish provided the hinge of translation between incommensurable European and West African languages, enabling exchange to take place based on provisional and partially public knowledge of the other.

In the psychoanalytic formulation, this hermeneutic sense is foreclosed; the fetish object is simply and narrowly taken to be a penis or

phallus substitute. The fetishist seizes on the fetish to guard against acknowledging his mother's difference from him—that is, her lack of a phallus. From this reading, fetishism has been formulated as the refusal to jump into the semiotic stream of ever-changing interpretations; the fetish guards against the instability of meaning and the threat posed by difference. The dominant psychoanalytic reading of the fetish thus emphasizes fetishism's negative aspects: the overvaluation of an object at the expense of another subject or a fluency of interpretation. Marcia Ian describes fetishism as "characterized by the refusal to individuate, the lack of ego development, and an inability to use symbols to represent rather than embody" (177). In this view, fetishism is precisely that which is antithetical to language, to the symbolic, to interpretation, insofar as it closes down the inherent openness of language to interpretation.

I do not want to deny the need for a label for the regressed state of refusing to "use symbols to represent rather than to embody" and for the desire for the return to an imaginary fusion with the mother. Nor would I want to deny that such a position exists. Yet this understanding, as Ian points out, is one which fetishism has accrued since Freud, and indeed differs from the Freudian interpretation. I believe there are interesting complexities in Freud's discussion of fetishism that deserve to be explored. By returning now to Freud's text we can move to de-fetishize fetishism, loosen its fixed meaning, examine its internal contradictions, and release the fetish from its overdetermined and overdetermining interpretation as the very pinnacle of the Thing, an object the fetishist is stuck on as the embodiment of substance and meaning. We can, for instance, come to see how the dominance of the penis-substitution definition gives fetishism a negative connotation that eclipses the potentially productive aspect of fetishism as a way of holding the contradiction between belief and knowledge together in tension. Indeed, once we begin to interrogate the larger framework of fetishism, we find that the notion brings together a number of complicated understandings of gender, knowledge, and desire.

Finding the value in fetishism is a matter of interpretation. By shifting perspective from a masterful, distant epistemology to a more sympathetic epistemology, we will see that in what outsiders view as the overvaluation of an inappropriate object, the fetishist finds an adequate solution to his or her needs. The fetishist's viewpoint focuses attention on fetishism's positive aspects as a combination of pragmatic and creative responses to the demands of the situation and the subject's needs. In this light, two faces of fetishism emerge. One is antithetical to language by dint of its investment in fixity and stasis. The other is an instrumental strategy for symbolic exchange, epistemology, and political

imagination by virtue of its investment in ambivalence, particularly in the ambivalent tension desire sets up between belief and knowledge. Where the negative side has been too long emphasized in psychoanalytical interpretations of fetishism, this study prefers to draw upon the positive offerings, the insights fetishism holds as a strategy for understanding sexual differences and the connections between desire and knowledge.

It may seem strange to call fetishism a strategy, since this move takes fetishism out of the context of the unconscious, rationalizing it by relating it to notions of agency, consciousness, and choice. Yet, while I do not want to sever the unconscious aspect of fetishism from my reading, I do want to retain this notion of strategy, precisely because it emphasizes provisionality and usefulness over the finality of proclamation and reminds us of the contingency of interpretation within a given context. The irony of an unconscious strategy—which is what is suggested by the very notion of fetishism as an epistemology—is intended to emphasize Freud's most basic lesson: that our conscious actions contain unconscious wishes. Rationality can never shake itself free from desire; fetishism as an epistemological strategy may help us better employ reason and desire.

To reexamine this general understanding, we must return to its point of departure, the text "Fetishism" by Freud. In this examination of Freud, I want both to impose the rigor of the text onto the rather loose interpretation of fetishism that currently holds ascendance—that is, fetishism as sexual overvaluation of an object—and to try to exploit that text's interpretation as a way of pushing our thinking about what fetishism is, and how it operates in modernity and postmodernity. What follows, then, will be a reading of Freud that mines the text for its instabilities not only in order to question the underpinnings of the formulation of fetishism, the assumptions which enable it to come into being, but also to see how this notion can be transformed, worked over, to provide a more productive understanding of how we can relate to the world. This reading mimes fetishism not only by being "true" to the text by minding what's there, but also by adventurously blowing things out of proportion for a strategic purpose.

