

CRIME AND FOLIE À DEUX: REVIEW AND CASE HISTORY

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"Motions passe from one Man to another, not so much by Exciting Imagination; as by Imitation; Especially if there be an Aptness or Inclination before."

Francis Bacon (1627)

THE phenomenon to which Lasègue and Falret in 1873 applied the term "folie à deux", had many times previously been recognized and described. William Harvey (1651) noted a case, and his contemporary, Sir Kenelm Digby (1658) not only recorded an excellent clinical description but suggested a psychopathology (Greenberg *et al.*, 1956). For Lasègue and Falret, folie à deux was a social rather than a psychiatric phenomenon: the second "passive" subject, they believed, was not truly psychotic but simply "absurdly credulous". As they saw it, the more authoritative and intelligent "active" partner created the delusions and imposed them on the "passive" subject. This was more likely to occur in a setting of prolonged and isolated intimacy. The delusions were more likely to be accepted if they were plausible and played on the hopes and fears of the second subject. Heredity, they pointed out, offered no overall explanation, for this process frequently involved unrelated individuals. The second subject often accepted the first's delusions only after a fruitless and exhausting struggle to restore his sanity: "the indifferent escape both this useless travail and its consequences." They held the prognosis for the "passive" subject to be invariably good, providing that the pair were separated. As early as 1563 Wier, writing on the cure of nuns afflicted en masse by demoniacal possession, had advised this course.

As discussed elsewhere (Greenberg, 1956) current textbooks overlook a vast literature which, among other things, indicates that the prognosis of the second subject is not necessarily good; that frequently his psychosis is as "real" as that of the first—rapid remission does not invalidate a phenomenological diagnosis of psychosis; that all gradations between simple acceptance of delusional ideas and unequivocal psychosis occur; that postulation of a genetic predisposition to schizophrenia explains nothing of the observed psychological phenomena. Thus, Mayer-Gross *et al.* (1954) state that ". . . . paranoid reactions show a particular tendency to spread by psychological contagion . . . one usually finds that one member of a pair or more of affected persons is suffering from an organic or endogenous illness, while the others are ill only in a social sense". They regard the prognosis as "excellent . . . if the isolation can be broken and the primary source removed". Curran and Partridge (1955) hold similar views and believe that on "separation of the parties concerned, the secondary sufferers from the condition readily recover through the corrective effect of mingling with more normal people, although the real sufferer from the disease does not". Henderson and Gillespie (1950) and Laignel-Lavastine (1951) express themselves similarly.

It is intended here to direct attention to some examples of folie à deux of forensic interest, certain aspects of which are inadequately accounted for by current formulations. There are however a number of recorded instances which can be described in Lasègue and Falret's terms. Kiernan (1883) was the first to remark on their forensic importance, though many before Lasègue and Falret had concerned themselves with the question (Esquirol, 1821; Livi, 1868; Despina, 1870; Smith, 1875 and others). Thus Boedeker (1891) published the case of a young man, arrested for stealing useless articles of clothing from restaurants. He was discovered to be acting out the delusional ideas of a "chronic paranoiac" who dominated him; on being separated from him, he rapidly gained insight into the irrational nature of these ideas. The young man had himself no conscious motivation for the thefts, and in this differed from the cases described by Moreau de Tours (1893) in a paper entitled "Le Crime à Deux". Moreau believed this to be an entity more or less identical with folie à deux and occurring under similar conditions; the second subject must be less intelligent, "more disposed to passive docility than to emancipation", living in constant relation with the dominant partner and "involved by the lure of a personal interest . . . As in folie à deux, one finds a more intelligent subject who foments the crime, a less intelligent subject who lets himself be outwitted and carries it out." Accordingly he thought that the legal responsibility of the instigator must be regarded as greater than that of the "blind instrument of the crime".

