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Publication Date

2008-01-01

Peer reviewed

Envy of Maternal Functions in Sacrifice Rituals

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Over two decades ago Jeffrey Andresen (1984) challenged analysts to pay more attention to themes of sacrifice appearing in their clinical work. According to Andresen, Freud's insight into this issue has been unduly neglected. Freud recounted throwing a slipper across the room and breaking a statue as a "sacrificial act" directed towards his daughter's recovery (Freud, 1901, p. 169). He saw this as one among many everyday activities which acted out sacrificial fantasies.

Andresen is no doubt correct that sacrificial fantasies appear often in clinical material; sacrifice traditions are so central in most religious traditions it is hard to imagine otherwise. Yet, Andresen proposed a fairly limited set of sacrificial fantasies. He presents several clinical vignettes in which something of value was given up or destroyed by a patient in hopes of restoring a relationship with a loved one. He thereby highlights his patients' wishes to compensate for fantasies of having harmed loved ones. Consideration of other notions of sacrifice might lead analysts to additional fantasies. If analysts have neglected sacrifice, scholars of religion have not. Theories of sacrifice and initiation constitute the vast majority of theorizing about ritual, with sacrifice weighing in with more ink.¹ Much modern scholarship replays old interpretations, from Plato's gift theory to Hume's concept of meritorious loss. This paper follows Andresen's call for analysts to focus on sacrifice, while simultaneously arguing that scholars of religion should make better use of analytic theories. I will argue that a central role of sacrifice rituals, too often overlooked by both analysts and scholars of religion, is expression of unconscious envy of maternal functions. Among these functions, the focus here is on the ability to give birth and to nurse.

The unconscious wish to take on these roles is acted out by men in numerous rituals, which represent manic denials of dependence on women by taking on their birthing/nursing roles. In Kleinian terms, the first object of envy is the feeding breast, "for the infant feels that it possesses everything he desires and that it has an unlimited flow of milk, and love which the breast keeps for its own gratification" (Klein, 1975, p. 183). While all babies envy the breast, she also states that for men "Excessive envy of the breast is likely to extend to all feminine attributes, in particular to the women's capacity to bear children" (p. 201). While Klein discussed individual patients, this envy is also manifest unconsciously on a societal level in religious myths and rituals. Sacrifice rituals are golden opportunities for men to acquire, if only for a short time, both the birthing and nurturing roles of women.

¹ For a concise summary of several major theories of sacrifice see (Valeri, 1985, pp. 62-73). Jeffrey Carter's collection (2003) includes excerpts from many major theorists, though sometimes in rather abbreviated form. For Biblical sacrifices in particular, see (Anderson, 1991).

Sacrifice Rites as Rebirthing Experiences

Sacrifice rituals, as some of the most exciting recent scholarship argues, represent powerful social mechanisms for articulating and sorting out gender roles. Nancy Jay's (1992) seminal research, for example, drew attention to the gender-skewed aspects of sacrifice. Examples as widely diverse as Ancient Israel, Rome, modern West Africa and Islam all converge in a stunning moment of cross-cultural agreement that men sacrifice animals and women do not. In the few instances where women are closely associated with sacrifices, the women are either post-menopausal or young virgins. Therefore it is not simply their status as females, which is so central to their exclusion from sacrifice, but their status as women capable of having children.

Robertson Smith noted long ago the close connection between sacrifice and clan membership, but it was Nancy Jay who outlined the various ways in which sacrifices establish and maintain patriarchal practices. Sacrifice is "male child-birthing", to use a phrase from Hawaiian sacrifice, since sacrificial rituals establish the social identity of the child (Valeri, 1985, p. 114). Birth by women is overcome in the various sacrificial rituals which attribute the social "birth" of a child to the father, even in matriarchal societies.² The person born from a woman is mortal, "but the man integrated into an 'eternal' social order to that degree transcends mortality" (Jay, 1992, p. 39).

In Greek society, a newborn was admitted into a family by a sacrifice at the hearth; without, the baby would be left to die or at least be excluded from the family line. In the case of the Hawaiian king, "in his sacrifices, especially those of his installation, the king ritually controls his divine genealogy and reproduces himself and the god without dependence on women's reproductive powers (Jay, 1992, p. 83).

