

On Resisting Women



Michaela Chamberlain



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*For Augusta, Beattie, and Beckett who call me into a better world,
and for Dan who makes a better world possible*

‘You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her.
And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing.’

Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975)
(trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen) in *Signs: Journal of
Women in Culture and Society*, 1(4): 875–893

‘Today I’m having an attack of the male gaze.’
Teresa Cinque, ‘Quello “sguardo machine” dentro di noi.’
Corriere della Sera, 14 July 2020

‘Resistance, as resistance and not incapacity, is always a
missed opportunity.’

Adam Phillips, On resistance (2025),
London Review of Books, 47(14/15)

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About the author

Michaela Chamberlain trained at The Bowlby Centre and studied in the Psychoanalysis Unit at UCL. Shortly after qualifying at The Bowlby Centre in 2016, she started teaching Freud and attachment theory and became chair of The Bowlby Centre. She worked as an honorary psychotherapist in two NHS trusts for several years. She has presented clinical papers at public forums, lectures internationally, and has been published in various journals. Her debut book, *Misogyny in Psychoanalysis*, released in June 2022, explores the historical and current context of misogyny in psychoanalytic theory and clinical practice.

She is in private practice in London as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist and is a supervisor and training therapist.

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This book is for Augusta, Beattie, and Beckett, the most insightful, quick-witted and kind people I know, who challenge and change my thinking on a daily basis. And for Dan, my first and most important reader.

Preface

As a psychotherapist I live in an alternative reality. Each day I sit with people listening intently to what they are telling me, while I allow my attention to wander and then making sense of what is drifting into my consciousness, to question if it is telling me anything about what is going on with the person talking to me. My job is deeply personal in all senses. How people feel, what is impacting on their lives right now, what has happened to them in the past, what they think about all of it, what they tell me about all of it, and importantly what they don't tell me about all of it. I want to know all about it and understand how the world they live in impacts on them. But the world they tell me about is often very much at odds with the world I would think I am living in if I were to rely on psychoanalytic texts.

Psychoanalysis is often referred to as a religion. When I listen to podcasts or hear analysts speak, I am often reminded of my years at a religious school, where each soul is considered sacred and of worth: each analyst's unconscious is of importance and valued as being of interest. But with psychoanalysis the religious associations give way for something more Orwellian, with the idea of some people's unconscious being more important than others'. Psychoanalysis claims to be inclusive. I trained at various institutions, each focused on the individual; they talked about race, classism, disability, and discrimination on the grounds of sexuality. But they never talked about misogyny, almost as though it did not exist

So, I wrote a book about my experience of training as a psychotherapist and the glaring omissions about patriarchy and misogyny in the theoretical canon and active misogyny in the theory, practice, and institutions of psychoanalysis. When my book was published, I was pleased to be invited to speak with numerous groups and institutions. I presented to a group of renowned, 'establishment' psychoanalysts, where a male psychoanalyst told me that the misogyny I was talking about didn't exist, that *he* didn't recognise it. A couple of the women in the group echoed his reaction or quietly dismissed what I was saying. A couple were interested.

The response I have had from many more of the participants at other groups, emails sent to me, post-conference conversations, from people new to psychoanalysis to those in retirement, would strongly suggest otherwise. Misogyny in psychoanalysis is far from dead, it is alive and kicking, without being called to account.

The one constant among all the groups I have spoken to irrespective of where in the world they are, is the voicing of upset

during the question-and-answer session. There is always a moment when a woman will voice her anger and frustration of not being 'seen' in her training. When this is heard, a collective silencing is broken and more voices of discontent, resentment, and sometimes trauma can be listened to.

Psychoanalytic writing, trainings, conferences have long ignored misogyny. In *Misogyny in Psychoanalysis* I wrote that I wanted to 'invite' people into a conversation. I was too polite. I am curious why psychoanalysis is not ashamed of its history of misogyny and is doing little about it in the present. The conversation about misogyny in psychoanalysis has to happen, it is no longer an invitation or an option.

As therapists and analysts, we sit with people every day who have been and are traumatised by patriarchy and misogyny. For all genders there is trauma due to patriarchy but some profit more from it. And because of that 'profit', psychoanalytic institutions have failed to train therapists to sit with people and understand and make sense of that trauma, furthermore they have legitimised misogynistic writing and thinking.

In the current world we do not have to look far for evidence of misogyny: rape has been effectively decriminalised in the UK; gender apartheid in Afghanistan has been extended to the point that women are forbidden from speaking in public; the overturning of *Roe vs Wade* in the USA has signalled the end of women having autonomy over their bodies; in France Gisèle Pelicot was drugged and offered up online for men to come and rape her, resulting in the conviction of fifty men; in Germany in 2024 an international chat group has been discovered with over 70,000 members sharing information on how to rape and sexually assault women; around the world rape and sexual assault is widely used as a weapon of war; a UK-based

group, Everyone's Invited, has published a list of 1,664 primary schools in the UK that have sexual abuse claims against them, to tackle the extent of rape culture in schools (sadly I could list more evidence of misogyny).

