What is the Name of the Father? An Officer and a Gentleman?

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There is perhaps only one more reviled Lacanian concept than the "name-of-the-father". Feminists and other commentators suspect that Lacan's attempt to systematise Freud by turning to game theory, mathematics and structuralism is merely the ideological obfuscation of a continuing set of patriarchal prejudices. It hardly matters when Lacanians protest that the "name of the father" is supposedly a function to which both sexes are subjected. When Lacanians say this, it is said, they are merely elevating a historically specific set of social relations into would-be transcendental conditions for the possibility of sociability, and thereby enacting the worst kind of intellectual complicity.

As always with intellectual disputes that are highly politically charged, it is useful here to take a step back, and ascertain what is being asserted, before one jumps into the trenches for either side. One wants as little to fend at windmills, as try to ride on the back of them. What I want to do in this essay is try to give as genteel account as I can of what I take it that the Lacanian notion of the "name of the father" signifies. Whatever one might think of Lacan the man, or psychoanalysis, I want to try to indicate how the Lacanian notion of the "name of the father" is a very fecund notion, which designates something like what would have to be a minimal condition for anything like an inter-subjective good. I will do this by way of an extended example. This example is the classic filmic romance from the early 1980's, starring Richard Gere and Deborah Winger: *An Officer and the Gentleman* .

Even on the surface of it, *An Officer and a Gentleman* stages two co-temporal plots. The first is the love story between Winger's character Paula and Gere/Zack Mayo. The second is the "coming of age" of Zack, as he tries to become an air force cadet, despite the cynicism of his father, and the harsh treatment that he receives from Drill Sergeant Foley (Louis Gosset). At the conclusion of the film (in fulfilment of what is intimated in the title) Mayo defies the odds to become an officer. Equally, he honours the love of the faithful Paula, thereby proving himself a gentleman.

The first questions for any critical reviewer of the film concerns what it is that is more precisely involved in these two plots; how they are to be read together

*The original version of this text can be found at `http://cinetext.philo.at`.

(if indeed they can and should be); and what interest any of this could have for us, beyond the two hours' duration of the film.

Let me approach an answer to these questions by looking at the fabric of the narrative in more detail. The predominant focus of the diegetics is on Gere's character Zack Mayo, as I have indicated. Shortly into the film, we are carried on Zack's reflections into a reminiscence upon his tough childhood. Zack has grown up in the shadow of the tragic suicide of his mother, forced to live with his womanising Naval Officer father (Byron Mayo) in the remote Asian posts where the latter was stationed. Zack is a person who learnt to cope with the traumatic loss of his mother, the neglect of his father, and the constant harassment of the local kids, by "getting tough" and becoming something of a loner.

The opening scene of the film shows the result of this process. Zack awakes from sharing a bed with his father and two prostitutes, and rises to bathe himself in the next room, where he proceeds to throw up copiously. As he stares into the mirror, his father approaches him, and inquires about what he is doing. Zack replies that today he is going to leave his father to go to Naval officer training. His father's response is one of thinly concealed derision. He tells his son that he is not made of the right stuff, and laughingly tries to convince him that he should stay. He reminds Zack of what good "pals" they have become, and of debaucheries they have shared in the past. Zack has to physically overpower the older man before he can leave.

In Lacanian terms, Zack's father thus represents a horrifying example of a superegoic or "anal" father. Everything is there in the film to indicate that the normal and normalising function of the parents- particularly of establishing generational difference- has failed for Zack. Father and son are closer to brothers and rivals than anything else. Byron Mayo, Zack's dad, is a "father of enjoyment". His being and his overwhelming *presence* for Zack is characterised very largely by his cruel mastery over, and indifference towards, the women he soullessly exploits, and which equally form the objects of desire of his own son.