Symptoms of an Analogy in the Construction of a "Penis"

I will begin at the end, at the point in Freud's essay on "Fetishism" which seems to sum up the foundation of this perversion. In the last sentence, which is itself the last paragraph—and thus clearly intended to strike the reader's attention—Freud asserts that

Schießlich darf man es aussprechen, das Normalvorbild des Fetisch ist der Penis des Mannes, wie das des minderwertigen Organs der reale kleine Penis des Weibes, die Klitoris. (GW 14: 317)

In conclusion we may say that the normal prototype of fetishes is a man's penis, just as the normal prototype of inferior organs is a woman's real small penis, the clitoris. (SE 21: 157)

The normal prototype of all fetishes is the penis of the man, just as the normal prototype of an organ felt to be inferior is the real little penis of the woman, the clitoris. (Rivière translation, 219)¹

Quite apart from its position at the end of the essay, the phrase "Schießlich darf man es aussprechen" or "In conclusion we may say" emphasizes the decisiveness of the sentence. The finality of this pronouncement may be in large part responsible for the prevalence of the penis-substitute definition of fetishism, although the phrase is elided in the mass-market translation by Joan Rivière.

This penis-substitute theory, read too glibly, invites an interpretation of Freud as a biological determinist or essentialist when he thus portrays the link between penis and fetish, reducing the latter to the former. Yet it is not Freud who is being so reductive but those who would hold to this interpretation, reaffirming what they already thought about fetishism. Such a reading narrows the myriad interpretations of "penis" that fetish objects provide to a single, simple, even patently obvious, base. The fact that this assertion comes at the end of "Fetishism" gives this reductive reading the weight to close off interpretive openness in favor of what seems to be anatomically evident. By taking anatomy as the unquestionable foundation for the model of the fetish, we complacently accept a certain biological determinism. Such a reading in fact functions at odds with the practice of fetishism, which at a basic level refuses to distinguish between anatomical and other objects. The biological given that anatomy seems to provide is not interrogated further as to the extent to which it is itself an interpretation, and contingent, not absolute. Furthermore, an interpretation of fetishism that makes the fetish strictly dependent upon the man's penis plays into the assumption that one has to have the latter in order to have access to the former. Such a view makes anatomy seem to be self-evident but still significant: beyond interpretation, but not beyond meaning.

Just this sort of reading has contributed to the view of fetishism as an exclusively male perversion in psychoanalysis; it is easy to make the logical error of slipping from "man's penis is the model" to "therefore it is men—as people with penises—who become fetishists." This slip ren-

ders the fundamental gesture of fetishism the act of attributing what you have to someone who doesn't have what you have. Indeed, this is the very gesture that Freud makes in this sentence, albeit at a very different level and thus with different rhetorical effects, when he uses the word "Penis" to describe both men's and women's genitals. While this gesture—whether Freud's or the reductive reading's—does illuminate the dynamic of fetishism that seeks to efface difference, it causes us to overlook another key aspect of fetishism: the implied inadequacy of the fetishist's own penis (or else why would it need a supplement in the form of the fetish object?). The inadequacy may best be understood as a precarious possession of the penis, threatened as it is with castration; this precariousness is the flip side of the refusal to recognize sexual difference. More importantly, the interpretive slippage between the man's penis as the model and the idea that only men are fetishists forecloses the disturbance produced by Freud's naming the clitoris the woman's penis, thereby introducing a striking ambiguity of sexual difference.²

In this last sentence of "Fetishism," there are implicit parallels made possible through the structure of an analogy. The explicit analogy between the normal prototype of the fetish and the normal prototype of an inferior organ—penis is to fetish as woman's penis is to inferior organ—permits the following: man is to woman as penis is to clitoris as fetish is to inferior organ. These parallels construct a matrix through which we can compare the elements of the analogy by tacitly acknowledging the difference within the pairs (man:woman or penis:clitoris) while focusing on the similarities between the pairs. Although the analogy is not forced, the force of the analogical form conceals the failure of the parallel on the rhetorical level. Notably, this failure is not a problem of translation; even in the German the parallel fails on the rhetorical level.

Freud labels the clitoris as fetish-counterpart a "minderwertigen Organs." The German for "inferior" or "inferior quality" is "minderwertig," so the translation is fairly direct; however, what is lost in the translation is the sense of value or worth—in German "wert"—that is literally written into the term. The clitoris-organ has a distinctly lesser value and is compared here to the penis-fetish, which has no particular value. The comparison is thus rather lopsided, since the points of comparison are not, as might be expected, between something lesser and something of superior or "hochwertiger" quality. This imbalance is evident in the grammar as well. The significance of the phrase is carried by the adjective "minderwertigen," rather than by the noun, as we would expect. Otherwise, the clitoris would be the normal prototype of an organ, in contrast to the penis as a normal prototype of a fetish. It is not

two nouns being weighed in comparison, but an adjective and a noun. To compound this grammatical asymmetry, the descriptive work done by the word "minderwertigen" cannot be separated from its evaluative force, which contrasts to the unmodified term "fetish."