A dramatic example of the gendering of sacrifice can be seen in the juxtaposition of the near-sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22) with the completed sacrifice of the anonymous daughter of Jephthah (Judges 11:29-40). The life of the eldest son is said to "belong" to the deity, and the son's life is given back to him by the divine father when he returns Isaac to his father. The sacrifice of the son, which appears to threaten any chance of Abraham having descendants, turns out to be a male generative act. For his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham is given the blessing of descendants, as the deity states, "I will bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars in heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore" (Genesis 22:17).

Jephthah vowed that he would sacrifice the first living being who came out of his house if he was given victory in battle. When he returns, his daughter comes out to meet him, learns of his vow, and acquiesces to his vow.³ Before she is killed she asks to go out into the mountains with other young women to mourn her virginity (Judges 11:37). She is unable to offer her generative power via a husband, which would not help her father

² Even in matriarchal societies sacrifices such as the Ashanti, or in bi-lateral descent traditions such as the Hawaiian, sacrifices are carried out by men exclusively and dominate the social world and create the most important social power relations.

³ This story raises numerous issues about sacrifice and sexuality which are beyond the scope of this paper, and points to issues of sacrifice as a mode of resolving Oedipal conflicts. See Patricia Johnson's article (1997) which argues that Antigone's decision to sacrifice herself for her brother instead of marrying her intended husband is also presented as an unresolved Oedipus conflict.

anyway with his line of descendants, but is able to offer her life to her father instead. The story ends by recounting that this practice is still carried out by the daughters of Israel, who go to the mountains to mourn the daughter's lost virginity but not, we note, her life. As Susan Sered (2002) has outlined, the cultural death of an animal valorizes the male and makes the female the carrier of everything negative (impurity, mortality, lost virginity, etc.). The particular manifestation of the gendering power of sacrifice varies from culture to culture. In some cultures women do not sacrifice because they are associated with death while in others they do not sacrifice because they are associated with life.

For all her brilliant analysis, Jay does not outline any basis for the striking cross-cultural similarities she describes. Alan Dundes' study of myth is helpful here, as he tries to explain another example of an obvious, yet overlooked, gender-skewed theme found in innumerable religions: a male god creating the first humans from dirt. This theme is specifically based, according to Dundes' Freudian interpretation, on the widespread appearance of 1) a cloacal theory of birth (childbirth via bowels) and 2) male envy of pregnancy. Beyond this bare plot, the full creation stories vary widely, since they are dependent in their details on culturally specific elaboration of the very general common theme.⁴ His explanation points to both the cross-culturally fixed part of the theme (the envy of childbirth and common childhood confusions about childbirth) and that the motivations behind the stories are unconscious. Thus it is possible to set Jay's findings in this larger context of aspects of religious expression which unconsciously express envy of maternal functions.

Part of this larger context is the myths Dundes has brought to our attention.⁵ In one of the central creation stories of the ancient Indian Vedic traditions, found in the Rig Veda, the world is created by a sacrifice of the cosmic figure called (Rig Veda 1.10). His body is dismembered and social roles (castes) fixed depending on which part of his body was used in their formation. The sacrifice story, and then all enactments of sacrifices modeled on it, reverses the reality of birth by making people literally out of the body of a man. The text states explicitly that the female principle was born from as part of the primary work of creation.

It is possible to argue that the entire philosophical system of transmigration of souls, so central to Indian philosophy, solves not only the problem of death but of that birth from a woman. Rebirth takes place at the time of death through a series of rituals controlled by men. The Hindu upper castes are distinguished as "twice-born," that is, as men who have already overcome the stigma of birth from a woman. The death/rebirth ritual of cremation is a structural parallel to the consuming and transforming sacrificial fire.

⁴ Looking for an unconscious meaning cross-culturally is a fraught enterprise; it is imperative to avoid reading one culture's notion of the feminine into another culture. Many analytic studies ignore this problem, and simply equate, for example, femininity with passivity no matter the specifics of the cultural system.

⁵ Jay does occasionally mention myths about sacrifice, as for example the myth that Hercules became divine via a sacrificial fire that burnt away "all that his mother gave him," leaving him in the image of his father (Jay, 1992, p. 31).

