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**DECAPITATUS:  
THE HORRIFYING EMASCULATIVE SYMBOLISM OF TERRORISTIC  
BEHEADINGS**

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**Abstract:** Perhaps nothing evokes more fear than decapitation. The authors examine the recent scourge of terroristic beheadings initiated by the radical group ISIS. Using Psychoanalytic theory the authors explore possible psychodynamic motivations undergirding decapitative activity as witnessed in the behavior of ‘Jihadi John’ and the terroristic subgroup to which he belongs. The authors argue for a fundamental emasculative fear rooted in unresolved Oedipal conflicts as being crucial in comprehending these recent and public – and horrifying – exhibitions of beheadings.

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Nothing evokes more fear and horror than the public beheading of persons, no matter their race, colour, creed, or religion; no other human action or activity can arouse such reprehensible and terrifying feelings like that of decapitation. Nothing is more ghastly and visually unacceptable than the separation of a person’s head from their body, from their very own self. And yet, at the same time, decapitation is filled with both gory fascination and profound symbolic meaning, no matter how terrific it may be. Like the devotees of the Hindu goddess, Kali—a powerful deity that relishes in ceremonially decapitating her sacrificial victims (Caldwell, 2013)—we view beheadings with arrested tongues, speechless at the brutality and the enormity of decapitation itself, asking ourselves in illimitable silence, “What is this? What does this mean? What can this be?”

As psychoanalytic thinkers and practitioners we are driven by an ineluctable need to find meaning in every aspect of human living; this is obviously true of clinical work and beyond,

where we attempt to heal persons from mean and intolerable conflicts, and assist them in functioning well, adapted to their own circumstances and their own minds. These characteristics represent a great need for us, and in fact a great gift as well, to flesh out the intricacies of the human mind, chasing after meaning in the dark by-paths, by-ways, and avenues of the psyche. When presented with the examination of normal daily activities like slips-of-the-tongue, dreams, artistic representations, and the internal pressures of lust and/or rage, we are easily directed to various meanings related to oedipal conflicts, human development, and human functioning in our hectic day-to-day. Yet, when we are presented with the infinitely horrifying symbolism of decapitation we are perhaps left in the lurch holding our own heads without solace, crestfallen and in utter confusion. For, to witness another's decapitation, is in some sense, to be decapitated as well.

Thus, it is incumbent upon us to perform psychoanalytic due diligence, and attempt conceptually to grasp the ugliness of such horrific scenes, even though its apprehension can only make us shudder. Perhaps by understanding the freakishness of purposeful beheading we can then render powerless this symbol of absolute psychological and social pathology, and therefore palliate our own sense of powerlessness and shock. Though we cannot prevent human cruelty with academic displays of symbolic denotation we can, perhaps, assist our intellects—and maybe even our patients too—in comprehending the full extent of psychological conflict, conflict that leads to appalling barbarity like beheading.

With the recent, tragic, and publicly exhibited beheadings of multitudes of civilians including James Foley and Steven Sotloff among others, at the hands of the terror-machine ISIS, this article seeks to make sense of this recent exhibitionistic display. Decapitation, of course, appears in clinical fantasy and in the hidden wishes of clients, and apparently points to unresolved oedipal conflicts (Schneider, 1976); but, in some crucial way, the real enactment of decapitation—especially at the hands of blood-thirsty terrorists—brings to the fore, in *bas relief* and incomparably, psychoanalytic theory and principles.

In this way we offer a simple psychoanalytic hermeneutic related to the symbolic functions of decapitation, as these conjoin and interconnect with ISIS's enactment of public and videoed decapitation scenes. We do not propose to interpret every aspect of the phenomenon of decapitation and its symbolism; rather, we focus on one manifestation of this gruesome misanthropic action in order to better comprehend the symbolic and psychological features of

beheading, whilst also satisfying the need to palliate our very own sense of horror. It may be, ironically, that decapitation is representative of basic – albeit profoundly grotesque – psychological and drive processes, processes that are sublimated in healthier persons. The danger of certain conflicts is important to discuss openly, lest our ability to contain powerful internal conflicts is outstripped by projective psychological factors that are hell-bent on complete, concrete expression of such conflicts. We postulate, perhaps naively, that to know about something is to assist in its control; that to better understand decapitation, then, is either to prevent it or cognitively and emotionally to process it.

