"Man Is Driven In Total by His Insecurities": Tony Soprano's Castration

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Abstract

HBO's influential crime drama series *The Sopranos* helped to usher in a new wave of complex, boundary-pushing narratives by confronting audiences with a fresh and subversive portrait of crime, family, and the legacy of Freud in American culture at the turn of the 21st century. The series centers around the daily life of mobster Tony Soprano as he navigates the challenges posed to his business by the RICO Act, to his family and marriage by his double life, and to his mental health by his deteriorating sense of power and identity. Previous analyses of the series have recognized that Freudian psychoanalysis is a major theme in the series as Tony visits psychiatrist Dr. Jennifer Melfi to find the root causes of his depression and anxiety, but few have produced psychoanalytic readings of the series itself. Through a scene-by-scene analysis of the series pilot through a Freudian lens, this essay examines how the characterization of Tony (and others) engages with the Freudian themes of castration anxiety and the Oedipus complex in a self-conscious manner and concludes that Tony's neurosis is driven by an unconscious resentment of his mother.

Creator of *The Sopranos* David Chase once claimed in an interview to have been a "devotee of [Sigmund] Freud in high school" (Lavery and Thompson 19), so it is unsurprising that references to Freud's theories of castration and the Oedipus complex are everywhere in the HBO crime drama. In Freud's "An Outline of Psychoanalysis," his 1940 overview of psychoanalysis' greatest breakthroughs, Freud defines the Oedipal phase as the (inevitable) point at which a young boy begins to desire sexual possession of his mother and to harbor defiant intentions towards his father until she threatens the boy with literal or implied castration— to take away the very "thing… which he is using to defy her" (Freud 68). This threat to his person and masculinity causes the boy to experience "the greatest trauma of his life": castration anxiety (29). Although the trauma of castration eventually becomes repressed into the unconscious, Freud saw its consequences as "manifold and quite enormous," affecting not only the boy's present and future relationships with his parents but also "with men and women as a whole" (69).

But the anxiety that troubles the star of *The Sopranos*, mobster Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini), is not so straightforward. Tony's castration appears to be inverted; in the series' pilot episode, he tells his psychiatrist Dr. Jennifer Melfi (Lorraine Bracco) that he remembers his deceased father with respect ("My father was tough, he ran his own crew" (31:37)) and that he resents how his mother Livia (Nancy Marchand) emasculated his father. With teeth set on edge he grumbles to Dr. Melfi about how Livia "wore… [Tony's father] down to a little nub" until he was nothing but "a squeaking little gerbil when he died" (31:42). Although he does not want to admit it, Tony's hatred of his mother is palpable. More recently than Freud, psychoanalysts have also begun to recognize the existence of an equally powerful "negative Oedipus complex" in which

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"the male child… harbor[s] death wishes toward his mother because he sees her as taking his father away from him" (Gabbard 110). Given the evidence that Tony's mother— whose very name recalls the domineering, Medea-like Empress of BBC's I, Claudius— is the parent who took possession of his father away from him and "failed to affirm Tony's masculinity and psychologically castrated him by ridiculing him mercilessly" (110), I argue that Tony's symptoms in the first season originate from repressed castration anxiety and an unresolved Oedipal grudge against his mother. In a classically Freudian manner, the effects of this original threat to his masculinity are wide-reaching and seriously impact Tony's identity across the series' six seasons, so I maintain that understanding Tony's castration is key to understanding what *The Sopranos* is trying to tell viewers about the legacy of Freud in the twenty-first century. And, because some of the best evidence for an Oedipal reading of *The Sopranos* is in the pilot episode, I will focus my analysis on our first hour with Tony Soprano.

The pilot episode's opening scenes establish that Tony's sense of masculinity is under attack. As the opening credits roll, the audience is subjected to a series of shaky hand-held shots from the passenger's seat of Tony's cigar-smoke filled Chevy Suburban, giving us the impression that we are accompanying Tony on a ride-along through the "harsh industrial environments of New Jersey" (Bernard par. 1) to his suburban home. Then, as the series' theme song (A3's "Woke Up This Morning") slowly rises from sinister pulse to screeching crescendo, Tony exits the vehicle and *The Sopranos*' tile appears with a gun in place of the 'R', setting our expectations up for an impressively gaudy or violent introduction to yet another mob narrative à la Goodfellas or The Godfather. What we get instead is furtive silence; the first shot is of a quiet waiting room across from Tony gazing upward with a puzzled expression from between the legs of the nude female statue that boxes in the frame (01:30). In this way, *The Sopranos* begins by diminishing Tony before a feminine figure and removing "all sense of power and monumentality from the imagery" (Bernard par. 2). The visual language is straightforward: Tony is a man who feels confined by and disconcerted with the feminine.