But the inadequacy of regarding the "passive" partner in a psychotically motivated crime simply as a credulous "malade par reflet" is obvious when behaviour so aberrant as murder is involved. Craig (1905) held that such people could be regarded as psychotic by the very fact that they acted upon as well as believed in their partner's delusions. This certainly applied to the case cited by Moreau, where a youth killed his father at the instance of his paranoid mother, who herself took no part in the assault. Similar crimes have many times been recorded. Hofbauer (1846) described the induction of a delusional psychosis in the several members of her family and her fiancé, by a girl suffering from "nymphomania"; one of her brothers was drowned in response to her delusional commands, the family throwing him down a well. Taguet (1887) reported the murder of a girl by her family at the instance of her psychotic brother. He had induced a psychosis in his three sibs and mother—a fourth sib, away from home, was unaffected—all experienced various hallucinations and came to believe that one of the girls was possessed by a demon. She herself asked to be killed and the family made three openings in her body to let out the demon. All remained chronically insane. Woods (1889) described a similar episode in an Irish peasant family. Induced by the eldest daughter, the mother and three sibs murdered a fourth in the belief that he was "a fairy changeling". All except the eldest daughter rapidly recovered. Archambault (1907) recorded the case of a woman who, more intelligent than her husband, had long dominated him; she introduced him to the practice of spiritualism, in which she had long been interested. Coming to believe herself "possessed", she induced a similar state in her husband. Under the guidance of his possessing spirit, he thereupon murdered her. He too remained chronically psychotic. Knigge (1939) described an almost identical case. Levassort (1912) noted a similar case to Moreau's: a psychotic woman instigated her son to murder her husband. This the boy did, after two months of discussion with his sibs as to the best way to accomplish it. More recently Tolsma (1951) has discussed a murder resulting from induction of psychosis in a family group: a young man, experiencing various hallucinatory manifestations, believed these to be of divine

origin and actively induced the "conversion" of his eight sibs and parents; they then announced the formation of a new religion. Only one brother had remained sceptical for any time but, finally "converted", expressed great guilt and unworthiness. He was promptly denounced as "the evil one" and jointly murdered by his family in a particularly barbarous fashion. The inducer remained psychotic, the psychoses of the rest of the family remitting within a few months.

Cucchi (1947) investigated the murder of a peasant by a neighbouring family, consisting of mother, son and daughter. It turned out that this had been instigated by the mother—the wife of a chronically psychotic man, whose suicide was the immediate precipitant of the murder. His delusions of persecution by witchcraft had originally been fixed when assured by a local expert that his hypochondriasis resulted from this source. Over some years he had conveyed his beliefs to his family, with the consequences noted above. Similar familial psychoses, stopping short of murder often only through extraneous circumstances, have been described. Dagrón (1861) graphically described the violence with which two psychotic sisters resisted his attempts to remove them to hospital; they turned their home into a kind of fortress to which Dagrón, aided by the gendarmerie, had to lay siege. Funaioli (1887) published the case of a young woman, who began to attribute her gastric pains to poison and witchcraft. Her three brothers and mother became "maniacal" and threatened the lives of the supposed persecutors. In Schöss's (1891) case, the brother of three acutely psychotic sisters repelled approach to their house with a shot-gun, sharing the family delusion that all strangers were agents of the Devil. Sommer (1904) reported the case of a middle-aged man with systematized persecutory delusions for many years, who himself did nothing about them, whereas his wife finally attacked one of the "persecutors".

The tendency of such psychotic states to spread beyond the original, usually familial, group is well-documented. Here we would mention only a few relevant examples. Folsom (1880) recounted the history of a member of a revivalist sect in a New England village. This man developed messianic delusions in which his wife and mother-in-law came to join. Eventually, now identified with Abraham, he ceremonially killed his young son, all the time expecting heavenly intervention to prevent it; his son murdered, he confidently predicted his resurrection on the third day. In all this he was supported by some eighteen neighbours who had accepted his ideas prior to the murder. These individuals subsequently gained insight into what had happened, but the man and his wife remained chronically insane. Sikorski (1898) retailed an appalling story of mass suicide in provincial Russia. A sect of "Old Believers" was induced by a psychotic girl to believe that the end of the world was at hand. But first, she revealed, they were to be cruelly persecuted. Rather than suffer this, under her direction they contrived to bury themselves alive, nineteen at first and six, four days later; the girl herself was in this last group. The survivors were arrested at this stage, but refusing to eat in custody, were allowed to return to their homes under strict supervision. Sikorski could only attribute all this to "a Slavic tendency to pessimism and strong passivity"! Romano (1921) in an extensive survey of induced psychosis, mentioned the case of a menopausal woman who became persuaded that she had conceived of the Holy Ghost; her two daughters and later the entire neighbourhood joined her in this belief. Directed by the delusionary exhortations of the inducer, three of these women attempted the manual extirpation of the uterus of another, "because it was the seat of all evil".