What I would reformulate the "coming of age" of Zack Mayo in *An Officer and a Gentleman* as, then, is his passage *away* from his frustrating and deeply incestous encapture by his "real" father, Byron Mayo. But it is in Zack's progress away from this encapture that I want to say he precisely moves *towards* an acceptance of the reign of what Lacan called the "name of the father". For the thing is, as Slavoj Zizek has stressed in *Enjoy Your Symptom!* , for Lacan—at least when there is not psychosis—*there are always two fathers*[1]. And the second father (whom Lacan called the "symbolic father") is absolutely to be *distanced* from the obscene type of patriarchal brute that Byron Mayo embodies in *An Officer and a Gentleman* .

Clearly, though, what I am saying needs some explaining.

What is it, let us consider, that happens to Zack when he defies his father and goes to cadet training? As Zack's Drill Sergeant Foley recognises, Zack initially bears the marks of his defective upbringing. A smooth operator, Zack participates in the activities of his group in a cynical, distanced way. He pays someone from outside the camp to clean his boots and polish his belt buckles.

[1]Even if there is only one man, as we shall see.

Though he quickly strikes up a relationship with Debra Winger's character Paula, he cruelly mistreats her, soon dumping her and justifying his petulance by accusing Paula falsely of only wanting to use him as a ticket out of her small-town existence. Tellingly, in the midst of an argument she tells him that he "ain't no officer", despite his shiny new uniform.

In the first months of Zack's training, that is to say, it is manifest that Zack represents a telling exemplar of the "pathological narcissism" which Slavoj Zizek argues characterises later capitalist subjectivity. He refuses to be bound by any external authority except when he is forced to, and seeks to take every short cut that he can. Zack enters into every social interchange with an eye ultimately only for his own egoic interests. He is precisely someone who refuses to be "had" by others, and believes in only what he can see and touch.

When Foley catches Zack "red handed" at his game of cheating the drill requirements, however, the Drill Sergeant subjects Zack to a brutal program of discipline and punishment that instigates the profound change in Mayo that is the topic of the film. To Zack himself, these punishments are experienced as one more example of the type of obscene enjoyment in the exercise of power which his father Byron clearly took in the privileges accorded to a man of his high military standing. Foley coldly disallows Zack weekend leave. In a manner that has set the cliché for many subsequent filmic characters, he then forces his charge to repeat meaningless and arduous exercises *ad nauseum* (making him polish the staircase with a toothbrush, *etc* .). All the while, he subjects Zack to a verbal barrage of insults and provocations, including making a telling play on his sir-name, calling him "mayo-naisse". Amidst this verbal barrage that Foley launches at Zack, he also tells Zack that he has done some "research" on what Zack was doing before he came to the cadet course, and knows all about is whoring with his dad.

The result of this sustained barrage is, of course, that Gere/Zack breaks down. Forced by Foley into physical exhaustion, and encouraged repeatedly by the Drill Sergeant to "give it up" or "go D.I.A.", Zack finally bursts into convulsive sobbing. On hands and knees, he bawls out that: "I have nowhere else to go!" Shortly after he has cut off his liason with Paula, moreover, his world is rocked by an even more damaging trauma. His close friend Sid, who has been cajoled by his girl Casey into pledging himself to her, suicides after she coldly rejects him because he has left the Officer course to pursue the marriage. Sid's suicide is clearly experienced by Zack as a painful repetition of the suicide of his mother that has soured his subsequent private life, and left him anxious never to get too emotionally close to anyone. When Paula approaches him to offer her comfort, Zack tells her outright that she is "just like all the rest", and that he just wants to be left alone. When he returns to the training camp, he gruffly approaches Drill Sergeant Foley to announce his desire to comply with the latter's request, and leave the cadetship forever

What follows is one of the film's several famous scenes, and one which is apparently in the worst patriarchal vein. The two men strip bear to the waist, and fight in front of Zack's contemporaries. They inflict multiple blows upon each other, and end by lying on the ground opposed to each other, writhing in pain. Wincing, Foley then says to Zack: "If you want to go, now, you can go".