The following interspersed scenes of Tony's psychotherapy appointments with Dr. Melfi paint a clearer picture of his troubled state throughout the episode. In the first, Dr. Melfi politely invites Tony into her office from the waiting room and, after a minute of uncomfortable silence between them, we learn that Tony, formidable capo in the North Jersey family, is in therapy for anxiety-induced panic attacks. In his study of psychology in *The Sopranos*, Glen Gabbard defines panic attacks as "discrete periods of intense discomfort or fear, often escalating to a sense of impending doom; they generally last only a few minutes" (24). In Freudian terms, Tony has developed a neurotic symptom because his weakened Ego can no longer repress impulses from his Id. His anxiety has begun to overwhelm him. Considering that "in the culture in which… [Tony] was raised, no man allows even a hint of disrespect for his mother" (104), it is unsurprising that his thoroughly repressed castration anxiety has had to find unusual ways to make itself known. In a later session, Tony himself gives the same explanation for Melfi while refusing to cooperate with her direct line of questioning about his fragile mental state. In the middle of a rant bemoaning the disappearance of "Gary Cooper" and the "strong, silent type" (27:00), Tony sneers "I have a semester and a half of college, so I understand Freud. I understand therapy as a concept, but in my world, it does not go down" before storming out of

her office (27:22). Tony admits that he knows what Melfi is getting at, but refuses to let it be said aloud. Although Tony is unconsciously aware of his resentment of his mother and the severe consequences of repressing his resentment, his desperate resistance to acknowledging the source of his anxiety follows Freud to the letter. “The more oppressed the Ich now feels [during treatment],” Freud cautions his fellow psychoanalysts, “the more desperately it persists—terrified... to protect what remains of it against further encroachment” (Freud 55). Tony’s resistance to the very suggestion that his depression and anxiety may be causing his panic attacks all but confirms that Melfi is on the right track.

Considering later developments in the episode, the choice to begin the series with Tony glowering up at the statue’s breasts is almost certainly a “symbolic foreshadowing of the program's central drama of Tony's conflict with his mother” (Walker 110). Although her role in the pilot is minor, Livia’s actions in this episode firmly establish her as a castrating figure in Tony’s life. When Tony makes a visit to give his mother a stereo and some CDs (15:00-18:30), Livia’s body language and dialogue are surprisingly dismissive. She leaves him waiting at the door for nearly thirty seconds before answering, leaves the room while Tony tries to give her his gift, angrily rejects his playful attempt to dance with her, frequently turns her back to him, and refuses to look him in the eye. She belittles and emasculates Tony constantly. In Tony’s three-minute visit, Livia goes out of her way to subvert his sense of masculinity and authority by comparing him unfavorably to his friend Artie Bucco, who “calls [his mother] every day” (16:16); to his dead father: “He was a saint” (17:00); and to his absent sisters: “all I know is, daughters are better at taking care of their mothers than sons” (18:00). She objectifies Tony by referring to him in the third rather than the second person, “symbolically fragmenting him into observer and observed” (Walker 118) when she dismisses his advice to get out more: “listen to him, he knows everything” (15:51). As Joseph Walker observes, “Livia's every utterance, however casual, has the potential to disrupt Tony's precarious sense of his selfhood” (118).

Despite Tony’s outward projections of masculine power through violence, his tough-guy identity cannot withstand Livia’s withering disdain. After collapsing for the second time while touring a care facility with his mother, Tony returns to Melfi with his head in his hands and begins to open up about his relationship with Livia. She was “part of that generation that grew up during the Depression,” he tells her, “but the Depression to her was a trip to Six Flags” (31:00). Melfi agrees that his mother has “quite a formidable maternal presence” (31:50). Ellen Willis contends that Tony's “heart of darkness is personified by Livia Soprano” (6) because his mother’s constant invalidation of his masculinity is at the root of the threatened sense of identity that lands him in Melfi’s chair. Outside of his mother’s home, Tony’s “tough guy…. gangster persona” gives him “constant excitement and action, a sense of power and control, a definition of masculinity” (Toscano 461), displayed when he savagely beats “degenerate fucking gambler” Mahaffey in front of his workplace in broad daylight (11:50). Tony’s sense of inadequacy as patriarch of his family and his famiglia arises from the constant threat posed to his identity by his mother.

While it is obvious why Tony feels threatened by his “clearly pathological” mother, “it is rather troubling that the other significant female characters are themselves so frequently represented as sharing in her patterns and methods, or even identified with her” (Walker 118).

For example, the connection between Livia and Carmela (Edie Falco), Tony's wife, is strongly suggested by Carmela's dialogue in the hospital in the wake of Tony's first attack. In response to Tony's bid for connection while awaiting an MRI, Carmela responds "here he goes now with the nostalgia" (21:14), recalling Livia's favorite strategy of ridiculing Tony in the third person. Freud argues that a child's relationship with their mother is significant because "she is [not only] the first and strongest love-object, [but also] the paradigm for all later love-relationships" (Freud 67), and evidently *The Sopranos* adopts a similar message through its portrayal of Tony's yearning for (and inability to secure) a nurturing feminine figure in his relationships with other women throughout the series. In a representation of the phenomenon Freud termed transference, Tony increasingly projects his ambivalent feelings of love and hatred towards his mother onto Dr. Melfi as the season progresses because he "sees psychotherapy with a woman therapist as emasculating" as well (Gabbard 164). Joseph Walker makes a compelling comparison between Livia and Melfi by pointing out that both "are attempting to do essentially the same thing: disrupt the coherent identity and meaning which sustained Tony"– which they accomplish by dealing in the feminine-coded "realm of the invisible, the silent, the repressed" (Walker 119). As Aaron Toscano argues, the narrative purpose that Tony's negative Oedipus complex serves seems to be an expression of "a fear in contemporary culture, especially for conservative audiences, that women will somehow destroy men or weaken them (460). In this way, Tony's fear of emasculation, not only from his mother but also from his other relationships with women, gestures towards a crisis of masculinity in the post-feminist twenty-first century.