The intimate relationship between murder and suicide indicated in many of these examples is highlighted in a note by Delasiauve (1869): a mother and daughter, attributing their hallucinatory experiences to police persecution, attempted to poison themselves; this proving ineffectual, the mother strangled her daughter but then felt unable to kill herself and surrendered to the police. Delasiauve remarked that "such agreements are not exceptional" and it is likely that many suicide pacts are of this nature. Kovalevsky (1896) recorded the suicide of five sisters, following their mother's death. Dominated by the eldest, they had long been patently psychotic; they prepared their suicide in a singularly detached fashion, had their pet animals destroyed and put their financial affairs in order, before quietly gassing themselves. A comparable case, though on a larger scale, was reported by Minovici (1929): a paranoid schizophrenic girl induced ten members of her family to gas themselves following an elaborate ritual Last Supper. Ballotta (1940) recorded the collective suicide of a whole family. Believing himself ruined by his persecutors, the father induced his family to commit suicide with him, "which they did in a singularly cold-blooded fashion: husband, wife and three children lay down on the railway track and waited for the train to pass over them". Pitres and Régis (1902) had remarked that certain "suicides à deux ou à plusieurs" were analagous to folie à deux—a thesis earlier sustained by Chpolianski (1885). Pitres and Régis also referred to crimes committed under the influence of "compulsions by contagion or suggestion".

The problem had been adumbrated by Magnan (1893) when discussing the supposed distinction between the *délirant chronique* (paranoid schizophrenic) and the *persécuté-persécutateur* (paranoiac): "The *délirant chronique* sometimes causes those who live with him to share his delusion; the *persécuté-persécutateur* is still more easily able to communicate his delusional beliefs. He has made himself a fighter for justice, he has suffered and struggled against the courts, doctors, authorities and all his battles, all his setbacks have but increased his desire for revenge. His attitude of one oppressed but not downcast brings sympathy, his misfortunes move many, while his intellectual activity, the dialectic with which he sustains his claims, the absence of all sensorial disturbance compels the belief of certain people. While for the *délirant chronique*, contagion is limited to those closest to him, for the *persécuté-persécutateur* it spreads beyond, and the patient finds his defenders in the press and public. It can be understood what difficulties of all kinds the specialist finds himself up against in examining these patients. It is these obstacles which explain why the useful measure of hospitalization intervenes only when, as Krafft-Ebing says, 'the patients have wasted all their possessions, wearied the courts with their interminable prosecutions, disturbed public order, destroyed respect for the law, caused their intimates to share their delusion and even avenged themselves by murdering their enemies'."

Instances of these less violent concerted delusional activities are legion and patently touch on the question of the psychology of large groups. But a few clinical examples may be referred to here. Roller (1894) described the activities of two spinster sisters, the younger of whom, after being troubled for years by "peculiar uterine sensations" developed an explanatory delusional system of a persecutory kind. In this she was joined by her sister and a brother. They published denunciatory pamphlets against their persecutors and thus came under medical observation. They had lived together for so many years that Roller could not bring himself to separate them in hospital, where of course they maintained their joint delusional system.