It is not only with the comparison between the fetish and the "minderwertigen Organ" that the parallel is strained; Freud's parallel between the penis and the clitoris is also complicated. While the term "Normalvorbild" is implicitly repeated in the sentence, the term "Penis" is explicitly repeated. Once again, the noun on the male side of the analogy is neutral and unmodified, while the noun on the female side is modified and evaluated as lesser. This time, however, the adjectives are doubled, and they do not overwhelm the modified noun to the point of substituting semantically for it. Whereas on the one hand we have "the penis of the man," on the other hand we have "the woman's real small penis, the clitoris." If the woman's penis is "klein," we might expect the man's penis to be "groß." In such a comparison, each term would be evaluated against the standard of its opposite. Instead, there is this doubled emphasis on smaller and lesser, and thus a strong sense of the female falling short of the standard. In English the doubled adjectives resonate with colloquial emphasis—the woman's penis is real[ly] small, though of course this is only a trick of translation.

What is further remarkable is the vocabulary Freud uses to describe this woman's penis. Instead of using the common German word "wirklich" or even "wahr" to describe the "real, little penis," Freud uses the Latinate term "reale."³ This word choice is all the more suggestive when we realize that earlier in the text, Freud refers to the "real female genitals" (SE 21: 154) as "das wirkliche weibliche Genitale" (GW 14: 313). This difference may seem unremarkable, yet it subtly underlines the oddity of calling the clitoris a penis by evoking a different cultural-linguistic framework. At the same time, in the same gesture, the choice of term covers over difference in its insistence that the woman's penis is "real" and marks the difference that is being suppressed. This importation serves as a reminder of the inadequacy of the available terminology, as if to signal the inadequacy of available anatomical interpretations.

Throughout this last sentence, then, Freud slips from a descriptive, positivist, scientific mode to an evaluative one. In the Rivière translation this shift is most apparent, though it is detectable in Strachey. Rivière renders Freud's account of the relation between the penis and the fetish as all-encompassing formula: *all* fetishes have a penis prototype. In the German, Freud only says "of the fetish" [des Fetisch], which Strachey gives as "of fetishes," mysteriously making it plural—notably the only time the term appears in the plural in the translation. Likewise,

Strachey makes the “inferior organs” plural too, but manages to convey Freud’s “minderwertigen Organs” equally concisely. In the Rivière translation, however, the account of the relation of the clitoris to its fetish-equivalent is much more verbose: “an organ felt to be inferior.” There is no handy, single-word term in English that adequately names that to which the clitoris is to be compared, unlike the case of the penis and fetish. Thus Freud’s translator appeals to a sort of circumlocution, as well as to a passive voice construction.

The latter aspect, the introduction of the passive voice, might further be read as an implicit critique: felt to be inferior by whom? Perhaps not by Joan Rivière, whatever Sigmund Freud and James Strachey might think. It is a striking difference, this circumlocution of Rivière’s in contrast to Strachey’s direct “inferior organ”; the former distances the reader from the evaluation of inferiority, whereas the latter seems to take the evaluation as truth, or at least as neutral assessment. Rivière’s rewriting of Freud loses the declarative force of Freud’s pronouncement on fetishes by implicitly questioning this pronouncement. Strachey maintains that declarative momentum, and thereby lulls the reader into accepting that the clitoris is indeed inferior, as if “inferior” were a neutral rather than a value-laden description. But if Rivière’s translation raises the question, for whom?, Strachey’s version more directly raises the question, inferior to what?—is the clitoris inferior as an organ, or as a penis?

Thus the parallel structure is not, in fact, parallel; indeed, the very basis for the comparison falls apart, as we are unable to compare penises and clitorises or fetishes and inferior organs because they are collapsed into being the same thing—no difference holds them apart to make a comparison interesting or worthwhile. This breakdown in the parallel structure shows us Freud is implicitly and contradictorily arguing much more in the last part of the analogy: both that the clitoris is inferior *and* that it is the equivalent of a penis. This argument is in fact the real model for fetishism and for sexual difference in Freud.

If we reexamine this last sentence, we will see that Freud’s ambivalence about sexual difference is critical to setting the stakes for fetishism. This passage suggests that if we are to understand what fetishism is in psychoanalysis, we must acknowledge its relation to the penis, whether or not we agree with Freud that this organ serves as a “normal prototype.” The reductiveness and logical slippage invited by the standard reading of this sentence also forecloses upon the disturbance produced by Freud’s naming the clitoris the woman’s penis, introducing a striking ambiguity of sexual difference. The final sentence of “Fetishism” clearly suggests that the “penis” may not be the sole

anatomical preserve of one gender. Thus, the assertion that the fetish in some way relates to or even depends on the penis does not automatically exclude women from fetishism.⁴

The operation of gender in this last sentence is particularly striking once it is extended to include all of the elements: man is to woman as penis is to clitoris as fetish is to inferiority. From this sense of inferiority comes shame. Elsewhere Freud points out that "shame . . . is considered to be a feminine characteristic *par excellence* but . . . has as its purpose, we believe, concealment of genital deficiency" (SE 22: 132). In thus articulating this analogy at the end of "Fetishism," Freud connects and contrasts shame with fetishism, implying that fetishism is a masculine characteristic *par excellence*. This gesture also reinforces gender differences that are culturally expressed as an anatomically based sexual difference between men and women. Indeed the view that female fetishism is an "oxymoron," as Naomi Schor has noted (365), or that documented cases of female fetishism are exceptions, if not impossibilities, buttresses the notion that fetishism is a male perversion or preserve. This final sentence of Freud's, however, is not the last word, even as it may seem to foreclose—or disavow—the possibility of female fetishism.

