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Peter Pan and Coraline: Gender's Impact on Mapping Psychoanalysis onto Physical Spaces

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Abstract:

In this essay I show the complications that arise when psychoanalytical theory is imposed onto a child's secondary world. In both J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* and Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* the child's unconscious desires are displayed in the way the child either dominates over or is threatened by the physical space he or she is in. As a boy who will never have to grow up, Peter dominates over both Hook's masculine threat of patriarchal authority and the crocodile's feminine threat of consumption. As a girl who will grow into a woman Coraline has to learn to both defy the monstrous feminine and embrace the aspects of it that are within her. Coraline learns to defend her own individuality and agency through defiance and deceit, while Peter uses outright physical violence and domination. Ultimately both children are gendered inversions of each other and their genders play a significant role in how they act and develop.

Peter Pan and Coraline: Gender's Impact on Mapping Psychoanalysis onto Physical Spaces

Both J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* and Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* map the space of the child's unconscious desire for independence onto the physical space of the secondary world. Thus, the secondary worlds in both texts bring psychoanalytical theory to life in the forms of parental figures that represent the uncanny, oedipal, Electra, and castration complexes actually lived out, and living examples of the consuming monstrous feminine. Both children deal with these issues differently because they are gendered inversions of each other. Peter is the boy who never grows up; he combats the problems in Neverland with the violence and cocky egoism expected of eternal boyish immaturity. Peter will never have to experience growth or rebirth so by the end of the novel his problems are efficiently removed. Coraline, however, is not in a state of eternal childhood. Coraline has to grow and mature, even confronting the defiant parts of herself that link her with the monstrous feminine, an aspect of the novels' threats that the male Peter does not have to confront. Ultimately Coraline maps out a new way to be a heroine as she confronts the return of the repressed and learns to exert her own agency and claim her own identity to overcome it.

In the opening pages of *Peter Pan* Barrie sets out the idea that Neverland is a "map of a child's mind" (Barrie 5). He also includes images such as Mrs. Darling "tidying up her children's minds" (7), and nightlights as protectors from the Neverland "in the two minutes before you go to sleep [when] it becomes very real" (6). These ideas evoke Freud's theories of the unconscious mind, suppression, and the uncanny. Michael Egan's essay, "The Neverland of Id: Barrie, Peter Pan and Freud" explores these issues in detail. In this essay he states that the Neverland is "a poetic version of the Freudian id" (44). He continues:

Barrie's Neverland, however, is more than merely dark suggestive hints. In fact he endows it with an ambiguous status quite like Freud's conception of the unconscious, settling on it not only archetypal representatives of physical terror—beasts, savages, murderous pirates—but also fantasies of gratified sexuality. (45)

He goes on to identify the “fantasies of gratified sexuality” in the text as the relationship between Peter and Wendy, where they exchange kisses and pretend to be the married parents of the lost boys, Michael and John. Although Peter pretends to be father and husband he is not conscious of what those roles entail. As Peter says, “[y]ou are so queer ... and Tiger Lily is just the same. There is something she wants to be to me, but she says it is not my mother” (Barrie 98). In Peter’s Neverland girls such as Wendy, Tiger Lily, and Tinker Bell hint at sexual relationships with Peter, but he cannot see them as anything but mothers, leading back to Freud’s oedipal complex of the boy who wants to sleep with his mother. Thus, the oedipal narrative can productively be mapped onto *Peter Pan*.

Critical essays on *Coraline* tend to deal with similar themes to the essays on *Peter Pan*, particularly in regards to the unconscious mind, the oedipal complex, and the secondary world as id. One of the best essays to map out these relationships in *Coraline* is Richard Gooding’s “‘Something Very Old and Very Slow’: Coraline, Uncanniness, and Narrative Form.” Gooding claims, “[u]ncanny effects in *Coraline* are aided by Gaiman’s technical innovations to a familiar narrative pattern featuring a border between real and fantasy worlds, a pattern that in adolescent fiction allows for the construction of a safe milieu for the playing out of id fantasies” (393). This sounds similar to Egan’s claim that the Neverland is “a poetic version of the Freudian id.” Although Gooding’s critique of *Coraline* largely focuses on the uncanny while Egan’s critique of

Peter Pan focuses on the oedipal complex, there are still traces of the oedipal complex in *Coraline*, just as there are traces of the uncanny in *Peter Pan*.