An Italian forensic *cause célèbre* was the acquittal, in 1892, of five young peasants, following psychiatric testimony as to their collective insanity. (A higher court held that they were nevertheless responsible and awarded short prison sentences.) They had broken into a house and threatened violence in an attempt to gain possession of a book, *Il Libro del Comando*, reputed to have magical powers. This mysterious volume was said to have belonged to a local Faustian figure, one Don Ortensio Giacobazzi, who had many years before been the local parish priest; he was believed to have sold his soul to the Devil in return for the ability to perform various miracles with the aid of this book. The peculiar relationship of these men—they were from several different families—and their strange motivation led to psychiatric examination. Cionini (1892) produced the resounding diagnosis of *Paranoia primitiva, degenerativa, sistematizzata, allucinatoria, demonologica a cinque*. The case was also discussed by Tamburini (1892) and Semelaigne (1893), and more recently reviewed by Boldrini (1938).

Kalmus (1902) reported the unique case of a chronically paranoid woman who, after twelve years, induced a similar psychosis in her husband; the latter became acutely excited and, being removed to hospital, recovered in six months. Through her husband's illness the wife came under observation, and while her husband was in hospital, was herself removed to hospital under certificate. On discharge from hospital, the husband sued for divorce. Evidence being given that, were he to resume living with his wife, there was every likelihood of his again becoming psychotic, he was granted a divorce under the then German divorce law.

Medlicott (1955) has published a remarkable case study of two adolescent girls who jointly murdered the mother of one of them. He regarded their mental state as "paranoia of the exalted type" and the shared psychosis as a *folie simultanée*. However, using the criteria put forward by Macalpine and Hunter (1955), of hypochondriasis—"body delusions"—and confusion over sexual identity, as basic disturbances in paranoid schizophrenia, these girls can be so classified. As has been suggested (Greenberg, 1954) these phenomena provide a basis for a better understanding of induced psychosis. In this case hypochondriasis was marked (Medlicott, personal communication) and the girls' homosexual relationship involved a constant confusion of sexual roles, in addition to tentative exploration of heterosexual relationships. Their basic delusional system seemed founded on a series of somatic hallucinatory experiences, culminating in the fixed belief that they each had "an extra part to their brain", which could apprehend a paradisaal "Fourth World". Their grandiosity was closely related to the fixing of these delusions by their hallucinatory experiences. The history also suggests that the younger girl, whose mother was the victim, though less intelligent, dominated the elder girl and originated the plan to murder her own mother. It thus seems probable that this was an instance of *folie communiquée* (Marandon de Montyel, 1881) rather than *folie simultanée*; the latter diagnosis almost invariably derives from the difficulty in obtaining a clear retrospective history, once the joint psychotic system has been elaborated—as strikingly demonstrated in Régis's (1880) original case-histories.

CASE HISTORY

We wish to record here a case of matricide, in which the son was assisted by his father. Although much detail of their psychiatric histories is unavailable, some points of psychopathological interest emerge. The objective facts are that the son impulsively killed his mother by blows over the head with a poker, immediately after which the father decapitated the body with a kitchen knife, apparently at the son's direction.

The son, aged 27, had a long history of psychotic disturbance; he is said to have had ideas of reference at the age of 12, and after an examination at the age of 18, cut his throat because voices urged him to kill his mother. Of high intelligence, he was considered by his fellow university students to be odd, extremely obstinate and opinionated; on occasion, he was noticeably grandiose. For about a week before the murder he complained of various somatic symptoms. Later he said that he was compelled to kill his mother "to get inner peace through a right relationship with God". While awaiting the arrival of the police after the murder, he pointed out to a neighbour a religious pamphlet in which he had previously underlined a passage recounting David's decapitation of Goliath. To the police he stated: "I got a poker and this evil spirit caused me to wallop her with the poker, as I thought she was an evil force. My father was still frightened of her, so I had to get him under my power and send him for the knife and get her head cut off. We just managed her. I have always been scared since I was a lad that I might go like I nearly went tonight, that is, mad. My father had a breakdown when I was young, and I realized that she was a Power. It was not (due to his work), it was Mum."

For several weeks after the murder he remained in a state of excitement and elation; later he said that this was "the only alternative to terrible and gloomy thoughts". For several years now he has remained in a state of mild exaltation with a sense of divine vocation.