The point of raising the question of female fetishism is not merely to insert women's bodies into the text, but to open up the space to examine and interrogate the gendered frameworks that structure our knowledge, and to recognize these frameworks as contingent rather than absolute. Thus, in recasting the question in terms of female fetishism, I do not contest the connection between the penis and the fetish, but rather the way this notion of the fetish has been construed to hinge on having a penis, and a narrowly defined one at that. Moreover, the challenge to a narrow definition of penis derives from Freud's own texts, since his definition of what a penis is changes in rather interesting and often ambivalent ways throughout his work, notably in "Fetishism." Sometimes a cigar may only be a cigar for Freud, but quite often a penis is something other than a penis. Thus, even if Freud asserts that the prototype of a fetish is a man's penis, we cannot necessarily take this penis at face value: first, because it is qualified as "the penis of the man," a logical overstatement given the human context (who else would have one?), but second, because it is juxtaposed in the same sentence with the "real little penis of the woman." Here, a penis is not a mark of sexual difference, but of sexuality, which either gender has, though to different effect. Both a man and a woman have a penis—and Freud even specifically asserts that the woman's penis is "real," albeit little. This equivalence may seem to imply a fundamental sexual indif-

ference, as if male and female anatomy or sexuality are basically the same; such a view resonates with Freud's idea that there is only one libido. However a significant difference remains here, one which is not contingent upon presence or absence, but upon both size and what one does with one's penis—that is, whether one bases one's fetish on it or one's sense of inferiority.

This difference is important for aiding our understanding of what a fetish does. If the choices are fetishize or feel inferior, then the fetish could be understood as what enables one to construct a positive—or at least adequate—sense of one's self. In a discussion of the strategic emergence of fetishism in the course of a male's sexual development, Louise Kaplan tells us that

The fetish is designed to reassure the boy that he has control over the mysterious . . . cycles of erection, ejaculation, orgasm, and detumescence. The fetish also gives him a feeling that he can modulate his hostile aggressive strivings. . . . (39)

This claim leads me to suggest that fetishism may indeed be instrumental in constructing an autonomous subjectivity, enabling one to have control over oneself, a form of subjectivity hardly encouraged in women under patriarchy but certainly crucial for men. Such a reading need not obscure the very real existence of pathological cases of fetishism that in their extremity seek to deny the subjectivity of the sexual partner. Rather, this reading emphasizes that fetishism, far from being a marginal or extreme perversion, in fact is a central route to constructing a sexual subjectivity, or subjectivity in general. This subjectivity may depend on a particular object, and thus be viewed by many as flawed. Nonetheless, because that object is inherently subordinate, this dependence is useful or instrumental rather than threatening to one's creation of a whole, independent self.

Fetishism thus offers a third route between autonomy and dependence, two poles which have been traditionally mapped onto masculinity and femininity, respectively. This reading suggests that the subject-object distinction is a critical difference for fetishism; even if fetishism seeks to obliterate other differences, it relies on the difference between what a subject is and what an object is. In other words, the very ontological difference of the fetish object renders it less threatening than another subject would be, and that enables one to assert oneself as autonomous, however conflicted and ambivalent this autonomy may be. It is perhaps not accidental then that fetishism triangulates not only gender binaries but the binary between dependence and autonomy, two

fundamentally distinct ways of being in the world. As the binary gender matrix is deconstructed, and its grip on our assumptions about sexual difference loosened, the ontological difference at stake in fetishism may become not only more important, but more productive.⁵

Implicit in these options, as the gendered matrix underscores, is the fact that context—specifically, what Kaplan calls the social gender stereotype—is a crucial determinant for the development of fetishism. Unquestioned in Freud's formulation is the idea that the man's penis guarantees the ascension to subjectivity (enabling him to feel superior to objects) while the woman's penis only reminds her of her failure to achieve that subjectivity (making her feel inferior to subjects). Women could not be fetishists precisely because they could not be expected to develop the same form of independent subjectivity as a man, or feel that their sexuality could achieve the same potency as his phallic penis seemed to guarantee. But what if the context were to change? What if this gendered matrix, which affirms only a rigid binary sexual difference and distributes power differentially according to that difference, were challenged or undermined? What if anyone could potentially have the penis? The association of the clitoris with inferiority merely serves to underscore the interpretation of female genitalia as inadequate for setting the standard, indicating, following patriarchal logic, that women are deviant from men; however, it fails to account for how that sense of inferiority may have come about.