The result of this encounter, however, as we learn in the next scene, is that Zack does precisely the opposite. He stays on now to complete his training, reconciled with his station.

My argument is that what transpires here is crucial to understanding the wider meaning of the film. As I just suggested, it seems as though *An Officer and a Gentleman* endorses the efficacy of the most archaic macho rites of passage, where two men can only win each other's respect through the display of physical force. But the key, I think, lies in two things that this suggestion over-looks. The first is the content of the very next scene. With the fight accomplished, we see Zack in the elementary position of the socialised (Althusser would say "interpellated") subject. Zack is shown standing with his fellows, pledging himself in a solemn symbolic vow to prosecute his role as an Officer in impartial loyalty to flag and country. The second key thing is the nature of the final blow that Zack receives in his fight with Drill Sergeant Foley. The blow, a sharp kick, hits Zack precisely (as is said) "where it hurts". It is nearly literally a castrating blow.

My interpretive wager, put simply, is then that we can use Lacanian theory, and his doctrines concerning the socialisation of the subject with the resolution of the Oedipus complex, to read these two apparently unrelated data in conjunction. What has happened to Zack at this point, I would say, is what Lacan calls "symbolic castration", the result of which—precisely—is the subject's introduction into the order governed by the so-called "name of the father". This "castration", Lacan comments, is the instantiation in the subject's development of a singular and absolutely non-equivalent exchange. In it, Lacan says, we give what is most important about ourselves (particularly the infantile aspiration to be the fully satisfying love object of the mother). In exchange for this sacrifice, though, we do not get any immediate reward. Rather, we are tied to a name (in our patronymic societies literally the "sir-name" of our father) that marks us off as belonging to a collective absolutely irreducible—and scarcely less than indifferent—to our egoistic aspirations. To quote:

“The effects on a human-being of the fact that he becomes a subject of law are, in short, that he is deprived of what matters to him most, and in exchange for it, he is himself delivered over to the texture which is woven between generations …” [at Zizek, 1996: 78]

At the point of our "symbolic castration", Lacanian theory avows, we are (like Mayo in *An Officer and a Gentleman*) able and bound to tie our allegiance precisely to *words and vows* : things that we cannot see and touch, and which can never be calculated into the closed economy of what Kant called our own "pathological" self-conceit.

In the light of my thesis that Zack's humbling by the Drill Sergeant represents the moment of his accession to the reign of the name of the father, too, I also think that we can make more clear what transpires in the second "prong" of the plot of *An Officer and a Gentleman* . As I stated in the "Introduction", this second "prong" documents Zack's love affair with Paula. One scene, particularly, stands out for me here as decisive. This is the scene wherein Zack's close friend Sid approaches Zack and announces that he intends to marry his girlfriend Casey, who has told him that she is bearing his child. Zack's respon-

se surprisingly mirrors that of his father's in the first scene of the film, when Zack had announced his intention to make a military career. He scoffs at Sid, commenting that women are good to next to nothing. Sid, however, responds by telling Zack with disgust that he has already bought the ring and intends to propose, whatever Zack might think. In a remark that looks everything like Nietzsche's famous assertion that the goal of civilisation is to breed an animal capable of keeping promises, Sid then defends himself by putting the position to Zack that: “It [keeping promises] is the only thing that separates human beings from the animals!”

After the trauma of his loss of Sid, and his castrating confrontation with Drill Sergeant Foley, however, Zack markedly changes his tune. In the famous closing scene (parodied in *The Simpsons* amongst many other places), Zack takes Paula on her word, and trusts that she is an honest woman. He strides into her factory, and literally sweeps her off her feet to the applause of all her workmates, and the backing of "Lord Lift Us Up Where We Belong".