Freud (1922) made the quintessential statement apropos of decapitation in his seminal essay “Medusa’s Head” when he tersely specified, “To decapitate = to castrate” (p. 273). The fact that Freud highlights the apotropaic aspects of decapitation in this essay, as well as the protective attributes, is vital for our comprehension of the act of beheading itself, especially as this relates to ISIS. Freud (1922) goes on to state:

What arouses horror in oneself will produce the same effect upon the enemy against whom one is seeking to defend oneself... To display the penis (or any of its surrogates) is to say: ‘I am not afraid of you. I defy you. I have a penis.’ Here, then, is another way of intimidating the Evil Spirit. (p. 273-274)

However, there is more to say than Freud’s perspective suggests here. Imbued in our minds are images of “Jihadi John” with his menacing hunting knife, his victims kneeling before him. The questions that such an image poses are as follows: Is Jihadi John displaying his own penis symbolized in his victims, which he then severs and decapitates? Or, is he beheading and emasculating – following Freud’s conceptions – the penis of the western evil empire? Or, is Jihadi John accomplishing both the severing of his own penis and that of his enemy at the same time, thereby temporarily eliminating, or resolving, certain troubling conflicts inherent within himself?

As analytical thinkers we are then prodded, by necessity, to ask who Jihadi John’s enemy is, in actuality—the West, his own sex drive, or his intense hatred for his father. Schneider (1976) opens the door in this respect when she asserts that decapitation is part-and-parcel and representative of unresolved oedipal conflicts:

In the normal course of a boy's development, the father—or some other authoritative male figure—is not removed but remains as a barrier. The boy may fear punishment from

his father for his oedipal desires—punishment which he perceives as the threat of castration. Although the boy desires the elimination of the father figure, he also loves and admires him, thus setting up a conflict situation. (p. 77)

Jihadi John's enemy, then, may be his very own father, the prime competitor for his mother's longed-for love. Jihadi John, in a bit of twisted irony, may be expressing a type of maladaptive, sublimated, and unconscious aggression toward his father, projected onto his perceived enemy, the West, which is then symbolized by his victims—the victims become the outward and concrete manifestation of his internal psychic struggle. For, Jihadi John is obviously driven by some internal psychological mechanism that, at one time, drove him out of his home, England, and into the grip of ISIS' political terror machine; some internal value, in other words, drove Jihadi John to fulfil this role as beheader of personages.

In a similar vein, Rank, Sachs, and Payne (1915) propose that decapitation is the figurative representation of the disempowerment of one's sexual competitor—a notion rooted for Rank in incestuous strivings. This idea further brings to mind the somewhat grotesquely sexual characteristic of decapitation—even if only in its bizarre relation to sexual dominance. There is an air of sexual excitement in fulfilling, after all, both conquest and the total disempowerment, by emasculation, of one's sexual rival. In this way, decapitation is a kind of radical and bloody rape, whereby the perpetrator gains destructive power over his victim in the complete elimination of the victim's body and psyche, and thus finds enjoyment in such unbounded conquest. Again, we may ask ourselves, is Jihadi John—and ISIS by association—using unconscious sexual overtones to assert their own power over their victims, and over the West? Are these radicals attempting to frighten us, or to entice us with their prowess, or both?