The father, aged 56 at the time of the crime, was a man of superior intelligence, who, despite early promise, had not succeeded in his profession. This was largely the result of several prolonged hypochondriacal illnesses, which kept him at home for long periods, eventually leading to his premature retirement. His wife, according to acquaintances of the family, was a difficult, aggressive and bad-tempered woman, who effectively dominated both her husband and son. Prior to the murder, the father was described as a subdued, retiring man, who suffered from intermittent bouts of hypochondriasis with mild depression; he was not known at any time to have expressed any delusional ideas or aggressive intentions.

His version of the murder was that: "I met my son at the bus, he was crying and we came into the house. There was a quarrel about religion between him, his mother and myself. Suddenly he picked up the poker and hit her across the head while she was sitting in the chair; after one or two strokes I ran for the knife and cut her throat to save her any pain. After that we ran about on the road in front of the house, then when I saw him threatening other people with the poker . . . I was glad I caught him in case he did anyone else any harm . . . if there is any punishment in the law, I want to bear it all and not my son."

As it was established that the woman was already dead when decapitated, the husband was not charged, but sent to hospital. The son was found unfit to plead to a charge of murder. Soon after the murder, the older man passed into a stuporose condition, punctuated by impulsive aggressive outbursts. In this state he remained for several years until with increasing dementia (arteriosclerotic) he became more communicative. He would never, however, refer to his family or his wife's death.

DISCUSSION

What sense can be made of these events? Nine years previously the son had cut his own throat rather than obey impulses to kill his mother. But on the fatal occasion, the focus of longstanding hostility in both her husband and son, the mother appears to have precipitated a quarrel which roused the latent aggression of her son to a degree that overwhelmed any capacity to restrain it. On the evidence of the underlined pamphlet, it seems probable that for some time he had sustained a phantasy of himself as a divinely guided champion against evil—David against the mighty Goliath—and in this guise, destroyed his mother. Parallel with this delusional concept, his recognition of longstanding hatred of his mother, *qua* mother, can be discerned: "My father had a breakdown when I was young and I realized that she was the Power. It was not (due to his work), it was Mum."

What of the father's part? It seems likely that his son's attack mobilized his longstanding hostility to his wife, sufficiently for him to act out, at his son's direction, the phantasy of decapitating Goliath—although there is no evidence of his knowing his son's motivation in ordering the decapitation. Nor did he know that his wife was already dead, for he stated that he "cut her throat to save her pain"—patently a desperate retrospective rationalization. While his subsequent stupor might be regarded as reactive depression, the impulsive attacks on fellow-patients indicate that control of his aggression after the murder was never again complete. But his sense of guilt was clear in his appeal: ". . . if there is any punishment in law, I want to bear it all and not my son."

Now in the whole tragedy, the most singular event is the loss of control, in a matter of minutes, of murderous impulses which the husband had effectively kept from consciousness over a very long period. In that his son's emotional state and behaviour presumably corresponded to his own, hitherto unconscious phantasy, he temporarily became his son's instrument for its realization. It will be recalled that he later prevented his son from attacking other people; so, in effect, they acted jointly, only when the basic phantasy—killing the wife and mother—coincided.

This process might be described in many different conceptual frameworks: that the father experienced a temporary "dissociation"; that repressing forces suddenly failed; that he "identified" with his son; that non-specific excitement at his son's behaviour led to confusion and automatic obedience to his son's orders, and so on. But one basic phenomenon seems apparent: affect of a specific kind in the son aroused similar affect in the father, or at least evoked it in far greater degree than would otherwise have obtained. Thus what Claude (1926) called the *phénomène de résonance*—the "sympathy" or "empathy" of the older authors—appears to have provided the affective activation of the father's quiescent unconscious phantasy. This is not the place to speculate on the nature of "sympathy" or "empathy", but one may point out that the question is not elucidated by tautological invocations of "suggestion" and "identification".

SUMMARY

The literature of folie à deux in relation to crime is briefly reviewed, with special reference to crimes of violence. A case of matricide with the father's participation is reported. It is pointed out that the phenomena involved are not at all well-understood in terms of current theory.

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