Female birthing power is displaced not only by animal sacrifice, but also by martyrdom traditions which emerge as the practice of animal sacrifice is rejected in early Judaism (Janowitz, forthcoming). In the earliest extant Jewish martyrdom text, the Apocryphal Second Maccabees,⁶ a mother exhorts her seven sons to die rather than obey the king and break a food taboo. In the modified self-sacrifice of martyrdom, the mother gains agency and participates much more than she would have in the animal sacrifice system, but the agency is basically her ability to die like a brave man. The mother dies encouraging her sons to reject the life that she gave them for another life given by the male god-father, substituting “re-birth” from the divine father for human birth from females. The martyr-son is offered the hope of an eternal merging with the mother in the afterlife, and at the same time, protection by the divine father (and his law) from a helpless dependence on the mother.

Men Making Male Food

In addition to animal sacrifice and martyrdom displacing the human mother, another fundamental role of females, that of nursing mother, is also displaced unto men by sacrifice traditions. While many theories have stressed the violent aspects of sacrifice (Girard, 1977), the roles of feeding and being fed have received much less attention. Robertson Smith placed the communal feast at the center of his theory of sacrifice, but did not note the gender implications at all (Smith, 1894). No matter what the role of women in the daily preparation of food, the making of sacred food via sacrifice is a male prerogative.⁷

The notion of “sacred food” is left somewhat vague here on purpose since the particular examples differ widely from tradition to tradition. In some cases it is possible to point to a specific set of food items, such as the bread and wine of the Eucharist. In other instances, an entire system might produce special sacred food, as the system of kashrut which is controlled by male rabbis (until very recently). Within this general system, specific items such as matzah can represent yet another level of sacred food. These sacred foods stand at the other end of the spectrum from mother’s milk. Although it is not necessarily always labeled impure in purity systems, mother’s milk cannot have saving power per se. Instead, the value of mothers’ milk is transferred to male sacred food metaphorically, as we will see in number of instances below. Sacrificial food far outweighs the natural food of the mother. That is, sacrifice traditions establish the male-produced food as the most important food for humans, often in explicit opposition to female nourishment.⁸

⁶ Second Maccabees is a Greek text from the first century B.C.E. that appears in Catholic and Eastern Orthodox bibles to this day.

⁷ For exceptions see (Sered, 1994).

⁸ It is beyond the scope of this paper, but worth noting that the food women make for ritual purposes is often involved in debates about heresy. The tradition of denouncing women for making cakes for the Queen of Heaven, perhaps in the shape of female genitalia (Jeremiah 7:18, 44:19; cf. Hosea 3:1) reappears in heresiologist Epiphanius of Salamis’ fourth-century denunciation (*Haeres* 78) of the “Collyridians” for making cakes for the Virgin Mother (Pope, 1977, p. 379). This tradition is perhaps continued all the way up to the making of hamantaschen.

Female participation is denied at every step of the process, since the officiant (priest) who produces the male food for the male deity from the male body must himself be male. By excluding women from making the sacred food of sacrifice, they are excluded from generative roles as well. That is, male-only feeding and begetting go hand in hand. Thus the food rituals reinforce the genealogies in the Priestly source of the Hebrew Scriptures, which list male offspring as if they were spontaneously generated from their fathers (Genesis 25:19). It might even be possible to argue that female exclusion from making sacrifices is in part demanded by the wish to negate their generative power.

Not only do men produce the sacred food, but also it is possible to make food out of men's bodies. Male flesh and blood can become sacred via sacrifice, and can then function as sacred food. Food made from the male body is positively associated with other dimensions of the religious system, such as the divine teachings. The literal eating of the bodily food seems to anchor the metaphorical taking-in of the divine teaching. Male supernatural figures can offer followers either teachings or their bodies, both of which in some fundamental way protect or save the followers.

Can we see this as a denial of the ambivalence felt towards the mother's breast? The male leader produces and distributes perfect food, endless in supply and always there for the taking. Eating the food carries no threat if the person who takes it in is good. In some instances, eating the food absolves the person from guilty feelings, again the opposite of the experience of the breast, which elicits guilt.