Curiously, humans exemplify, perhaps, the apex of decapitation behaviour. In our broad research of the ethological literature, the sole incidents of beheading behaviour, aside from those representative of humans, are witnessed in certain insect populations like various flies, bees, and ants (Henne, & Johnson, 2007; Yadava, & Smith, 1971)—fascinatingly, some of these incidents of decapitation and head amputation are rooted in socially driven, and quite raw, power dynamics within insect communities (see Wenseleers, Hart, Ratnieks, & Quezada-Euán, 2004). Apparently, our species is not the only one dramatically to remove heads from individuals. Yet it must be emphasized, decapitation as such is rare in the natural world.

Clinically speaking it is not completely unusual to encounter fantasies of beheading from patients, or to see them enacted in drawings and in play. These phenomena are usually witnessed alongside phallic images of swords, etc.—not uncommon at all when working with children. In one instant a patient may long to amputate tails—a clear variation of the beheading theme; and, in another instant, a patient may fantasize about the cutting off of the head of a teacher, and/or various other personages who are illustrative of power and oedipal competition. We, like Freud, Schneider, and Rank et al., conceive of these clinical manifestations as demonstrating oedipal strivings. Discussions centered on issues apropos of the fear of emasculation, and assisting the patient to develop ego strength, alongside guidance in striving for client-centred goals, can assist in relieving psychic tension brought about by emasculative fears and a sense of powerlessness.

Again, we propose that by some maladaptive projective mechanism, a baleful procedure whereby internal pressure and conflict is decreased – akin to Vaillant’s (1995) descriptions of pathological ego functioning in his pivotal volume *The Wisdom of the Ego* – the decapitation wrought by Jihadi John figuratively displays his own psychological struggles, and trouble with mastery over ambivalence and internal drives. In an important way, then, Jihadi John’s actions speak more about his oedipal strivings, fear of emasculation, and pathological virile compensation than they do about true political manoeuvring. These statements cannot be proved, of course, at least not by way of the scientific method; but, we can speculate that Jihadi John does in fact possess and exemplify psychological reasons for fleeing Britain, and subsequently taking on the role of dispenser of the gruesome and vulgar actions for which he is now well known. As dangerous as he is—and thus ISIS by connection—speaking practically, it is their unconscious forcefulness and sexual aggressiveness that make them horrifyingly repulsive to healthy persons. Here we see how destructive and maladaptive misdirected, and misused, male energy can be.

In a final twist of peculiar irony it is reported by a released French journalist—freed from ISIS’s insane grip prior to James Foley’s heart-rending execution—that Jihadi John is part-and-parcel of a British group embedded within ISIS known to the hostages as “the Beatles,” an obvious play on words and terms (Robinson & Allen, 2014). Further, it is noted that these several British terrorists are calling themselves, respectively: “John,” “Ringo,” “George,” and “Paul” (Levy, 2014). No one can know for sure the various reasons why these individuals are assuming this appellation, except that it must be based on a sadistic and prankish

*weltanschauung*. It is certainly clear, however, that one member of the true band *The Beatles*, Ringo Starr, states that the commandeering of *The Beatles'* individual names and group identity is “bullshit”, and that ISIS is antithetical to everything *The Beatles* stood/stand for (Watts, 2014). It is as if the ISIS brand of the Beatles is the figurative evil twin of the original.

These facts are vital to viewing the childlike and sadistic features of the ISIS group known as “the Beatles,” whose willing and barbaric front-man is Jihadi John. Instead of producing notes of harmony and peace and love, the ISIS group is sowing seeds of discord and war.

One thing is certain: as parents reprimanding boundary-less children, the world, with its various nation states, is now poised to teach this unreasonable group a veritable “lesson.” For, the powers that be – whether heads of families, or leaders of collectivities – cannot, at particular times, stand for unbridled oedipal conflicts and displacements. Who knows, perhaps even Jihadi John unconsciously wishes, in the end, to be controlled in an absolute sense – conceivably, this may explain the need for such a conservative, all-encompassing, and dissolutive religious commitment. Perhaps even he, with his intense internal conflicts and bizarre actions, scares himself.

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