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In 1974, at the height of the women's movement, Juliet Mitchell shocked her fellow feminists by challenging the entrenched belief that Freud was the enemy. She argued that a rejection of psychoanalysis as bourgeois and patriarchal was fatal for feminism. However it may have been used, she pointed out, psychoanalysis is not a recommendation *for* a patriarchal society, but rather an analysis *of* one. "If we are interested in understanding and challenging the oppression of women," she says, "we cannot afford to neglect psychoanalysis." In an introduction written specially for this reissue, Mitchell reflects on the changing relationship between these two major influences on twentieth-century thought. Original and provocative, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* remains an essential component of the feminist canon.

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## Ulrich Baer says

There are biological, chemical, anatomical, and of course social differences between the sexes. In her brilliant and seminal landmark study, Psychoanalysis and Feminism, Juliet Mitchell asks how it is that beyond all of these factors that structure sexual difference, this difference almost always gives way to inequality and the oppression of women. This question becomes more urgent for us, in our modern times, when the factors that would tie women to the time-consuming roles of child-rearing and family cohesion are no longer as strong. We have the means to create equality (and the laws to guarantee it), and yet sexual difference seems to settle in people's minds always as a hierarchy of the weaker and the more dominant sex. Mitchell's question is why we seem to be fully capable of living with and making sense of difference – sexual difference being the first encounter with difference that all human beings will be part of – but fail to understand this difference in a way that does not place the gender into a hierarchical structure, with one being not simply other but also better or more powerful than the other. Why is it that gender is experienced as a difference that makes one of the two genders superior to another? There seems to be a kind of conservatism inherent in the very construction of sexual difference, which Mitchell called a kind of underwater tow that makes progress regress on matters of gender equality despite massive social economic and legal changes.

Mitchell published Psychoanalysis and Feminism in 1974, at a time when feminists largely discredited Sigmund Freud's theories as being part and parcel of the patriarchy. Mitchell argued that psychoanalysis can provide critical insights into the way in which we think about and experience, often unconsciously, sexual difference as a type of difference that organizes people into two genders which do not have equal standing. Especially in today's world, when there so much progress made in terms of equality of rights, why is it that the family remains to be thought of as the still center of a moving world? (The continuing debates about single-parent homes, career women's responsibility toward their children, and same-sex parents are symptoms of this tendency to think of the family as a nuclear unit). Why is it that women tend to have to fight for their equality with every generation? Why does progress in gender relations not get established once and for all? How is this idea that the difference between the sexes is really a difference in their claim for social equality transmitted? Mitchell focuses on the generational transmission of a certain kind of thought about concepts like masculinity and femininity. It is unlikely that human infants are born with the conception of what it is to be a female or male. But how does the process by which children pick up the unconscious signals of what sexual difference is? Why do young boys and girls start having very specific ideas about gender, even when their home or school environment promote a message of gender equality? Freud surmised that "unless psychical processes were continued from one generation to another, if each generation were obliged to acquire its attitude to life anew, there would be no progress in this field and no development." Mitchell's book focuses on this idea of how the culture transmits its values as if unconsciously to the next generation. People pick up a lot more than what they are taught to when they grow up, and not all of this can simply be explained as the workings of ideology (which a Marxist analysis would do). The importance of psychoanalysis is that human beings can feel and know certain things without these feelings being rooted in reality. Freud was able to show that people can have guilt feelings without having committed a crime. His work allows us to think about how people acquire knowledge of the difference between the sexes even if within their actual experience (if they were raised by ardent feminists, for instance) nothing points to the fact that women should occupy an inferior social position.

Mitchell argues that Freud allows us to see why gender conservatism persists in the face of change, and why it is just so difficult to achieve equality for the sexes. There seems to be something at the root of our conceptions of gender that is far more insidious, or unconscious, than explicit social messages (what we

would consider education or ideology).

In Psychoanalysis and Feminism, Mitchell ultimately turns to the anthropological study of kinship patterns to understand how gender difference turns up as a hierarchical relationship in almost all societies. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, in Mitchell's account, is tremendously important for showing how the unconscious is structured like a language, but Lacan did not allow for the possibility of historical change in the construction of sexual difference. For Lacan, the child's understanding of sexual difference takes place in a location removed from historical conditions and context. One must turn to later thinkers like Joan Copjec for an analysis of how even in that pre-linguistic developmental space, there might be a possibility for change. For an understanding of how young boys and girls differentiate themselves from their parents, but in this process of differentiation end up reproducing (in ways that both Freud and Lacan found inevitable, but that feminists want to change and disrupt) the hierarchical gender roles that they have a chance to overcome, one must turn to Jessica Benjamin's work.

