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BOOK REVIEW:

PLAYING WITH DYNAMITE. A PERSONAL APPROACH TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF PERVERSIONS, VIOLENCE AND CRIMINALITY.

Estela V. Welldon, London, Karnac Books, 320pp, £25.99
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Understanding the forensic field demands a ‘grown up conversation with the general public about what it means to be human’ Estela Welldon contends, quoting Helena Kennedy QC (Welldon 2011: 143). The diverse collection of essays in ‘Playing with Dynamite’ invite the reader into a whole range of conversations – theoretical, clinical, technical, historical, political and personal. Charming interludes of lively discussion with her former student, the psychotherapist, scholar and editor Brett Kahr are interspersed with serious and tough-minded sections of the book. The rhythm of immersion in clinical details followed by discussion, which these interludes set up, reverberates throughout the book, modelled on Welldon’s own engaged but thoughtful clinical practice. As in many human conversations and many conversations about being human, the book has multiple rewards as well as frustrations, digressions and repetitions. And, as is also common in good conversation, there are a plethora of points which could do with amplification in future dialogue.

Estela Welldon is a psychoanalyst, group analyst and psychiatrist, particularly notable for her interest in female perversion and its transgenerational transmission via motherhood. As the book recounts, she founded the International Association for Forensic Psychotherapy (IAFP) and developed Forensic Psychotherapy training at the Portman clinic, leading to a ‘golden decade’ of students who, the dedication states, ‘*have become this country’s most accomplished clinicians, academicians, writers and researchers in this, the most difficult field of psychiatric endeavours*’.

The book gives insight into perversion and its underlying repetition compulsion. It focuses on perverse relationships, including those in the transference to the therapist, to the

group, the treatment team and the institution. The contentious thinking of 'Mother, Madonna, Whore' (Welldon, 1988) on the baby as the mother's fetish object is developed and placed within a context of familial and social abuse. It is also richly explored as a treatment issue. When a baby is a fetish object, it is treated as part of the woman's own body, not as a separate being. Women internalise patriarchal abuse and contempt in punitive acts towards their own bodies and this therefore includes actual and vicarious abuse towards their children. The chapters of the current collection present thinking about maternal Munchausen Syndrome by proxy, mothers as bystanders to incest and the plight of children caught up in domestic violence. In addition, the book describes how to set up and run a forensic psychotherapy training course and the impact of organisational dynamics and professional networks on the success of centres of psychodynamic thinking. Welldon suggests that 'the big problem with some small places is that they consider themselves to be big because they are small and unique' (Welldon, 2011: 256). For the practitioner there are chapters on group psychotherapy for forensic patients, where both those identified as victims and those as perpetrators are invited to attend. Considerable care has been taken to make the book accessible and useful for a wide range of professionals. The book uses tables, diagrams and clinical examples, which are shared in generous detail as well as rich engagement with the ideas of an international field and with Welldon's former students.

Feminism

As Welldon sets out in the opening chapters, perversion may fruitfully be understood as a defence against depression, annihilation and suicide rather than against psychosis. It is a manic defence she evocatively terms '*dancing with death*'. In formulating female perversion, Welldon espouses a feminism which has proved hard to place within more explicitly political discourses and therefore has received more tacit acceptance than engaged response. She posits that maternity is idealised as the essential expression of a woman's being within patriarchal society (in which we must situate our society, whatever our achievements in terms of markers such as women's suffrage and progress towards equal pay). But, she suggests, women know first in their own experience of being mothered and subsequently on producing a baby, that motherhood does not make up for all the privations and restrictions of 'woman's lot'. In fact, motherhood is often the guillotine which divides the sexes and places women in

direct emotional contact with transgenerational patterns of oppression in a way that many find unbearable.

