

Jordan Osserman, *Circumcision on the Couch: The Cultural, Psychological, and Gendered Dimensions of the World's Oldest Surgery* (New York & London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022; 264 pp.); reviewed by James Lawrence Slattery
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In season two, episode nine of *Sex and the City*, ‘New Dogs, Old Dicks’ (1999), the four central characters, Carrie (Sarah-Jessica Parker), Miranda (Cynthia Nixon), Charlotte (Kristin David) and Samantha (Kim Cattrall), meet in their characteristic formation around the table of a café. In this episode, Charlotte is dating a restaurant critic, but runs into a problem when she discovers something shocking: he is not circumcised. In the typical parlance of the show, a conversation ensues whereby each woman’s reaction tells us something about her: Charlotte is verging on horrified as if his penis offends her prim waspish New England sensibilities. Miranda is suspicious and declares she likes things to be ‘out in the open’. Carrie makes a balanced comment, citing that 85 per cent of men *are not* circumcised (a shock to the table). As the sexually adventurous and relatively unjudgemental relief, Samantha embraces uncircumcised men, boasting that they are ‘the best’ and that she has slept with five. In this scene, men can be placed into one of two categories, circumcised and uncircumcised – sets that form a simple equation for which all can be designated.

Perhaps I thought about this scene when I began reading Jordan Osserman’s *Circumcision on the Couch: The Cultural, Psychological, and Gendered Dimensions of the World's Oldest Surgery* because, not having a penis myself, my relationship to circumcision is closer to the *Sex and the City* scenario than the author’s. In other words, I can discuss but cannot embody either side of the dividing line of the practice Osserman systematically investigates through the realms of religious tradition, medical practice and, more recently, a point of gathering for men’s rights activism, as well as his own somatic and cultural experience. As such, in reviewing this book, it seems pertinent to point out that I have no ‘skin in the game’, though this is obviously not a requirement for engaging with the detailed and dedicated study that Osserman approaches through his Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic prism. Nonetheless, being without a penis, I am continually made aware that *Circumcision on the Couch* struggles with centring and negating the appendage. Importantly, this is also a difficulty psychoanalysis has had throughout its history, and feminist interventions into psychoanalysis have consistently highlighted and challenged this ongoing negotiation. Indeed, this tension is never lost as the book returns the male genital organ to

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psychoanalytic discussions of the phallus. While Sigmund Freud was more concerned with the penis as a site of meaning (for instance, ‘penis-envy’) (see Freud, 1977), Jacques Lacan socialized this idea with the more abstract notion of the ‘phallus’: a ‘privileged signifier’ and decidedly *not* a specific body part (see Lacan, 1989). Remaining cognizant of this distinction, Osserman reintroduces the penis as both physical appendage and symbolic point of concentration; a master-signifier that organizes meaning in his text.

Circumcision – the often-ritualized removing of the foreskin from the penis – has, Osserman tells us, ‘arisen in different places across the world, and in societies that, in some cases, did not have contact with each other’ (p. 19). Throughout the book, the penis is the central object of study, yet the more one approaches it, the more it recedes from view. It moves through a series of substitutions, symbolic chains and imaginary place-holders, acting as a kind of Rorschach test that transforms depending on which person or field takes it up as a point of investigation. The book’s cover itself attests to this process as, under the title, a grainy black and white close-up photograph depicts Freud’s hand holding a cigar, ash peeling back the tip of the leaf, the trace of the now-smoked tobacco designated by that which is left only as a trace.

Following the introduction, the opening chapter, ‘Freud’s Foreskin: Psychoanalytic Interpretations of Circumcision’, sets out the theoretical terms of the study by providing a dense yet lucid outline of Freud and Lacan’s ideas. Of particular and repeated note is the notoriously challenging ‘sexual difference’ discussed in Lacan’s *Seminar XX* (Lacan, 1999). Initially, it seems counterintuitive to focus on the penis to investigate sexual difference. Despite the colloquial connotations of Lacan’s categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’, there is notably no correspondence to biology for these positions. However, Osserman addresses this difficulty of reinserting the penis into Lacanian ‘sexuation’ by referring to the phallus. By engaging these terms, Osserman suggests how the penis often takes the place of meaning and yet is unable to confer symbolic power. It is this tension that a focus on circumcision is partially able to address in *Circumcision on the Couch*, as its ritualized cut appears to both take away from and supplement the penis. Also in this chapter, Osserman sensitively considers ‘female genital mutilation’ or ‘female circumcision’ and briefly weighs the overlaps and divergences of female and male genital cutting and the social positions of the bodies they target.