One obvious example of this is the institution of the Eucharist as Jesus' body and blood.⁹ In First Corinthians 11 Paul distinguished between a normal meal and the special meal set in motion by Jesus. The meal is done to remember the actions of Jesus before he died, when he recited "This is my body which is for you; do this as a memorial for me. (1 Cor. 11:24)." Beyond being a memorial of the events from Jesus' life, the food has tremendous power. If eaten in the proper context with the proper attitude, it protects the person who eats it. Eating this food makes a person part of the body of Christ, destined for rebirth into an eternal afterlife. Those who do not eat it are literally condemned by death since they will not achieve immortal life.

Some surprising examples of male body-food appear in stories where the Buddha offers his body to his followers to eat. These Buddhist texts shift back and forth between presentations of the Buddha's teachings (dharma) and much more dramatic stories where the Buddha literally turns himself into food for his followers to save them from starving. These stories, described and analyzed by Reiko Ohnuma in his article "The Gift of the Body and the Gift of Dharma," (1998) seem to embarrass scholars of Buddhism who do not expect such bloody stories in Buddhist circles. The Buddha suffers, sometimes quite dramatically, as he willingly offers others his flesh. The theme appears in the Jataka tales, which recount stories of the Buddha's previous lives where he often appears in the form of an animal.¹⁰ In one of these stories an ascetic is forced by starvation to consider

⁹ These few comments on the incredibly complex meanings of the Eucharist are meant to be suggestive. See also Jay's discussion of these issues in the modern context (1992, pp. 112-127).

¹⁰ The Jataka tales are non-canonical Buddhist folk-literature dating to approximately the third century.

retuning to a village where he might fall into temptation. The Buddha, who appears in the story as a hare, willingly throws himself into the fire in order to supply the ascetic with food.¹¹

In another story from the Sutra of the Wise and Foolish, a human prince comes upon a starving tigress who is about to eat her cubs (pp. 329-330). The prince kills himself next to them, so that they may drink his blood. Thus he saves both the cubs from their ravenous mother and the mother herself. The prince turns out to be none other than the Buddha.

It is hard to imagine a story that more fully displaces the mother. It is a reverse nursing story, where instead of mother's milk, male blood is the fluid that saves the cubs from none other than the devouring mother herself. Dharma, the Buddha's teaching, then is interpreted based on these stories as a metaphorical image of the body. It too can be "incorporated" so as to save the followers from suffering and death. Ohnuma concludes "The bodhisattva's body is not only a symbol for the Buddha's dharma; it is also that entity that seems to have become the Buddha's dharma" (1998, p. 358-9).

An even more explicit replacing of mother's milk by Buddha milk is found in "Gotami's Story", part of the Apadana collection of moral biographies written in the last two centuries B.C.E. This text is the autobiography of Gotami, Buddha's aunt, who stepped in as wet-nurse for the Buddha when her sister died while the Buddha was still an infant. Just before her death Gotami recounts how she reared the Buddha and contrasts her milk with the milk the Buddha gave her in return. "I suckled you with mother's milk which quenched thirst for a moment. From you I drank the dharma-milk, perpetually tranquil." (Lopez, 1995, p. 121).

No doubt further study will offer us numerous other examples of male blood functioning as a substitute for female milk, and numerous variants on this theme. For example, in his article on the origin of circumcision, James George Frazer (1904) recounts a number of rituals which employ male blood for what he calls its "fertilizing virtue" yet makes no comment on gender issues (p. 210). Among the Australian Aborigines, men slit their arm veins and let some of their blood fall on the ground as a way of increasing the fertility of the emus (pp. 205-206). Here the male fluid functions as a sort of combined mother's milk and perhaps the uterine blood as well.

These stories seem like male fantasies of nursing stories, where the heroic nature of the act is held up in high regard even as it is presented as gruesome and in some basic sense disgusting. The nursing father outdoes the nursing mother, since he is ready to die for the sake of nourishing all the children and their mother. And the nursing father will not really die, since he can supply an endless supply of food without being in any way diminished or depleted.

While not positing food made of male bodies, rabbinic texts equate manna and mother's milk and thus present both the deity and Moses as nursing figures. These nursing figures far outweigh all human mothers. Babylonian Talmud tractate *Yoma* 75a plays on the word "cake" used to describe manna in Numbers 11:8, changing the vowels to read instead "breast." Both the manna cakes and breast milk have a variety of tastes.