Uncanny doubling occurs in *Peter Pan* with the figures of Mr. Darling and Captain Hook. Mr. Darling is the main patriarch in *Peter Pan*, the example of the father figure. From the first performance of Barrie's *Peter Pan* the actor playing Mr. Darling reappears on stage as Captain Hook. Symbolically, therefore, Mr. Darling and Captain Hook represent the same man, suggesting Neverland has been penetrated by the kind of patriarchal authority Peter is trying to escape. Peter tells Wendy, "I ran away the day I was born ... It was because I heard father and mother ... talking about what I was to be when I became a man ... I don't ever want to be a man ... I want always to be a little boy and to have fun" (Barrie 26). Peter runs away to escape the patriarchal authority, and yet it follows him to the island in the form of Captain Hook. Peter and Hook are pitted as rivals, so it is little surprise that "Hook represents the Oedipal Father ... If Hook is the Oedipal Father, then within the structure of the story Peter Pan himself must be his son" (Egan 49). Thus, the oedipal plot is further established through uncanny doubling, not only the doubled adult threat, Hook and Darling, but also Peter's violence propensities according to Egan.

Freud defines the uncanny as "something that ought to have been hidden but has now come to light" (241); "it is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (220). Gooding argues this is one of the dominant themes of *Coraline*. He writes, "[t]he house Coraline discovers on the other side of the drawing room is ... a near-literal manifestation of the *unheimlich*: a home that is familiar but unknown" (394). As Coraline first enters the other house she experiences carpet, wallpaper, and a picture that are all "the same that they had ... at home" (Gaiman 27). Coraline draws the logical conclusion, "she was in her own

home. She hadn't left" (27). This other house is even complete with the other mother who "looked a little like Coraline's mother" (27). The passage Coraline uses to reach the other mother smells "very old and very slow" (26); perhaps reminding Coraline of an "old and long familiar" passage she has been in before, the one which led from her own mother originally. Later the passage "moved, as if it were taking a breath ... This time what she touched felt hot and wet, as if she had put her hand in somebody's mouth, and she pulled it back with a small wail" (135). The moving hot wet passage Coraline must travel to reach her real mother is uncannily similar to the birthing canal. Even Coraline's "small wail" is reminiscent of the first noise a baby makes after delivery. Coraline's terror and discomfort at being in this space is probably connected to the Freudian association between the womb and the anxiety of being buried alive, an intriguing association since the other mother is a threat because of her consuming love for Coraline.

Peter does not fear being consumed by Neverland's predators because of his power over Neverland's subjects:

Feeling that Peter was on his way back, the Neverland had again woke into life ... In his absence things are usually quiet on the island. The fairies take an hour longer in the morning, the beasts attend to their young, the redskins feed heavily for six days and nights, and when pirates and lost boys meet they merely bite their thumbs at each other. But with the coming of Peter, who hates lethargy, they are under way again. (Barrie 46)

Peter's presence induces both violent and non-violent action from Neverland's inhabitants. This power and control stems from Neverland being a reflection of Peter's own unconsciousness. He enjoys the danger and action associated with male power, while also enjoying the safety of self-sacrificing feminine duty. When Peter nearly drowns on Marooners' Rock the Never bird comes

“to save him, to give him her nest, though there were eggs in it” (89). To the Never bird protecting Peter comes before protecting her own eggs. Tinkerbell is another example of a female who puts Peter first. She warns Peter that his medicine “cup was poisoned ... Tink got between his lips and the draught, and drained it to the dregs” (121). Tinkerbell is fully willing to risk her own life for Peter’s, just as the bird would have sacrificed her own children’s live for Peter’s. These examples show that feminine forces exist to protect Peter, not harm him; if someone in Neverland is going to be harmed by the monstrous feminine it will not be Peter.