In 1977 the French feminist philosopher, Luce Irigaray, had described how, in patriarchal society, woman's social identity is always reduced and circumscribed by her biological functioning. Even the idealisation of woman as 'Madonna' does not resolve the disempowerment and distorted relationships attendant on reproduction being her primary role: 'in our patriarchal culture, the daughter is absolutely unable to control her relation to her mother. Nor can the woman control her relation to maternity, *unless she reduces herself to that role alone*' (Irigaray 1977/1985: 143, my emphasis.). Where Welldon's argument is brilliant and profound is in highlighting the societal violence which creates and maintains disempowerment, using the concepts of American psychiatrist James Gilligan. Gilligan distinguishes between *behavioural* violence and the *structural* violence which is always its wider context. Violence is commonly considered to be behavioural, interpersonal and an expression of want or lack, (leading to crimes of greed or need). However, Gilligan suggests that behavioural violence is itself a response to the injustice, shame and humiliation of structural violence, that is, to being situated within an arbitrary hierarchy (Gilligan, 1996). Put simply, it is not the position of being a second-class citizen which irks, but the humiliation and strictures of being 'put in one's place'. Gilligan's analysis enables Welldon to suggest that mothering becomes perversion because motherhood fails to address the depressing annihilation of a woman's societal being in all domains other than that of childbearing.

Welldon sees marked differences between male and female perversion, in terms, for instance, of empathy and the object of violence. Her view that it is the enactment of socially structured gender positions which generates perversion allows her to avoid an accusation of biological essentialism. That is, she does not attribute psychological difference simply to physiological difference between the sexes. Within the unconscious, gender identification is fluid. There is always already perverse violence in the production of a binary gender system, as Hakeem's work at the Portman clinic details (Hakeem, 2010). Reproduction and child care particularly reify the binary, both as a division of labour and as attribution of instinct. Welldon's collection also has little time for liberal-feminist understandings of women's oppression as stemming from prejudice against instinctively nurturing, soft and 'feminine' qualities. In this latest collection Welldon remains keen and persuasive in putting female violence, sadism and aggression (and their effects) on the map. She argues that if there is

such a thing as the 'maternal instinct' we also need to conceive of the perversion of that instinct. Her insistence on the universality of aggression is consistent with her own self-understanding. When recently asked about being a woman working with dangerous men, she humorously recounted a fantasy of slaughtering a murderer patient because he resisted her interpretations (Sternberg & Scott, 2009: 145).

Welldon's emphasis on the violence and hostility in perversion is useful in extending the concept beyond the arena of sexual relationships/acts to a wide range of behaviours which include self-harm, harm to others and harm to 'transitional objects' (children). Additionally, her definition of perversion, which I will discuss later, enables her to situate her argument within a radical feminist tradition. This radical perspective focuses on the repeated process of creating differentials in power between potential equals, rather than the disrespect of difference which the liberal feminist position emphasises. Thus Welldon sees perverse acts directed against women, such as rape and domestic abuse, as expressions of male structural violence towards women in general. Returning to Gilligan's argument above, this violence provides the context which humiliatingly keeps all women in their place. When women internalise this humiliation they act out violence against their own bodies and those of their dependents.

'Playing with Dynamite's' iconoclastic writing demolishes the 'all-too-frequent equating of motherhood with good mental health' (2011: 164). Her discussion illuminated my experience of the systemic difficulties that child protection professionals have in communicating effectively with each other to assess and identify harm. Reports into child protection tragedies in which harm has been overlooked, spanning cases from Tyra Henry and Jasmine Beckford (1984) to Victoria Climbié (2000) and beyond, repeatedly highlight failure of communication - between social workers, doctors and police (Climbié Report, 2002; Select Committee on Health, 2003). This systemic splitting and in-cohesion between professionals reflects the conceptual impossibility of nuanced conversations about motherhood. In a societal context of strong binary certainties, where motherhood is either idealised or denigrated, it is very difficult for teams to open up dialogue with sufficient curiosity (and therefore from a position of uncertainty) in order establish what is really going on in a particular case. Both Climbié and Beckford died within settings whose ability to give maternal care was so idealised that no evidence to the contrary could be held in the minds of their professional teams. The extended families and god fearing communities in which they

lived, and died, epitomised goodness, in contrast to the denigrated image of the feckless and isolated single mother, which epitomised risk.