The parallel suggests that shame is a perverse reaction just as fetishism is. But the juxtaposition also raises the following question: why would a sense of inferiority derive from the clitoris? One response would be that the clitoris is not enough of a penis—in both the sense of being enough like, and in the more literal sense of not having enough penis-substance, of skin, nerves, and blood vessels. In order for the clitoris to be perceived as inferior, there must be some sense of commonality with the penis, some point of identity that enables the comparison. This necessity suggests the interpretation rests on sexual indifference, rather than a sense of sexual difference which would have focused on contrast. Given this association, we are prompted to ask whether this connection, the analogy between penis and clitoris, is any more real or true than the suggestion that the fetish models itself on the man's penis. The objects held together here by association are not only not identical, but may not even resemble each other. (What penis looks like a strip of velvet or lace undergarment?)⁶ The analogy presumes sexual difference but works through sexual sameness in order to conclude by asserting both inferiority and fetishism. What enables this move from sameness to the sharp distinction between inferiority and fetishism? Here it be-

comes clear that the analogy seeks to conceal what it so brazenly reveals: the contingency of interpretations of anatomy.

Despite the distribution of the word “penis” on either side of the analogy, underpinning Freud’s description of fetishism is an assumption that morphology can only be interpreted one way, that a penis is always sufficient unto itself and a clitoris can never be sufficient, but rather indicates lack. It is clear that Freud feels no need to clarify anything regarding the man’s penis but doubles the number of words to describe the woman’s penis. Yet fetishism results from an inadequacy of the penis, a sense that one is not enough and thus a supplement is required. Moreover, this inadequacy is inextricable from the more commonly recognized association of overvaluation with fetishism—setting up an ideal which the penis can never hope to live up to. We must thus look outside of the penis-clitoris analogy to find the distinction that intervenes between fetishism and inadequacy, between overvaluation and undervaluation.

In the construction of the fetish here—grafted from the penis of the man—the apparently equally real penis of the woman is feminized as a prototype of inferiority. This feminization is particularly striking because so often the clitoris figures in Freud’s texts as masculine.⁷ Freud quite frequently reads the clitoris as the penis, in the essays on “Fetishism” and “Femininity,” as well as in his earlier *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Freud’s doubled strategy of literalizing and metaphorizing these body parts in his text complicates our reading. To metaphorize the clitoris as the “penis-equivalent” (SE 22: 118), produces a destabilization of the univocal, literalized hold that “penis” claims as a term referring to male genitalia—in effect, it renders “this penis . . . no longer the same as it was before” (SE 21: 154). “Penis” becomes instead a term that signifies the site of pleasure and self-gratification in the phallic stage. However, a consequence of this destabilization is that the penis cannot attain its phallic significance through its purported absence in half the population. That is, if everyone has some version of the penis, some analogous focus of pleasure in the phallic stage, sexual “difference” has to be constituted on some other basis than lack and castration. This understanding of fetishism highlights the fact that the “penis” is not a unique or univocal signifier, as a reductive anatomical reading would posit; instead, structurally and inherently, a “penis” must accommodate and fragment into a number of different interpretations.

Two possibilities, which may be maintained simultaneously, present themselves immediately. On the one hand, the penis in fetishism’s primal scene functions as a signifier of difference in comparison to the phallus (as symbol of control or mastery); Elizabeth Grosz works on this

distinction in her reading of fetishism, which posits the boy's penis as insignificant in the presence of the mother's phallus. On the other hand, the penis also operates unremarked in Freud's text as a metaphor for sameness, a figure for common ground, but one that elides a certain anatomical or (hetero)sexual difference. These examples suggest that the "penis" is not something that can be taken for granted as obvious; they push us to question how "penis" is being interpreted and put to use.

There is, however, more at stake in this final paragraph of "Fetishism" than a difference between masculine and feminine, or between penis and clitoris, or fetishism and shame. At work in this passage is also the sexual difference between "normal" and "perverse." The paradoxical nature of sexual difference we have already explored is only heightened by Freud's oxymoronic claim that the man's penis is a "normal prototype" of a perversion, which is, by definition, not normal. The use of the word "normal" here raises a red flag for any reader of Freud who is aware of his skepticism toward this category throughout his work, his "reluctance to view matters of human sexuality in terms of normality or abnormality" (Kaplan 47). Although Freud most likely intends for the term "normal prototype" to suggest the standard from which the perversion deviates, the implication remains that some other prototype of this perversion could exist. The contrast of "normal prototype" and the sweeping generalization "all fetishes" (or in German, the abstraction "des Fetisch") makes for an interesting twist. The variety of fetish objects is obscured, reduced down to the penis model.⁸ If the non-normal prototype of a fetish were the woman's "real little penis" would female fetishism then be a perverse perversion? Instead of a normal perversion, would it be a perverse normality?