¹¹ Avadanasataka 37 cited by (Ohnuma, 1998, p. 328). In this story the ascetic pulls the hare out of the fire, but, as Ohnuma notes, the story demonstrates the Buddha's willingness to sacrifice himself.

The *Sifre* commentary on Numbers 89 compares the centrality of manna, which is so significant for those who eat it, with the breast, which “is everything” to the nursing infant. Yet another interpretation recounts that in the time of the persecution of the Israelites by the Egyptian, God provided the Israelites with two balls (breast-shaped rocks), one made of oil and one made of honey, citing “And he made him to suck honey out of the crag and oil out of the flinty rock “ (Deuteronomy 32:13). God thus nurses the children of Israel with honey and oil instead of milk (Midrash *Exodus Rabba* 1.12 and Talmud tractate *Sota* 11b). In the rabbinic text *Pesikta d’Rab Kahane* 12, manna and nursing milk are both equated with the divine word, which is also customized to each individual person’s needs, “the Divine Word spoke to each and every person according to his particular capacity.”

The sacred food from the deity and Moses is copied in the rituals where rabbis are equated with nursing mothers when young boys begin their study of the Torah. The boys sit on the laps of the rabbis and are fed “Torah” cakes (Marcus, 1996, p. 77).

Initiation Rituals and Envy of Females

Initiation, J. Z. Smith points out, may be the equivalent in hunter/gatherer cultures of sacrifice in agrarian ones (Smith, 2004). His observation seems especially salient in regards to the topic of this paper since initiation rituals also appear to be based on envy of women. The female envy encoded in these rituals has been more widely noted in analytic literature, perhaps because it is mentioned so often in the anthropological data.¹²

Initiations are interpreted as a sub-category of fertility rites, since they assert that men too can bear children (Bettelheim, 1954, p. 45).

This was not Freud’s view, nor that of many of his followers. Freud’s particular stance on circumcision was that it was connected to castration anxiety and the Oedipal complex. He wrote, “Circumcision is the symbolic substitute for castration, a punishment which the primeval father dealt his sons long ago out of the fullness of his power” (Freud, 1933, p. 122). Freud did not consider other theories and most of his followers have stuck fairly closely to Freud’s lines of interpretation. Hermann Nunberg (1947), for example, offers clinical evidence about circumcision fantasies which point to issues of bi-sexuality but repeats the strict Freudian interpretation. Freud’s explanation is dependent on the universality of the Oedipus complex, a point which is highly controversial. The question is whether these rituals can also have another function, especially in societies where the jealous father is not a central figure in the cultural stories. These rituals are often undertaken by the man by choice and sometimes even repeated by choice. The rituals are seen as enhancing the men’s status as more virile. Decades ago Bruno Bettelheim brought to the attention of the analytic community Margaret Mead’s analysis of initiation rites as male attempts to take over female functions.¹³ He argued at length in *Symbolic Wounds* (1954) that males are ambivalent towards their mothers, and envy the female sexual

¹² See (Lidz and Lidz, 1977) and (Jaffe, 1968).

¹³ In addition to Mead’s book *Male and Female*, Bettelheim cites the work of Ashley Montagu, Gregory Bateson, and R. M. and C. H. Berndt.

organs and their functions (p. 15). Since women also participate in initiation rituals, they may be able to temporarily make themselves into men via these rites.

The initiation rituals to which Mead, Bettelheim and others draw our attention involve numerous ingenious means of genital mutilation by men. In some of these rites men make their genitals bleed in order to make themselves temporarily into menstruating women. In his 1970 study of New Guinea, Hogbin (1970) describes a complex set of rituals by which men “menstruate” and are thus able to cleanse themselves of contamination. This set of rituals is so important in Hogbin’s analysis of the culture that it appears in the title of his book *The Island of Menstruating Men*. Menstruating men, like menstruating women, are considered “rekaraka,” and must go into retirement, observe food taboos, etc. Variations in the treatment of the two genders are due to, as Hogbin explains, the fact that “men are socially more important” (p. 89). Also, the men do not menstruate every month; they may delay doing so until they suffer an illness where they may be suffering from some type of female pollution and in need of decontamination. Men are thus able to be female to the extent that it is useful to them, but to avoid the consequences of being too female, or female all the time.