Mitchell's explanation of Freud is useful in the following way. Freud gave us the tools to understand how young boys and girls develop and accept the gender roles of society. Let's assume his analysis is correct. Then Freud would give us the tools (the concept of the unconscious, drives, etc.) to change the way this conception of sexual difference happens. Or, if Freud's analysis is incorrect (due to his own sexism or the limitations of his historical situation), then we could at least find out the process which really happens, and why it still results in the perpetuation of the patriarchy. In both cases, whether Freud is right or wrong, psychoanalysis opens up a way to think of human development as creating a possibility for gender difference to not be one of hierarchies, but simply a distinction.

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### **Katie Glanz says**

This is a very well written and clear account of psychoanalysis and feminism. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in either theoretical approach. However, I found the chapters on Reich fairly ungenerous, although that might be warranted. I also wasn't quite clear on how the end of the book, which outlined a path for feminism in the future, fit in with the book as a whole.

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### **Tom Schulte says**

This book analyzes the views of Freud, Reich, and Laing - both comparitivel, in light of their critics and with the author's own assessment and historical overview. Actually, very little of the content is explicitly feminist, or feminist motivated. The result is an enlightening overview of the founders and radicals of psychoanalysis.

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My favorite quote: "The unconscious is the way man lives his humanity in harmony and conflict with his particular and historically determined environment."

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### **Oraib Toukhly says**

Not an easy read, nevertheless, Mitchell did a great job on the sexuality chapter and her explanation of the castration complex, Oedipus complex, and how it's linked behind all neuroses. Highly recommended book.

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### **Pinot noir says**

I apologize if this review isn't an eloquent and witty essay. I went from liking this book to feeling eh about it at the end. I liked part one immensely, it went downhill after page 120. As expected from a psychoanalyst, Mitchell has an excellent grasp on Freud. She neatly weaves his various theories/essays into an easily decipherable summary (part one felt like a giant summary). This is excellent for readers who aren't familiar with Freud's work and/or misunderstand it. Ex. The popular misconception that Freud theorized the Electra complex, when in fact, it was Jung. I agree with Mitchell's initial thesis that psychoanalysis is necessary for feminism and not an "enemy." That's about it. At least to me, she doesn't really provide a thorough analysis, back up her claims nor make a compelling argument. It's more like she lists people, says they're wrong and/or confused, puts a quote by them and says they're wrong AGAIN. Spending 85 pages saying Reich is wrong wrong wrong and wrong isn't really necessary, it can be slimmed down. At times, it felt like she was making ad hominem arguments. The random dry jokes she makes in the middle of an argument doesn't help either.

I'm aware that this was published in 1974, so I'm not surprised that the content is a bit outdated. However, the grandiose title and what's printed on the back is a bit annoying. I personally wouldn't consider this "a radical reassessment," "provocative," nor "an essential component of the feminist canon" in contemporary Western society because it needs major updates and more nuanced arguments. Also, I get that touching on various disciplines is the "cool" thing to do in academia, but it would've been better if Mitchell left Anthropology alone because it seems like she doesn't know much about it. Anthropologists would cringe at her generalizations, universals, "matriarchy," and etc. In the end, Mitchell makes a grandiose claim, "It is a question of overthrowing patriarchy." This impossibility makes it kinda difficult to accept and ultimately hurts her argument(s).

Overall, I would recommend the first 120 pages of this book. The rest, ehhh.

(I'm sorry if this sounds harsh, please take it as constructive criticism. Luv ya Julie)

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### **Robert Wood says**

So far, the book has offered a pretty good critical reading of Freud's work on the unconscious and sexuality, in line with the work of Jacqueline Rose. In addition, the lengthy critique of Reich and Laing, while a bit dated, are interesting explorations into a couple significant thinkers for the new left and their limitations in comparison to Freud. The material on feminist thinkers could have been expanded, but the critiques are useful. The book ends on an oddly structuralist note, trying to combine the work of Freud, Lacan, Engels, and Levi-Strauss, and invites the sort of critiques that generally have plagued Levi-Strauss' work. Still, an overall interesting read.

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