The ambivalence in the term "penis" as something which could belong to either a man or a woman parallels Freud's recurrent ambivalence over the term "normal"—the tension in his work between his drive to interrogate the foundations of our assumptions about the status quo and his resistance to radically disrupting some of those received ideas. Asserting the penis as a "normal prototype" reinscribes it as a standard, counterbalancing the potential disruption to patriarchal hierarchy posed by its equivalence with the clitoris. Both the term "normal" and the term "penis" in this passage seem intended to function descriptively as a standard of comparison, rather than prescriptively through evaluation. By juxtaposing "normal prototype" with the man's and woman's penis, Freud indeed may aim to undermine the prescriptive force behind either "normal" or "penis." But while he may succeed to some extent with regard to "normal" because of its instability throughout his work, he is less successful with "penis."

There is a double edge to Freud's unsettling of the overdetermined and exclusionary claims of biological essentialists. The radical gesture of interrogating how the "norm" is established—the gesture of calling the clitoris a penis—is undercut by the failure to question the penis as a standard. The tension between Freud's use of the term "penis" as a gender-neutral and technical term and the highly gendered significance of the term outside of Freud's texts—the very meaning of which gives his equivocation of the penis and clitoris its radical quality—remains implicit rather than acknowledged. The singularity of the choice of "penis" as the gender-neutral classification is particularly striking, given that the clitoris is never similarly taken up as a technical term but is instead effaced or disposed of. Indeed, there is a thematic insistence, throughout Freud's work on sexual difference, on the clitoris's inferiority, which only comes about through its evaluative comparison with the penis, its thematic masculinization.⁹ If the term "penis" is a theoretical, scientific term that includes the clitoris, it suggests that we should have another "real" name for the man's penis, one less sexually indifferent.

Using the term "penis" without explicitly acknowledging this instability presumes that the readers already understand what that designation might mean—that is, that we know what a penis is. But taking Freud's schema here to its radical conclusion suggests that perhaps we do not know what a penis is, any more than we know what normal is: both have to be accounted for, rather than presumed. The final lesson of this final paragraph, then, may well be to apply to the term "penis" the same skepticism we readers of Freud have developed towards "normal." If we take the term penis in the same vein as we take the term normal, then reading Freud will shake up assumptions about sexual difference—that is, by telling us something new, rather than something we already know or would expect.

Penis, Phallus, Fetish

At the outset of "Fetishism," Freud hones the psychoanalytic definition of the fetish: "Wenn ich nun mitteile, der Fetisch ist ein Penisersatz, so werde ich gewiß Enttäuschung hervorrufen" (GW 14: 312). "When I now announce that the fetish is a substitute for the penis, I shall certainly create disappointment" (SE 21: 152). Rivière's translation, "When I now disclose that the fetish is a penis-substitute I shall certainly arouse disappointment" (214–15), comes a little closer to Freud's German at two points: in the more direct rendering of "Penisersatz" as "penis-substitute," but, more importantly, in the translation of "hervorrufen" as "arouse" rather than "create." Rivière's word-choice, perhaps uninten-

tionally, sets up an ironic tension in this clause, given that disappointment tends to quell arousal rather than be arousal's aim. But apart from the sexual resonances, "arouse" comes closer than "create" to the sense in the original of there being something already there, merely needing to be evoked. "Hervorrufen" has as its root the verb "rufen," to call or to send for; while there may not necessarily be something there to call forth, at the very least the hope or expectation that such a thing would be there remains implicit in the word. "Create," on the other hand, has no such resonances; indeed, it suggests that nothing was there in the first place, so it had to be made. My concern in attending to this inevitable slippage of meaning in translation, however, is not the question of which translation is better or worse, but rather what is at stake in this disappointment—where is this disappointment coming from, and what does it mark?

At the very least, Freud's choice of "hervorrufen" supposes that disappointment is in the air, lurking somewhere. At first glance, this disappointment is merely a rhetorical move, since if the fetish were only a penis-substitute, Freud would not need to write this article to explain further the nature of fetishism. The statement is straightforward, declarative, despite its theatrical overtones; it presumes that everyone already knows what fetishism is, and certainly implies that the knowledgeable audience might have guessed the answer from the lead-in to this assertion, in which Freud introduces the well-known case of the shine on the nose. There is reason to think that at least some of Freud's audience would not find the penis-substitute theory a revelation, since Freud has touched on fetishism in quite a few of his writings. Thus, Freud's belief in his audience's disappointment is not merely an empty rhetorical device but an acknowledgment of real possibility that they do already know this much about fetishism.¹⁰ The disappointment thus seems to mark some anxiety on Freud's part about satisfying the curiosity of his readers; he expects that the penis-substitute answer is no news flash to them. Since this is his first published article focusing exclusively on the phenomenon after years of commenting on it within other texts, the anxiety may be attributed to Freud's sense that he ought to say something new rather than repeat what he has said elsewhere. Whatever the cause of the anxiety, whatever expectations Freud projects onto his audience, this much is clear: the disappointment is certain. ("I shall certainly arouse disappointment. . . .")