Initially in the other world, Coraline appears to have control and power akin to Peter’s. On the first visit Coraline finds a utopia, where “all her complaints against her parents are answered and her wishes [are] fulfilled” (Gooding 396). However, the more Coraline explores, the less she seems to have control over the world. When Coraline calls it a “small world” (Gaiman 75), the cat replies, “it’s big enough for her ... Spider’s webs only have to be large enough to catch flies ... she’s had [this world] a very long time” (75). The other world may be a reflection of Coraline’s unconscious mind, but it is the other mother’s interpretation and creation. Neverland is Peter’s unconscious mind, a world where mother figures serve to protect from traps, but the unconscious world in *Coraline* is one where the mother wants to trap and consume children the way a spider traps and consumes flies. The dead children confirm this suspicion. One says, “I walked through the scullery door ... *she* was waiting for me. She told me she was my other mamma, but I never saw my true mamma again” (85). Like a spider waiting for food in a carefully constructed web, the other mother waits on the other side of the door for children to be ensnared. Another ghost substantiates the impression: “[s]he kept us, and she fed on us, until now we’ve nothing left of ourselves, only snakeskins and spider husks” (85). Just as a spider sucks an insect’s blood until its body is empty, the other mother sucks the lives of the children

she catches: “[s]he stole our hearts, and she stole our souls, and she took our lives away” (84). In Neverland Peter enjoys his battles with pirates where he has the power to always win as he cockily taunts and later brags about his numerous victories. Coraline, however, does not enjoy her encounters with the numerous spiders and spider webs in the other world (60, 75, 81, 85, 99, 100, 101, 102, and 108) since “[s]piders made Coraline intensely uncomfortable” (10). The spider-like other mother becomes an uncanny reminder of Coraline’s already established discomfort. When Coraline holds the protection stone the “other mother’s hand scuttled off Coraline’s shoulder like a frightened spider” (46), and later the same hand becomes a five-legged spider stalking Coraline. In Coraline’s final encounter with the other mother this imagery is heightened by the other mother’s transformed appearance; “[t]he other mother was huge—her head almost brushed the ceiling—and very pale, the color of a spider’s belly. Her hair writhed and twined about her head, and her teeth were sharp as knives...” (128). Spiders, writhing hair, and teeth like knives evoke a mythos of fairy tale witches and Medusa, the gorgon with snakes for hair that Freud believed “represent[s] the female genitals” (Rudd 162), making her an ideal symbol for the monstrous feminine. Even the other mother’s other name, “beldam” (Gaiman 81, 85, 97, 98, and 145), associates her with old ladies, particularly hags and witches. The other mother could “want something to love ... Something that isn’t her” (65), but like the witch in “Hansel and Gretel”, “[s]he might want something to eat as well. It’s hard to tell with creatures like that” (65). The other mother certainly desires to consume Coraline, either with her love, or her knife like teeth. Unlike Peter, Coraline has no control over the other mother’s threat to consume her. Peter awakens his island’s inhabitants into life so they can amuse, entertain, and protect him, but the other mother creates life in her world only to further ensnare Coraline and bring her that much closer to being consumed.

Consumption plays a significant role in Peter's and Hook's relationship as well. As the oedipal father Hook hates Peter because they are rivals. However, Hook has another reason for hating Peter; Peter cut off Hook's hand and fed it to the crocodile. Hook tells Smee, "[i]t liked my arm so much, Smee, that it has followed me ever since, from sea to sea and from land to land, licking its lips for the rest of me ... I want Peter Pan, who first gave the brute its taste for me" (Barrie 54). The crocodile that ate Hook's hand is comparable with the other mother since the crocodile is the monstrous female consumer of Neverland. In one of his essays French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan even compares the monstrous abject mother to a crocodile:

The mother is a big crocodile, and you find yourself in her mouth. You never know what may set her off suddenly, making those jaws clamp down. That is the mother's desire ... There is a roller, made of stone, of course, which is potentially there at the level of the trap and which holds and jams it open. That is what we call the phallus. It is a roller which protects you, should the jaws suddenly close. (qtd. in Fink 56-7)

Egan explains that the loss of Hook's hand is a symbolic castration; Peter steals Hook's "stone roller", his phallus, which protects him from the trap. In Hook's case the roller which is to jam the mouth of the trap is actually fed to the trap, further trapping Hook with her desire for the rest of him. Hook lacks his phallus, accounting for his inability to defeat the crocodile while he lives in fear of it returning for the rest of him. At the end of the novel Hook goes "content to the crocodile" (Barrie 141); structurally, the crocodile has to consume Hook after he has lost the one thing which could have been his defence. In Freud's terms Hook is "buried alive by mistake" (244) inside the belly of the beast; he joins his castrated body part as he literally returns to a position inside the feminine body, "the most uncanny thing of all" (244). At this point Peter is

free to complete the oedipal complex; now that he has castrated and killed his father all that is left is to consume his father's identity, which he does in the next chapter. Peter, wearing one of Captain Hook's suits, "sat long in the cabin with Hook's cigar-holder in his mouth and one hand clenched, all but for the forefinger, which he bent and held threateningly aloft like a hook"¹ (Barrie144). This perfectly completes the oedipal cycle as Peter becomes the new pirate captain, the head of the symbolic family complete with his own phallic symbolism.