I would of course be negligent if I did not devote due attention to the most explicit but also the most puzzling instance of castration in the episode: Tony's dream. Freud famously insisted that dreams reveal "originally unconscious and repressed unconscious material" (Freud 40), and there is absolutely no question that Tony's dream is a surfacing of his castration anxiety, but I also advocate for a symbolic reading of how his dream reveals the impact of his unresolved Oedipal phase on the rest of his life. Tony recounts to Dr. Melfi in his final session of the pilot that he dreamed he unscrewed his belly button until his penis fell off, after which he wandered around looking for a mechanic to fix it until a bird snatched it out of his hand and flew away (50:50-51:40). Melfi points out that Tony first collapsed when the ducks he was looking after flew away, and his defenses fall as he becomes emotional (52:00). The dream's "obvious reference to losing the phallus" (Toscano 461) is also one of the most complicated because it condenses the various threats on his manhood into a single symbol.

Although Tony's dream represents a literal loss of the phallus, the question remains of what kind of loss Tony is afraid of at this point in his life. In the first place, I would argue that the connection to Livia is implicit but obvious as teary-eyed Tony refers to himself in the third person in Melfi's office, "Oh Jesus, fuck now he's gonna cry" (52:40), recalling Livia's signature style of dialogue and role as the "castrating figure that lurks in Tony's unconscious" (Gabbard 101-2). On the other hand, Toscano believes that Tony's castration anxiety is a fear of "losing his masculine role in the patriarchal structure," implying that Tony is simply "worried about his class position" (461). However, what ultimately resonates with Tony is the realization that he has formed an unconscious connection between the ducks and his family when he affirms that: "I'm afraid I'm gonna lose my family like I lost the ducks" (53:10) with unabashed astonishment in his

voice. This evidently critical breakthrough in Tony's therapy discloses that this "middle-aged Mafia boss is suddenly afraid of being left alone" (Gabbard 26), and that Tony's castration anxiety fundamentally boils down to a fear of loss, the roots of which can be traced to Freud's original conception of the threat of literal castration of the phallus as well as to the way Tony 'lost' his father to his mother. Unresolved, Tony's castration anxiety lurks beneath the surface of his psyche, surfacing only when he is threatened with loss— whether it be loss of his mother and his mother's approval, of his wife and children's respect, or of his livelihood as a criminal in the uncertain present of the turn of the millennium.

In 1995, film critic Roger Ebert wrote in a review of Martin Scorsese's epic crime drama Casino that, "like The Godfather… [Casino] makes us feel like eavesdroppers in a secret place" (par. 5) by uncovering not only the seedy underworld of Las Vegas, Nevada but also the seedy private lives of the gangsters who rule it. In *The Sopranos*, Chase and company take the self-conscious gangster narrative a step further by allowing us to step into the mind of the mobster and see what makes him tick; to understand that his "predatory lust and aggression [are] in all of us… [that] his lies and cover-ups are ours;" and to see that "the therapist's fear is our own collective terror of peeling away those lies" (Willis 8). What *The Sopranos* is telling us by reviving Freud's Oedipus complex is not only that Tony's relationships and symptoms are shaped by unconscious drives, but that Tony's crisis of identity reflects a broader cultural crisis of identity taking place at the turn of the twenty-first century. Ron Bernard argues that Tony suffers from "a cultural anxiety generated by the end of 'the American Century'"— in the twentieth century America "saved Europe from evil, wildly flourished under a market economy, and [watched as] defeated Communism was rapidly coming to an end," but began to feel "a sense, perhaps, that we had never really paid our dues… [that] we had been getting something-for-nothing for too long" (Bernard par. 6). Freud, speaking from clinical experience, held that the Oedipal complex was "the greatest problem of early life and the most powerful source of later inadequacy" (70). Similarly, loan shark Hesh Rabkin (Jerry Adler) advises Tony on the power struggle between him and his Uncle Junior with the aphorism: "Man is driven in total by his insecurities" (34:30). If *The Sopranos* is, as Ellen Willis argues, a cultural Rorschach Test, then "the inkblot is the unconscious" (8). Like Freud did more than a century earlier, *The Sopranos* reminds us that something lurks underneath our collective consciousness— that something about our identities remains profoundly unsatisfied— and that what we lack is what drives us.

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