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The Non-Maleness of the Symbolic Order: Phallocentrism and the Castrated Third Sex

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Abstract: This article will analyze the meanings of phallic envy and castration from the perspectives of sociology, feminism, and sexual psychology. It focuses mainly on phallocentrism and Jacques Lacan's theory of the three realms of The Real-Imaginary-Symbolic Order. The article does not take the body/cultural dualism as a premise, but instead uses the body of the eunuch as a medium to discuss the formation of the symbolic order, patriarchy, and female tendencies in the devaluation of women. The castration complex of the eunuch is essential for entering both the symbolic order and patriarchy. At the same time, the alienation of women and phalluses within the symbolic order constitutes the basis for the projection of negative meaning. This article attempts to understand and analyze the physical and mental state of the castrated female eunuch through the lens of intersectionality. The generalized symbol of the phallus extends beyond the physical level to encompass the imprisonment and deprivation of thought and rights, as women consciously enter the isolated space of phallocentrism.

1. Research methodology

The article uses the perspectives of sociology, feminism, and sexual psychology to examine phallocentrism and the concept of the castrated third sex. It argues that the long-standing classification of women as a unified group should not be solely attributed to the concept of a third sex defined by the absence of the phallus, as this risks reducing the complexity of gender issues to a single dimension. The perspective of intersectionality moves beyond locating the root of inequality in gender alone, emphasizing instead the interconnectedness of patriarchy, gender theory, and class-based power relations. It highlights the dynamic interplay between difference and commonality.

2. Phallocentrism

Phallocentrism is a metaphorical symbol of patriarchal dominance. Broadly interpreted, its central idea—that males are superior to females—suggests that maleness is the default reference point for legitimacy and universality. Sigmund Freud introduced the concept of phallocentrism in his theory of sexuality, referring to a developmental stage in which the libido centers on the external genitalia. In this framework, women, lacking a penis, are seen as yearning for one. Their sexual behavior is often framed in terms of “inclusion” and “absorption,” reflecting a symbolic desire for the phallus itself. Femininity, under this logic, becomes inscribed with phallocentric ideology, where women are

objectified, eroticized, and marginalized[5].

A key tenet of phallocentrism is the belief that women exist to satisfy male erotic desires, while being denied their own. This dynamic serves to reinforce male sexual pleasure and elevate the male subject as a dominant power.

Phallic envy, also known as penis envy, is a concept in sexual developmental theory. It describes a psychological condition in which women, consciously or unconsciously, experience gender conflict by aspiring to be male and viewing the absence of a penis as a deficiency. Interestingly, this concept is sometimes mirrored by men who feel insecure about their penile attributes. Throughout history, penis envy and vagina worship have coexisted, both functioning as symbolic representations of vitality and generative power.

In art, the male penis is often portrayed in an erect state, symbolizing strength and dominance, while the female genitals are depicted in a more passive or relaxed state. Artistic representations from various periods reinforce these symbolic roles. For instance, Gustave Courbet's 19th-century realist painting *The Origin of the World* presents a close-up of a woman's genitalia, reverently rendered but strategically concealing the vaginal opening, labia, and clitoris. The painting approaches the female body with a sense of solemnity rather than eroticism.

Conversely, the penis in Renaissance art was frequently associated with lust and authority. In Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, the goddess of love emerges from the sea—a mythological event tied to the castration of Uranus. According to Greek mythology, Cronus severed Uranus's penis during intercourse and cast it into the sea, where it mixed with foam and gave birth to Venus. This myth, later depicted by Giorgio Vasari, exemplifies the symbolic power and generative force associated with the phallus. As such, the phallus continues to hold critical significance in understanding the foundations of male domination.

3. Castrated third sex

The erection of the penis functions as a "preparatory act" for sexual intercourse and symbolizes the secondary force behind male sexuality. This behavior is rooted in the primal instincts of reproduction. The prominent male genitalia can only complete the reproductive act by penetrating the female body, which enables the male to experience a strong sense of conquest. The erect penis is often symbolically associated with vitality and fertility, while the hymen of a woman who has not experienced vaginal penetration is traditionally viewed as a symbol of fragility and purity. When the force of male penetration breaks this barrier, it is metaphorically interpreted as the subjugation of the female body by male dominance. The protruding nature of male genitalia versus the internal structure of female genitalia reinforces the notion of male dominance in heterosexual intercourse. Irreversible physiological attributes—such as penile rigidity and comparatively greater physical strength—are often interpreted as natural justifications for male dominance. Over time, this physiological dominance has evolved into a sociocultural construct: men are positioned as conquerors, and women are expected to be submissive. Within this framework arises the concept of male castration anxiety and female phallic envy, both of which reflect unconscious gendered anxieties.