Peter accepts Hook's identity as his own by the end of the novel, but Coraline consistently refuses to be named or claimed by anyone other than herself. Coraline is constantly annoyed by her neighbours' inability to remember her name. All her neighbours call her "Caroline" instead of Coraline (Gaiman 3, 4, 13, 15, 16, 18, 20, 50, 151, and 160). Coraline's insistence that she be called by her proper name demonstrates an unrelinquishable attachment to her real father and mother, the people who named her. Although Coraline finds the other mother's world "much more interesting than at home" (45), she defiantly refuses to stay "for ever and always" (45) because the price is abandoning herself and her own parents to be consumed by the other mother, a sacrifice symbolized through sewing buttons in Coraline's eyes. Having buttons for eyes is something particular to the other mother; she creates others in the world, such as the other father, to have buttons in their eyes so they are a reflection of her. In his essay "An Eye for an Eye: Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* and Questions of Identity," Rudd writes, "[t]he other mother offers to replace Coraline's eye with her own I: an eye for an I" (163). The other mother cannot consume the souls of the trapped children unless she first steals their eyes, referring to the idea that the eyes are the window to the soul (163). Although the lost eyes are often also associated with castration, they seem to more appropriately stand for individual identity since "names are the first thing to go" (83) after the other mother sews in the buttons.

¹ For further analysis of this passage see Egan pg. 54

Coraline recognizes that she will have to forfeit her identity to stay with the other mother, which is why she offers herself as the prize if she loses. She says: “[i]f I lose I’ll stay here with you forever and I’ll let you love me. I’ll be a most dutiful daughter. I’ll eat your food and play Happy Families. And I’ll let you sew your buttons into my eyes” (Gaiman 91). If she lost Coraline would cease to be her own self; she would become the “most dutiful daughter”, an eyeless, nameless, soulless being, a “hollow husk” (86) akin to the ghost children and the other father. According to Creed all children struggle to have their own identities outside of simply being “the son” or “the daughter”: “the mother-child relation [is] one marked by conflict: the child struggles to break free but the mother is reluctant to release it” (11-12). For Coraline losing the game means surrendering all subjectivity to the all-consuming love of the other mother and being completely dominated by her will, an uncanny state eerily similar to “intra-uterine existence” (Freud 244).

Coraline’s determination not to be reabsorbed into oneness with the other mother results in her openly defying the other mother. An example of this is when Coraline says to the other mother, “[y]ou’re sick ... [s]ick and evil and weird” (Gaiman 78), defiantly rejecting the other mother’s claim to be her mother, a reaction sometimes attributed to the Electra complex. Jung, the psychoanalyst who coined the term “Electra complex”, writes:

[A] daughter develops a specific liking for the father, with a correspondingly jealous attitude toward the mother. We could call this the Electra complex. As everyone knows Electra took vengeance on her mother Clytemnestra for murdering her husband Agamemnon and thus robbing her [Electra] of her beloved father. (qtd. in Kilmartin 269)

Jealousy is not the right way to describe the feeling Coraline has for the other mother. However, Jung's focus on the daughter's willingness to pursue vengeance for unjustly lost loved ones seems appropriate, especially since Coraline's open defiance does not begin until the other mother kidnaps her real parents. Although Coraline returns to the other world to rescue both her real father and mother there is evidence that she has a special bond with her father, a bond which Rudd recognizes in his essay. He notes, "Coraline expressly acknowledges the significance of her father in her life ... telling the cat about how her dad once protected her from some wasps; and she does it again when she recites a verse that her father once sang to her" (Rudd 165). While escaping in the tunnel Coraline does have a similar moment where she expressly acknowledges the significance of her mother in her life; however, she more often reaches for memories of her father for support and encouragement. Although each of Coraline's parents "had their own study" (Gaiman 7), Coraline chooses to enter her father's study and write a story on his computer after her parents have disappeared. Even in the other world Coraline seeks out the office of her other father to learn crucial information, implying that her father is the one she most often goes to for wisdom and support. This suggests that Coraline has a special intimate connection to her father, further aligning her with the Electra complex.