After acknowledging this inevitable disappointment, Freud continues: "Ich beeile mich darum hinzuzufügen, nicht der Ersatz eines beliebigen . . . Penis." "I hasten to add that it is not a substitute for any chance penis. . . ." Freud's haste in moving on suggests that he is not satisfied with this penis-substitution answer. He wants to move quickly

beyond the inevitable disappointment this explanation brings. Interestingly, at the end of this paragraph in the text, Freud has a footnote that states "This interpretation was mentioned in 1910, without any reason given for it, in my study on Leonardo da Vinci." Freud's haste, in this light, turns out to be not so hasty, since he has taken seventeen years to give the reasons for this interpretation. Likewise, what Freud acknowledges as obvious is in fact not so obvious, the disappointment not so certain. There is a discrepancy between how Freud feels about the penis-substitute explanation and how his audience likely feels, since in truth they all cannot be expected to already know everything Freud has said on the subject of fetishism. Let us examine the larger picture, the fuller context of this first revelation of what the fetish is. Here is what Freud tells us:

Wenn ich nun mitteile, der Fetisch ist ein Penisersatz, so werde ich gewiß Enttäuschung hervorrufen. Ich beeile mich darum hinzuzufügen, nicht der Ersatz eines beliebigen, sondern eines bestimmten, ganz besonderen Penis, der in frühen Kinderjahren eine große Bedeutung hat, aber später verloren geht. (GW 14: 312)

When I now announce that the fetish is a substitute for the penis, I shall certainly create disappointment; so I hasten to add that it is not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular and quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but had later been lost. (SE 21: 152)

When I now disclose that the fetish is a penis-substitute I shall certainly arouse disappointment; I hasten to add that it is not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but was afterwards lost. (Rivière 215)

Freud's anxiety hastens him to substitute the shamefully inadequate explanation of fetishism as a penis-substitute for the more satisfying explanation of fetishism as a substitute for a quite special penis that once was extremely important and has since been lost.¹¹ In short, at the rhetorical level Freud indulges in the fetishistic move of thinking that the thing he knows is inferior and substituting it with a more satisfactory belief in an illusory object. The special qualities of this recovered penis serve to compensate for the disappointment raised by the penis-substitute explanation.

Yet even this explanation is not sufficient; it must be shored up by two other iterations of the same idea, which only gradually layer

their meanings onto the overall significance of the fetish. Freud continues with the second iteration: "Das heißt: er sollte normalerweise aufgegeben werden, aber gerade der Fetsch ist dazu bestimmt, ihn vor dem Untergang zu behüten" (GW). "That is to say: it should normally have been given up, but the fetish is precisely designed to preserve it from extinction" (SE). The third reiteration is a much more marked repetition of the previous formulations:

Um es klarer zu sagen, der Fetsch is der Ersatz für den Phallus des Weibes (der Mutter), an den das Knäblein geglaubt hat und auf den es—wir wissen warum—nicht verzichten will. (GW)

To put it plainly, the fetish is the substitute for the woman's (mother's) phallus which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forego—we know why. (Rivière)

If Freud's certainty of disappointing his audience with his initial announcement of the penis-substitute explanation of fetish is connected to an anxiety about repeating his earlier discussions about fetishism, that anxiety about repetition has clearly dissipated here. Indeed, Freud seems so satisfied by his elaboration on the penis-substitute theory that he spins it out further through repetitive clarification. Yet this elaboration ends with a cagey "we know why," once again playing into the presupposition of shared knowledge, which had undergirded the certain disappointment. It is only in the next paragraph that the nonknowledgeable audience might be let in on the secret of the young boy's ("Knäblein"—a clearly gendered term) emphasis on the mother's penis. This penis is special because it had guaranteed the boy was like his mother, and because its loss promises that the boy could lose his. For Freud, as for the young boy, what makes this second elaboration more satisfying, more adequate, than the disappointing revelation of the penis-substitute is the value put on the quite special penis. This value is derived not from the thing itself, but from the threatened absence of the thing.