Castration of the phallus, also referred to as qu shi in Chinese, signifies the loss of dominance and natural vitality[4]. Castration has existed throughout human history, with instances found in ancient Egypt, Persia, Algeria, and feudal Europe—it is by no means a new phenomenon. As human society transitioned from matriarchal to patrilineal systems, the paternal bloodline became central to social structure, and the inheritance of thrones and property came to rely on male lineage. To ensure the purity of patrilineal descent, wives were required to uphold strict chastity and marital fidelity. This ideology effectively reduced women to the status of male property and reproductive instruments. This absolute control was most evident in royal palaces, as illustrated by the historical presence of eunuchs.

During the feudal monarchy of ancient China, eunuchs—known as huan guan—were men whose penis and testicles had been entirely removed to prevent sexual relations, particularly with women in the imperial court[2]. In certain historical periods, these eunuchs served emperors and royal families within the Chinese empire. Eunuchs first emerged during the Shang Dynasty (ca. 1600 BCE) and the practice persisted until the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1921[1]. Confucian scholars during imperial times harshly condemned eunuchs, describing them as "an abyss of disgrace" and among the most morally corrupt. This long and complex history has also been referred to as a "castrated civilization."[3]

Physical castration has also historically been practiced on women. According to records in the *Zhou Li*, high-ranking palace maids who were responsible for managing harem affairs but did not hold the status of imperial concubines were referred to as "female officials" or even "female eunuchs" in ancient times[12]. These women were subjected to a brutal procedure known as gynecological castration. The process reportedly began with the administration of anesthesia. Then, a hook was deeply inserted into the uterus, which was subsequently pulled downward using a heavy object. The lower abdomen was then struck with a soft hammer to force the uterus and ovaries to prolapse through the vaginal canal. Once the vaginal root was tied off to disconnect it from the body, the uterus, ovaries, and vaginal tissue were amputated using a knife. These tissues would later fall away due to ischemic necrosis. In addition, the nipples were reportedly excised, and grass ash was applied to the wounds to stop the bleeding. Whether applied to males or females, the primary purpose of such castration was to suppress the production of sex hormones and eliminate secondary sexual characteristics, thereby preventing any sexual disturbance or threat within the confines of the royal palace[14].

After evolution, castration has expanded from a physical punishment to the imprisonment and deprivation of thoughts and powers, and is divided into physical castration and spiritual castration[13]. Women are sheltered by male authority by attaching to the male group, so women gradually integrate into the situation that they must have a husband or a son to stand in the phallic economy. In this process, with the disappearance of other social roles, women are gradually transformed into subordinate roles of the family, subtly changing the social norm of gaining status through childbirth. Male heirs become female signifiers with phallus, and females consciously enter the phallocentrism claustrophobic space. The castrated consciousness of women from the male perspective has long been internalized, and the castrated female image endows the world with order and meaning. But the role of the female in forming the patriarchal unconscious is twofold, since she does not have a phallus, she symbolizes the threat of castration, and secondly she brings her child into the symbolic realm, and once that is done, her meaning in the process comes to an end. For example, in ancient Chinese imperial palaces, women gained status by giving birth to male heirs, which further shows that women turned her children into the phallus she longed for, thus bringing their own children into a phallocentrism society. Women have been castrated from the symbolic order under long-term repression and murder, not only consciously becoming repressed, but also alienated into male power, internalizing the ethical order of patriarchal society (for example: chastity) into their own code of conduct and value orientation and they consciously become the defenders of this order. For example, footbinding in Chinese feudal society is a product of a patriarchal society[18]. While it brings physical pain to women, it also separates women from social production labor to a considerable extent, reducing opportunities for women to engage in social practice. This is also an important reason why the patriarchal society and its cultural traditions have continued to this day and are unbreakable[19].

4. The Non-Male in the Symbolic Order

From a psychoanalytic point of view, women represent the threat of "castration" in the symbolic order and in the father law. First, she lacks a penis. Compared with the phenomenon that the eunuch loses the penis after birth, she is born like that. Secondly, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan proposed

the developmental trajectory from infancy to "adult", namely three concepts: needs, requests and desires, which roughly correspond to the three stages or three areas of human development: The Real-Imaginary-Symbolic Order[21]. He mentioned in *Lacan's Theory* that the phallus, the stone phallus and the father, constitute the symbolic order. The castration complex based on the physical evidence of eunuchs is extremely important for entering the symbolic order and patriarchy. In Freud's *Three Treatises on Sexology*, people's sexual pleasure satisfaction is divided into three stages: oral desire, anal desire and genital desire. It is the Oedipus complex, Electra complex and the Castration Complex that put an end to the possibilities of perversion and create "adults" - male and female. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir expounded the non-dualism of feminism with the theoretical framework of existentialism - the two genders of women's existence, physical form and social form. There is also an essential difference between "castrated" women and "second sex" women. Women in "second sex" use men as a reference, internalize the male subject, and become an acquired "woman". This castrated female and male, she/he is a non-man, a defective man, symbolizing a third gender beyond the "other" and "she".