Coraline appears to exact vengeance on the other mother when she escapes having won the challenge by rescuing the ghost children's souls, her parents, and even the cat. However, the thing that landed in the corridor "with a sort of a scuttling thump" (Gaiman 134) turns out to be the return of the repressed, the monstrous feminine, the other mother's right hand. This time it is the other mother who is seeking vengeance. Freud writes, "a hand cut off at the wrist ... [has] something peculiarly uncanny about [it], especially when ... they prove capable of independent activity in addition. As we already know, this kind of uncanniness springs from its proximity to

the castration complex” (244). As with Hook’s hand, the other mother’s severed hand is also symbolic of a castration performed by the rival child. Unlike with Hook, the other mother’s castrated hand is uncannily capable of “independent activity.” It is rendered even more uncanny because its “too-many tapping, clicking, scurrying feet” (Gaiman 147), liken it to a spider, sent to make Coraline again “intensely uncomfortable.” The uncanny castrated hand stalks Coraline because she has something it desires, the key to Coraline’s destruction. “There is only one key” (64), so the other mother must steal it back from Coraline if she is going to successfully consume her. After Peter battles Hook, Peter does not have to worry about any lingering threats because Hook is buried in the monstrous feminine, the crocodile, and in Barrie’s fiction, the crocodile only ever wanted to finish off the wounded, the partially castrated man. Unlike Hook and the crocodile, the other mother is a lingering threat because she has not returned to the womb, nor has she consumed the object of her desire like the crocodile. To entirely defeat the other mother Coraline would have to reenter the other world and risk being consumed, a risk Peter never had to take. Providing readers with a canny heroine, Gaiman has his protagonist bury the fiction’s greatest threat, just as Peter buried threats inside the crocodile. Coraline decides to bury the other mother’s hand along with the key.

In carrying out this plan Coraline flirts with her own monstrous femininity; like the other mother luring children to their destruction while posing as a loving mother, Coraline lures the hand to its destruction while posing as an innocent little girl. She tricks the hand while appearing to be having an innocent child’s tea party. The hand “made one triumphant, nail-clacking leap onto the center of the paper tablecloth ... And then the weight and the momentum of the hand sent the plastic dolls’ cups flying, and the paper tablecloth, the key, and the other mother’s right hand went tumbling down into the darkness of the well” (158-9). The other mother is once again

tricked by Coraline as her hand acts on its own, burying itself without Coraline ever having to touch it. The hand's burial in a well is appropriate since wells have been associated with both tombs and wombs before. In David Heineken's essay: "Haunting Masculinity and Frightening Femininity: The Novels of John Bellairs", he writes,

The well clearly evokes the feminine qualities associated with what Barbara Creed (2002) has described as the "archaic mother," a reproductive and generative figure existing outside the patriarchal symbolic order that signifies both the terrors of dissolution as well as the unity of the womb (p.47). Similarly, the well is both hole and whole, a site of both death and rebirth. (125).

The other mother's hand meets its death in the well as it is buried, but Coraline is reborn in that moment as the solidified defiant feminine heroine. Once again Coraline tricks and defies the other mother while she asserts her own identity.

Unlike Peter, Coraline never kills anyone; at the end of *Peter Pan*, Peter's greatest enemy is defeated, but the other mother remains a possible threat who literally has the key to Coraline's destruction if her hand ever emerges from its premature burial in the well. The dangers of the mind's Neverland disappear with the click of a nightlight, but the well behind Coraline's house and the door inside her house are eerily closer and far more real. As the boy who never grows up Peter will never have to succumb to the patriarchal authority Hook represented, Hook is dead and gone. Never growing up also means never changing and never experiencing rebirth, aspects of maturation Coraline will have to deal with as she grows into womanhood. The beginning of the new school year at the end of the novel serves as a reminder that Coraline is still growing and learning. The hand remains a potential threat for Coraline because it is a reminder that the repressed could return once again, just as the other mother reburied her own mother (Gaiman

93), Coraline may have to rebury the hand, a reminder that she may not be done with the monstrous feminine as she grows into her own femininity.

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