Ruth and Theodore Lidz describe still more rituals in New Guinea in which men “menstruate” as a means of endowing themselves with female creativity, which they believe women possess naturally but which men must acquire via rituals (Lidz, et al., 1977). After they menstruate as part of initiation ceremonies, they then learn to play the sacred flutes.

A striking number of other initiation rituals in other religious traditions also involve drawing blood from male genitals. According to standard rabbinic practice, if a boy is born circumcised, or if a man who is circumcised converts to Judaism, then in order to convert to Judaism some blood must be drawn from his penis (Hoffman, 1996, p. 96). This blood is not defiling, in stark contrast to menstrual blood. It is no surprise that circumcision is emphasized in the Priestly source of the Hebrew Scriptures, which denies to women as much as possible any role in genealogies.

Initiation also articulates with other, more explicit attempts by males to take on birthing roles, among the more famous of these is the “couvade,” or practice by men of simulated pregnancy. In all of these instances one of the beauties of the rituals is that it is not a permanent change; men can experiment with being female temporarily. They can symbolically undergo childbirth, lactation and all the other roles, which are not open to them in normal life.

Endowing religious specialists with secrets is often presented as stealing the secret of fertility from women. Among the Yoruba, in the Itefa initiation ceremonies, male diviners take over the birthing role by “re-birthing” men into a new identity. The founding myth for the ritual claims that it was originally the wife of the deity of divination who told it to her husband. He then proceeded to produce sixteen “children”, that is, the sixteen major divination signs. As a reminder of this origin a woman carries a closed gourd during the ritual (Drewal, 1992, p. 73).

While women are completely excluded from sacrifice, they are able to participate in some circumstances in initiations. These rituals often exhibit aspects of penis envy, that is, during the rites women act like men and show off culturally-male attributes such as

courage and endurance. An intriguing question is why females are permitted to experiment with being males temporarily while no equivalent experimentation is found in sacrificial cultures.

Conclusions

The fact that it is the mother who by nature bears children and offers food presents a problem: how is it possible that women have such an inherent advantage? It would appear to point to some kind of natural superiority of women. It is this dilemma that some rituals work hard to overcome by reversing, canceling, or denigrating the female advantage. Exactly how this is done varies from religion to religion and from culture to culture. If we want to follow Andresen's advice and look for more sacrificial material in clinical work we must consider that fantasies about sacrifice and initiation may relate to issues of bi-sexuality. People continue to have bi-sexual identifications throughout their lives. Religious rituals and myths can permit these identifications to be temporarily tried out in new ways, or strongly reinforce standard societal norms.

We must also greatly expand on our notions of sacrificial fantasies. Bataille (1986) argued that sacrifice is the moment when the continuity of life and death is acted out, but our analysis points in a different direction. Sacrifice is the structural opposite of birth, the undoing of the natural birth experience via culturally-enacted death. Ironically, the act of killing by choice, the "selective kill" described in J. Z. Smith's theory of sacrifice, seems to give the power of death and life to men. The sleight of hand, as it were, of sacrifice, giving birth by killing, redirects natural productivity to men. It may not be surprising that myths and rituals, which are the creations of men, center on creative male deities from whom female principles are born. But Klein would have us take this issue very seriously, since the relationship with the breast is the basis of object relations, building the core of the ego.¹⁴ Envy of the breast is part of the psychic development of every individual. She writes (1975):

The whole is instinctual desire and his [the child's] unconscious phantasies imbue the breast with qualities going far beyond the actual nourishment it affords [p. 180]. [In particular,] the fundamental envy of the women's breast lies at the root even of penis envy [p. 199].¹⁵

The social implications of these unconscious structures of myth and ritual are enormous; envy of women is a basic problem which societies must struggle with. Sacrifice and initiation rites are both central opportunities to overcome male disadvantages temporarily, but the issue is in no way resolved.

¹⁴ See also Robert Paul's comments on the persecuting father of the Biblical texts as "a derivative of the more primary persecuting breast of the Kleinian 'paranoid position'"...which he argues explain the "more uncanny and horrifying features of the male god" (Paul, 1996, p. 103).

¹⁵ Similar to Karen Horney's statements (1967) that fear of the vulva is earlier than fear of the father's penis, and the dread of the penis is put forward to "hide the intense dread of the vulva" (pp. 458-459).

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