5. Female eunuchs and misogyny

The Female Eunuch is a book by Australian feminist writer Germaine Greer[6]. She argues that women have been shaped since childhood according to the expectations of a patriarchal society, gradually losing their innate vitality and becoming "powerless, lonely, sexually atrophied, unhappy" individuals—so-called "castrated people"—who acquire femininity by becoming "female eunuchs." According to J. W. Breakey, castration, in terms of dysfunction and physical abnormality, often leads to self-exclusion and marginalization, labeling the individual as a "less acceptable person"[11]. The philosopher Aristotle in Ancient Greece was once considered a misogynist for similar views—he claimed that women are incomplete men. From this, we can infer that the symbolism of the phallus extends beyond the physical realm; it also encompasses power, wealth, and social status. If a woman possesses these attributes, she too may be considered a subject with a phallus. However, the misogynistic complex often portrays women in demeaning archetypes: as lewd seductresses who bring ruin to nations, or as morally corrupt and unkempt figures. In ancient China, for example, characters such as Daji and Baosi are frequently used to vilify and demonize women, reinforcing the notion that even when women attain symbolic phallic power, they remain subject to criticism. Female desire is subordinated to her constructed image as a bearer of destruction and bloodshed; she exists only in relation to castration, never beyond it. Moreover, society imposes two extreme archetypes onto women: the "saintess" and the "prostitute." Clearly, this duality stems from the labels imposed by male-dominated ideology—a mechanism for controlling and defining women. Whether a woman is deemed a "saintess" or a "prostitute," this binary classification serves primarily to suppress male desire[7].

In the fourth chapter, "The Hate of Women," of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, she argues that society has excessively indoctrinated women with a rigid body image, leading them to believe that their bodies are unworthy of praise once revealed. Women often feel ashamed of their bodies because they believe they do not conform to the idealized image of desire widely disseminated by mass media. This internalized perception is divided into two aspects: male misogyny and female self-loathing. These attitudes can manifest in various forms, including social exclusion, sexism, hostility towards women, phallocentrism, patriarchy, male privilege, violence against women, and the sexual objectification of the female body. Joan Smith, in her book *Misogyny*, describes this phenomenon—also known as female deprecation—as a pervasive condition present in literature, art, daily life, and ideological structures[8]. It is expressed through the contempt for femininity, feminine traits, and even all things associated with women. The journal article *"Of Termites and Ovaries on Strike: Rethinking*

Medical Metaphors of the Female Body" argues that harmful metaphors of the female body reinforce reductionist and misogynistic interpretations of female symbolism[15]. It suggests that femininity and the female body are often framed as obedient to the "Father's Law," necessitating a fundamental reconstruction of feminist discourse. According to Jacques Lacan, "La femme n'existe pas" ("woman does not exist"). He posits that women are alienated within the symbolic order defined by the phallus, and this alienation forms the basis for negative projections of meaning. Within this symbolic framework, even linguistic identity is assigned in masculine terms, effectively silencing the feminine subjectivity.

6. Conclusion

Whether it is a de-masculinized "third sex" or a de-feminized "third sex," both concepts suppress natural male and female hormones, ultimately leading to the loss of sexual identity[9]. From a psychoanalytic perspective, within the Symbolic Order and the Law of the Father, women represent the threat of "castration." Unlike eunuchs who lose the phallus after birth, the woman is understood as inherently lacking the phallus—she is born into this absence. This so-called "castrated woman" is framed as a non-man, a defective man, symbolizing a third gender that transcends both the "Other" and "She"[16]. Castration of the phallus implies the loss of dominance, vitality, and agency. Female desire is thus subordinated to her symbolic role as the bearer of blood and loss—she can exist only in relation to castration, never beyond it. However, the symbolism of the phallus goes beyond the physical. In a broader sense, it also signifies power, wealth, and social status[10]. Over time, the notion of castration has evolved from a purely physical punishment into a metaphor for the imprisonment and deprivation of autonomy, ideas, and authority. Women bring children into the Symbolic realm and influence social status subtly through reproduction. The birth of male heirs becomes a symbolic extension of phallic power, enabling women to acquire phallic significance indirectly. In other words, this line of thought reveals deeply embedded cultural and social patterns. The metaphor of the female body has been used to critique reductionist and misogynistic conceptions of femininity. It proposes that embodying femininity or possessing a female body is often equated with submission to patriarchy. The alienation of femininity from the phallic symbolic order forms the foundation for negative meaning projection. Ultimately, the body—both socially constructed and biologically defined—is in a constant state of transformation. This calls for a physical and conceptual reconstruction of feminist discourse[20].

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