But when I return to my alternative reality of reading psychoanalytic journals and books, listening to podcasts, and receiving flyers for CPD events, I am effectively told that world does not exist. Through the lack of address of misogyny on trainings, conferences, published papers, I am told that the woman sat in front of me, traumatised by being leered at on the train, being catcalled, being told that her skirt is too short for work, being ignored in meetings and talked over by men, or being choked during sex due to this being normalised in porn, really does not exist. And more importantly, if she does exist, she is interpreted as a modern-day Blanche DuBois, instantly pathologised and metaphorically dismissed to an asylum. The world beyond the woman's immediate family is rarely analysed and diagnosed: if it were, it might hint at where the real illness lies. (When I use the terms woman, female, man, male I am including all people who identify with those terms.)

Freud's main request of his patients was to speak freely, so I have accepted his invitation as I continue to put psychoanalysis on the couch. It might be easy to see my words as coming from a place of trauma, activism, revenge for injustices, and frustrations with psychoanalysis. It does not. This book is not a protest, it is a refusal. I refuse the misogynistic structures that have put in place a white, cisgendered, phallogocentric viewpoint. I care about psychoanalysis too much to let those structures exclude me from something that has been immensely important and enjoyable in my life.

Misogyny in psychoanalysis is very much alive, but what is also punching through is a desire for change. I am immensely grateful

for the invitations I have received to speak with different groups. I am often taken aback by how much my experience of misogyny in psychoanalysis resonates with the different psychoanalytic communities and how ready people are for psychoanalysis to be genuinely inclusive. Thanks to the openness and forward thinking of some institutions wanting to engage with misogyny, the change is beginning to happen. I wish to continue the conversations with people from around the world that I have learnt from and who are also calling for change in psychoanalysis, who want their experiences to be included and to not feel the unconscious and conscious pull of submitting to misogyny. To be clear, there are losses for all people under patriarchy, for some much more than others.

This book is about the various ways in which we resist women, how we ignore women on a daily basis, tone them down, censor them, and pathologise them. It is about what causes misogyny and the impact it has on people of all genders. This book is based in lived experience, using psychoanalysis as an example of how misogyny seeps into every aspect of daily life and how we need to resist misogyny rather than women.

'A lucid, intriguing, and far-reaching book on what psychoanalysis can do to and for women. The combination of scholarly research, wit, and clinical insight – written with a remarkable lightness of touch and strikingly imaginative sympathy – is a tonic in the often desultory and earnest world of psychoanalytic writing. This is a useful and inspiring work.'

Adam Phillips, psychoanalyst and writer

'This is an important and concise book about the unwelcome pervasive misogyny of our culture. Michaela Chamberlain illustrates, through personal experiences, the need for changing the intransigent patriarchal cultures we are complicit in. Despite established criticisms of patriarchy in psychoanalysis, Chamberlain laments their continuing lack of integration into training.'

Dr Jane M. Selby, Charles Sturt University, clinical psychologist

'In this lively and very readable book, Michaela Chamberlain lays bare not only the ubiquity of misogyny but its utter disavowal, even in places where otherwise disavowal is understood as a matter of pathology which requires investigation. She explores the consequences for men and women of this loss of the equal attention to the lived experiences of women and mothers. This book will be of general interest and to trainers of future clinicians.'

Dr Jan McGregor Hepburn, former registrar, British Psychoanalytic Council

'This is a sober examination of how misogyny informs the praxis of psychoanalysis, from Freud's treatment of Dora to contemporary institutional practices that silence women's voices. A *cri de cœur*, Michaela Chamberlain implores us to examine the inheritances of the "misogynistic introject" which continue to be pernicious and corrosive. I recommend this as essential reading for clinicians and institutes committed to addressing the ongoing enactments of misogyny in our field.'

Christopher Russell, faculty, Center for Modern Psychoanalytic Studies, New York

'Michaela Chamberlain's book is a profound testament to the paradox at the heart of psychoanalysis: that it is deeply haunted by misogyny, even as it offers some of our most incisive tools for unveiling and challenging it. But it requires a rare and radical form of courage to use psychoanalytic thinking to reveal the layers of misogyny not only in the world but also embedded within psychoanalysis itself. Chamberlain writes with precisely that courage.'

Helena Vissing, PsyD, Associate Professor, California Institute of Integral Studies

Michaela Chamberlain is former CEO of The Bowlby Centre. She works in private practice as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist and is a supervisor and training therapist.



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