What, though, has all this got to do with "the name of the father", you ask? I think a more poignant question here is actually this: *who* is the father of Zack, in the sense meant when Lacanians talk of the "name of the father"? My answer would actually be this: *Zack's father in* An Officer and a Gentleman *, in the sense that matters, is Drill Sergeant Foley.* This is not solely because he is the one who applies the castrating blow in the film, as I have discussed. Lacan often quipped in the earlier Seminars that the person of the biological mother is only too capable of reminding the child to "put that thing away", lest he wants to lose it. My argument is rather that the force of the final blow Foley inflicts upon Zack in their man-to-man combat is its metaphoric valence (and we could recall here that Lacan always insisted that the name of the father is at base always a *metaphor*). Like the child's imagined physical castration, what Zack's near-literal castration stands as metaphor for in the film, I want to suggest, is the necessity we are all submitted to of giving "a pound of flesh" in order that we enter into the order of symbolic exchange of our culture- the *nomoi* of conventions, mandates, and Law.

The important point of theory is that the "father" *qua* castrating agent of the Law, for Lacan, is always contingent. It could be anyone: uncle, brother, mother, sister, or someone completely unrelated to the individual by blood. The reason is that "Father", in his terminology" rigidly designates (in the Kripkean sense) that agency of whichever gender which introduces the child to the order of promises that need to be kept, in principle, and independently of whether the individual can reasonably expect to gain from them as a living, enjoying individual. "The name of the father" is that name identification with which inscribes us as members of a sociolinguistic community; one wherein people speak a common tongue, and routinely take what others say on trust (this being, as Kant pointed out in *The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* , the first condition for anything like the social covenant).

For the "castrated" being, immediate access to the Real of some immediately and wholly satisfying enjoyment is debarred. This is what Lacan meant when he said that peaceable relations between the sexes can only proceed under the sign of the name of the father. Like Mayo, who can only treat his woman right once

he has been made to give up on his narcissistic self-conceit and pledge himself to something greater than his own private concerns, Lacan's psychoanalytic opinion was that as speaking, socialised beings, access to any lasting sexual enjoyment comes only on condition that one has given it up as the primary and explicit goal of one's existence. It is (paradoxically enough) in this way a clear example of what John Elster has called a "state that is essentially a by-product".

My point is that clearly, then, if we can put aside our fetishisation of the fact that the father has traditionally in the West been a male, it remains that even a matriarchy would have to operate through the subjection of individuals to something akin to that which Lacan designated as the "name of the father". As *An Officer and a Gentleman* shows, the reason is that the "symbolic father" is not the man who would have full virile control over all His actions, words and sexual objects. Rather, "the name of the father" names the operator of a kind of transcendental humility necessary for accession to social maturity: an acceptance of how we are always, as socialised, as much spoken through by the roles and ideals that we pledge ourselves to, as the agents of these same.

And, for the record, this is exactly what the last scene of the film neatly shows, when Zack Mayo strides out from the officer training camp as an enfranchised officer. When he had first entered as a long-haired cadet, Drill Sergeant Foley had ripped into him, saying that "there were only two things that came from" where Mayo grew up: "queers and deers; and I don't see any deers around, do you, boy?" As he leaves after his investiture, however, Mayo notices that Foley is repeating word-for-word this *very same speech* to some other hapless freshman. What we again see staged here, then, I would say, is the distance between symbolic authority and the regime of the patriarchal father of enjoyment, who would posture as the master of speech and *jouissance* . Mayo has realised, at the end of *An Officer and a* Gentleman, that he was wrong to have taken the Drill Sergeant's hostile treatment of him as a hateful singling out, performed perversely by the Drill Sergeant to gain sadistic enjoyment. As it were, the mask of hostility Foley wore was there to conceal that in reality there was really nothing to conceal: just the almost mechanical prosecution of a Drill Sergeant's duties.

What Mayo has now finally seen, to put it curtly, is what he could never have seen before: that, when it comes to the name of the father, it's never anything personal.