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Psychiatry in film

The Oedipal dynamic of 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice' (from *Fantasia*, 1940)

Frederick Arthur Jack Simon

'Die ich rief, die Geister / Werd' ich nun nicht los'
[Those spirits I have conjured, now I cannot banish]

(J.W. Goethe, 'Der Zauberlehrling', 1797)

A Sorcerer, tired after a heavy session of conjuring, yawns and leaves his basement lair. Mickey Mouse, his apprentice, finds himself alone. In an imitation of his master, he dons the Sorcerer's hat and turns his attention to a broom. Mickey gives the broom arms, legs and a yoke with which to carry a pair of buckets. Thrilled by his own inventiveness, Mickey instructs the broom to fill the Sorcerer's cauldron with water from a well. Mickey sits back to admire his work and, overcome by tiredness, nods off. In his dreams he has mastered the stars, the skies and the seas; only to wake up with water lapping against his robes. The broom has overfilled the cauldron and the Sorcerer's chamber is flooding. In vain, Mickey tries to stop the broom, but is trampled. He spots an axe, and unable to recall his master's magic he uses force to stop the broom, smashing it into splinters. After a moment of relief, each splinter is resurrected, forming an army of berserk brooms. Together they continue their furious cauldron-filling. The flood reaches biblical proportions and Mickey starts to be dragged down by increasingly forceful whirlpools. He reaches for the spell book but can't find the right words. A door finally swings open, the Sorcerer returns and brings the chaos to an end. The sopping Mickey hands back the hat and the broom, and picks up his buckets. With a whoosh of his master's broom Mickey scuttles out of the room and returns to his chores.

With the somewhat crudely named Sorcerer, Yen Sid (Disney backwards), representing the Ur-Father, and Mickey the infant, the Oedipal imagery is dense. The story is reassuring for a multitude of reasons. The first and most literal comes when Mickey is saved from the army of foam-spraying phallic automatons by his all-powerful master/father; the second (and perhaps more significant) when the (unsuccessful) imitation of his master/father goes (almost entirely) unpunished.

Anna Freud, in her 1935 lectures *Psycho-Analysis for Teachers and Parents* (translated by Barbara Low), summarises the Oedipal conflict with pure Freudian elegance:

'Now the father plays a twofold part in the little child's life. The boy hates him as a rival [...] But in all other respects the child loves and admires his father, relies on his help, believes in his strength and omnipotence and has no greater desire than to be like him in the future. Thus there arises in the boy the quite extraordinary problem, at first quite insoluble, that he loves and admires a person and at the same time hates him and wishes him dead.'

Symbolically Mickey tries to replace his master and usurp his powers, but instead of being punished (or killed, or allowed to die in the whirlpools), he is saved and forgiven, and treasured as the object of paternal love and admiration. For an infant learning to introject the role of their father, this is a powerful story.

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