Women and Violence

The book proposes that a woman's identification with the societally annihilated woman – her own mother, (a 'dead mother' in André Green's sense), leads to attempts at 'melancholic reparation' (p.76) using both the body and its products (babies). Welldon's proposition is insightful into traumatised women's defences against what Bion terms 'learning from experience', both transgenerationally and within their own lives, which can be so frustrating and baffling to work with. What is often judged as deliberate self-destruction and female masochism – serial violent partners, repeated pregnancies, self-harm, misplaced trust – is actually what Welldon terms a '*survival minikit*'. These compulsive repetitions serve to '*avoid "the black hole", the dread of emptiness...which is linked to experiences of deprivation, neglect and abuse*' (p. 77). In practical terms, rather than being counter-indications to therapeutic treatment or signs of its failure, Welldon shows how these repeated gestures contain the life force which potentially brings the treatment its success.

Between the sexes

Violence, Welldon asserts, begets violence. In the 'weaker sex' this violence may not be easily detected or dramatically expressed and has therefore, historically, been overlooked. It is only the provision of a reflective space and interventions which facilitate the process of mourning which prevent repetition. She describes in detail how the 'voice' of the forensic psychotherapy group serves as an 'auxiliary ego' which provides individuals with an internal space to negotiate with pain and sadism that would otherwise be expressed in cycles of abuse (2011: 137).

The cover illustration of 'Playing with Dynamite' uncompromisingly illustrates the cycle of violence and abuse. It depicts a woman being raped (a detail from Titian's 'Tarquin and Lucretia', 1571). In discussing Shakespeare's poem on the rape of Lucretia and her subsequent suicide, Welldon links Sextus Tarquinius' sexual violence with the violence Lucretia then metes out on herself in the form of suicide. Welldon's thinking can always be widely applied, to both current and historical contexts. For instance, it helps us understand

the Elizabethan fascination with Lucretia's story as a nexus of perverse and violent personal, social and political relations within a tyrannical state (Kewes, 2002). A popular uprising followed Lucretia's death, the Tarquins were deposed and Rome became a Republic. For Elizabethan republicans, Lucretia's death marked the moment when the 'voice of the people' interposed itself between the Absolutist ruler and his/her narcissistic exploitation of the people, to prevent repeated cycles of abuse (Skinner, 1979). In fact, until the English Revolution of 1640, republican thought was preoccupied with the diffused effects of structural violence in the state. Of particular concern was the effect of a perverse state upon relations between the sexes and between parent and child (Wooten & Holderness, 2010).

Redress

It is clear therefore that the redress for female perversion lies in a grown-up conversation about women and men in society, some of which this book records. Additionally, Wellton's pioneering ideas continue to create dialogue with new and original thinking. For instance, Peter Aylward's 'Understanding Dunblane and other Massacres', which includes papers presented at the IAFP which Wellton founded, describes the effects of the absence of a 'triangulating third' (most commonly the father) upon transgenerational maternal perversion (Aylward, 2012). These two books complement each other well. Aylward argues, for instance, that the 'third' opens a space within the perverse and dyadic maternal enmeshment which Wellton describes, and prevents 'history' repeating itself symmetrically through the generations. With the publication of Wellton's collection it is likely that further dialogue will take off in many directions.

Discussion of the forensic 'offence' as symptom forms one of the most fascinating and iconoclastic elements of 'Playing with Dynamite'. Wellton gives to this view detailed theoretical understanding of how symptoms (similar to dreams) tend to shift until they find a language of expression intelligible to others. Both Aylward and Wellton show how bizarre and seemingly unmotivated crimes can yield rich understanding for both individual patients and for the communities which produce them.

Wellton goes on to suggest a relationship between different 'categories' of crimes, for instance between 'sex crimes', 'acquisitive crimes' and crimes of violence. This is profoundly unsettling to our current tendency to safely divide the sexually perverse from the 'normal' criminal and to offer criminals either different treatment pathways or, if deemed

‘bad not mad’, no psychological treatment at all. She insists on a continuum between ‘normal’ crimes of burglary and shop lifting, sexual violence and sexualised thrill seeking, using compelling clinical evidence to support her case.