Chapter 2, “‘Real Circumcision Is a Matter of the Heart’: Badiou’s Paul and Boyarin’s Jewish Question’, turns to two divergent philosophical interpretations of religious scholarship: Alain Badiou and Daniel Boyarin’s readings of Saint Paul’s biblical entries on circumcision. Using these texts, circumcision structures two distinctive modes of universalism. On the one hand, universalism is established through lack (Badiou’s Pauline interpretation). On the other, universalism is established through particularity (as posited by Boyarin’s reading). To analyse these versions of universality that hinge on the circumcision ritual, Osserman returns to Lacan’s ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ designations, with the ‘masculine’

signalling the realm of particularity and the ‘feminine’ aligning with a universality understood by what is not ‘there’ or able to be secured.

Chapter 3, ‘The Circumcision Cure: Circumcision’s Nineteenth-Century Medicalization’, takes a historical look at circumcision in Western medicine and how it became established as a cure for a range of ailments associated with ‘abnormal’ sexual behaviours in children. Osserman traces the clinical justifications for the practice by examining the work of two surgeons, Nathaniel Heckford and Lewis Sayer, who curiously arrived at similar proscriptions of circumcision between 1865 and 1870 independently of one another. The book then transitions into an account of ‘reflex theory’: a diagnostic system based on somatic – often genital – ‘issues’ that were thought to produce emotional and psychic disturbances. In this chapter, infantile sexuality is a point of particular interest, as the removal of the supposedly ‘irritating’ foreskin becomes that which re-establishes ‘proper’ sexual maturation according to the adult fantasy of childhood innocence. By first outlining the ways reflex theory concentrated on women’s ovaries, Osserman tracks how the foreskin became invested with meaning, and how its removal was believed to transform the penis into an appendage that corresponded to the then-contemporary orders of normality.

Chapter 4, ‘The Talking Cure: Psychoanalysis’s Answer to Medical Circumcision’, leads on from the previous chapter by introducing two of reflex theory’s formative proponents: physicians Thomas Laycock and Moritz Romberg. Following a summary of their hypotheses of reflex theory, Osserman presents a thorough study of how ailments were thought to relate to the body. This chapter becomes a skilled account that tracks how the study of hysterical patients was key in the early years of psychoanalysis, with reference to Jean-Martin Charcot and his well-known influence on Freud. The chapter then moves through a thorough and articulate explanation of seduction theory advanced in the psychoanalytic field, most notably by Jean Laplanche. As an overview of psychoanalysis’s development, this chapter presents a detailed historical timeline that maps how the body and sexuality interact and are differentiated during the advancement of Freud’s ‘talking cure’. It then turns to the antisemitic and misogynistic writing of Otto Weininger. The second half of this chapter becomes a masterclass in the historical and theoretical developments of Freudian psychoanalysis and its core concerns. Here, Osserman elucidates the ways in which sexuality calcifies into a kernel of difficulty that comes to define us as subjects. Importantly, this kernel cannot be parcelled off onto the fantasy of the angelic or degraded woman or of the cultural, ethnic or racial ‘other’ who is perceived as castrated in order to sustain a fiction of one’s own mastery, a mastery always bound to fail.

Osserman’s final chapter, ‘The First Cut Is the Deepest: Contemporary Struggles over the Penile Cut’, brings us into the present moment by introducing ‘intactivist’ groups (a portmanteau of ‘intact’ and ‘activist’) in greater detail. Primarily comprised of circumcised men who regard the procedure as a form of involuntary ‘male genital mutilation’ that has profoundly hindered their lives, ‘intactivism’ is now associated with men’s rights activism and, to some extent, the

‘alt-right’. The closing chapter demonstrates how this fraught practice distils the pursuit of subjective wholeness, which psychoanalysis teaches us is an impossible task for the subject of language. As is evidenced by Osserman’s citations from online forums such as Reddit, the foreskin’s removal has become imbued as a pronounced site of absence. There is a belief that – were it left intact – the now-missing piece of skin would have bestowed upon men their phallic power, their great sex, their mastery. Following this, Osserman details the metzizah b’ah circumcision ritual, practised by the ultra orthodox Haredi Jewish community, and the political storms that have swirled around it. The author also looks at the uneven political responses to Jewish and Muslim rituals of circumcision by studying recent debates in Germany and the USA.

Circumcision on the Couch is a compelling investigation into circumcision that details the practice by skilfully leading readers through intersecting historical, cultural and theoretical pathways. At the same time, the book also presents a more general study into how the penis operates as a site of meaning for psychoanalytic discussion. This second way to read *Circumcision on the Couch* is less direct but no less intriguing. As indicated in the opening of this review, the unavoidable concentration on the penis that a study of circumcision requires leaves open the question: what does it mean to return the penis as the object of investigation in psychoanalytic study? This inquiry seems particularly challenging when the object is one that remains highly invested in within society and yet is rendered vague and elusive by Osserman’s examination, becoming mirage-like to the extent that it cannot ever be pulled into sharp focus.

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