In a slightly different reiteration in her essay "Lesbian Fetishism?" Elizabeth Grosz points out, "The fetish is thus the substitute for, the talisman of, the phallus . . . not just any old phallus. . . . but his mother's" (42). Juxtaposing her formulation with Freud's here underscores the slippage between penis and phallus that appears in Freud at the crucial moment: Freud's "particular quite special penis" is in fact also a phallus, and a maternal phallus at that. We have moved from the "disappointing" revelation that the fetish is a penis-substitute to the more

satisfying and interesting understanding that the fetish is a maternal phallus substitute. There is much at stake in distinguishing between penis and phallus; while the former refers to a part of the body, the phallus is not a part of any body, but is a symbolic figure through which an individual may claim a degree of power and authority. Freud's substitution of "phallus" for "penis" in this first definition is therefore significant for its lack of rigor.

At first glance, it seems that the facility with which Freud quietly substitutes "penis" with "phallus" is easily explained by acknowledging that it is not so much the penis itself that is substituted here, but rather, what it signifies or guarantees within a phallogocentric or patriarchal culture. But such a glib substitution is troubling to twentieth-century readers returning to Freud after reading Lacan, although it would, of course, be anachronistic to insist that Freud maintain the Lacanian distinction between penis and phallus so rigorously. Much psychoanalytic discussion has been directed toward our understanding this guarantee, and the term "phallus" has been introduced as a way of distinguishing between the penis as an anatomical organ and the phallus as the arbiter of what the presence or absence of that organ signifies.¹² But what is at stake is not a simple substitution of arguably interchangeable terms, "penis" and "phallus," as reading Grosz with Freud will show.

At the level of the text in "Fetishism," this slip from penis to phallus serves to avert the shock of saying "the woman's penis," holding off till the end of the article its explicit articulation, but intimating the point nonetheless. In other words, this ambivalence allows the woman to have a penis (but only "a particular quite special penis") and not have the penis (because she has, instead, a phallus). Indeed, this attempt to avert or defer the shocking revelation of the woman's special penis provides a different, though equally plausible, explanation for why Freud feels compelled to present his theory of the fetish through such repetitive rhetoric. Furthermore, it is disappointing only that the fetish would turn out to be a penis-substitute; what is not disappointing, what, indeed, is so shocking that we must ease into this idea through terminological substitution, is that this penis for which the fetish substitutes belongs to a woman, a mother.¹³

Moreover, what this lack of rigorous distinction between penis and phallus reveals is that the fetish cannot be anchored to what Freud concludes to be its prototypical basis, the "penis of the man." When the basis of the fetish is first defined in the text, the penis becomes a phallus—the quite special penis turns out to be a maternal phallus. This phallus is then "lost" in two different ways in this text. First, diegeti-

cally, it is lost to the boy-child who will become the fetishist in order to assuage this loss. Secondly, on the level of rhetoric, this phallus is lost in Freud's definition of the fetish prototype, since he resorts in the final sentence to the man's penis. Finally, there is a significant but unremarked shift from the boy's penis, which is endangered by the sight of his mother's genitals (*SE* 21: 153), to the man's penis which now serves as the fetish prototype (*SE* 21: 157).¹⁴

We can look at the chain of loss and substitution in this initial definition of fetishism even more closely. Is this slippage between "penis" and "phallus" itself a fetishistic substitution, supplementing one inadequate term with a more significant or weighty one that will better ground the meaning because of its private significance? In this case, the "phallus" is the fetish object that bolsters the "penis." If fetishistic substitution is such a part of the discourse, can one write about fetishism without employing the logic of fetishism? In other words, to understand fetishism, do we have to take up the position of the fetishist, or is there an outside to fetishism which still gives us understanding of the phenomenon? This question is important since one of the key aspects in Freud's description of the fetish object is its undetectability, the fact that its significance "is not known to other people" (*SE* 21: 154). In this sense, the fetish object is the very opposite of the penis, which is the thing we all must have knowledge of, whether we "have" one or not. In this light, one has to wonder at the appropriateness of the substitution of the penis by the fetish object, since they are semiotically opposite.

In trying to answer the epistemological question of whether we can understand fetishism without being fetishists, we can examine Freud's exegesis of the term. Freud tells us that he arrived at his definition because the fetish "revealed itself so naturally and seemed to me so compelling" (*SE* 21: 152). ("Sie ergab sich so ungezwungen und erschien mir so zwingend" [*GW* 14: 312].) The fact that he can employ such straightforward and emphatic words as "ungezwungen" and "zwingend" suggests that he believes it is possible to have access to knowledge about fetishism from outside of the fetishistic relation, since a fetishist would be ambivalent, if not equivocal. Freud's certainty here indicates that far from being a purely private language, fetishism is accessible to those who are not fetishists, who are outside fetishism's semiotic economy. Indeed, as Freud's certainty here shows, fetishism can be explained quite directly, its arguments can be cogent and compelling. This not only enables Freud to be definitive rather than hopelessly ambivalent (as a fetishist would be), but it also suggests that the fetish object is not nearly as inscrutable as the fetishist may think.¹⁵