Perversion is defined by the extreme hostility of drives which stem from developmentally early, pre-genital internal states and are directed towards an object/part object. This is distinct from the notion of ‘deviation’ which is predicated on statistical norms of sexual behaviour. Welldon contends that the psychiatric term ‘paraphilia’ which replaced ‘perversion’ in DSM-IV, fails to account for a genesis of behaviour in developmental trauma, trauma which equally stunts other parts of the personality and psychic functions. An analogy is made to Winnicott’s ‘fear of breakdown’ and Rosenfeld’s notion of the split between the dependent but sane and narcissistic parts of the personality, patrolled by a ‘mafia gang’ of psychic relations. Reading this book with a view to teaching psychotherapy, it is unfortunate that Welldon does not afford herself greater space to explore the theoretical hinterland of her ideas. Rather, highly original readings and illustrations of central psychoanalytic concepts are presented in passing, as if discussed at greater length in a volume elsewhere. There are, as I have said, many further conversations to be had.

Welldon’s subtlety is to envisage the complex of victimhood and aggression in all human beings, which makes her frequent discussion of the countertransference feelings evoked in the therapist and their uses invaluable. Her prose is often highly evocative, giving the practitioner insight into how to sense by ‘feel’ the perverse, encapsulated part of the personality in the clinical encounter: ‘the other part ...is stuck in that devouring state, suicidally attracted to whatever wounds and preys....the dark violence, the devastation, sadism, and imperviousness, both within the psyche and in self-other relations’ (2011: 29). Her case examples share with the reader the manic excitement and sudden let downs that the therapist feels in working with the ‘dynamite’ of these patients’ inner worlds. Throughout, she uses her enormously authoritative experience to espouse humility. She conveys that the therapist is rarely coolly objective, because of the powerful projections and identifications in the transference dynamic and therefore rarely ‘right’ in their initial thoughts.

Early in the book Welldon suggests a common link between patients who act out in contravention of the law and those who are drawn to treat them – forensic psychotherapists and other professionals. She suggests that both parties are seeking to re-establish an innate sense of justice, in the face of early trauma and powerlessness. The patient’s acts of revenge are paranoid schizoid states, developmental precursors of the therapist’s mature gestures of

reparation (p. 96-7). Patient and therapist are on a continuum of human striving, dealing with the same problems of being human in different ways. It is the continuum, she insists, which enables the therapeutic conversation to take place.

The central difference between patient and therapist is that the forensic patient cannot 'play' but is compelled to act. 'Playing', which forms the title of the book, is used in Winnicott's sense as the precursor to thinking, 'bearing with' experience and 'working it through' (p. 172). By contrast, action, in Welldon's 'cycle of perversion', is driven by overwhelming internal anxiety which cannot be thought about.

It is worth stressing the seriousness of Welldon's insight about 'play' in forensic work. The forensic setting deals with enormous anxiety that the institution and its staff hold when working with risk and with projections of society's hate and blame. Such anxiety easily leads to a cessation of 'play', stunting conversation, team work, and reflective space and practices. As Welldon explains, the pervert, under the unbearable strain of 'unthinkable' internal conflict reduces the complexity of the Other to a 'part object'. Such collapse in thinking easily becomes replicated within systems of care, which unconsciously take on the patient group's defences against anxiety. Patients are then reduced to crisp psychiatric diagnoses, risk scores and a single 'index offence'. As Aylward illustrates in a moving account of an inpatient unable to sustain life, although these patients have the most complex and troubled early histories, they often pass through the entire psychiatric treatment system without any acknowledgement that they had a history prior to their admission (Aylward, 2012).

In Welldon's formulation, play is predicated upon an ability to contain and process anxiety (and defences against it) so that thinking and conversation can take place. The influential forensic psychotherapist Gwen Adshead, one of Welldon's students from the 'golden decade' told me 'perhaps the main thing is that Estela made learning fun'. The appeal of this book to both a wide as well as a specialist readership is that it models this 'fun', despite the knotty conceptual territory and of course, the distress, injustice and societal reproach that it records. Reading for review is a very good way to enjoy it, because it benefits from close and repeated reading and the tracing of threads and developments within its assembled treasures, complexities and suggestions. This is the context in which Welldon gives a heartfelt cry against moralistic thinking and the silencing of curious conversation 'judgemental responses are of no use and are the expression of intellectual laziness' (2011: 29). This often playful book provides us with a very good tool for thinking.

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