Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis: The Real Spielrein Between Jung and Freud

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Down through the decades, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis have been portrayed in many Hollywood films and in television sitcoms but not with the suggestion that they are dangerous methods.

A mere footnote in the *Standard Edition* of Freud’s works, Sabina Spielrein first emerged from oblivion as an historical person with the publication by W. McGuire of the epochal correspondence between Freud and Jung in 1974. This made no stir until 1980, when Spielrein’s German diaries and correspondence with Freud and Jung were published by Aldo Carotenuto, a devoted Italian Jungian. Carotenuto, intent on exonerating Jung, portrayed Spielrein as both seductive and schizophrenic, blaming her as the cause of their alleged sexual affair.

The legend died hard and paved the way for a cottage industry of scandal: professionals and lay protesters decrying an alleged boundary violation in therapy in journal articles, books, plays (*The Talking Cure*, by Christopher Hampton, 2002), and feature films (*The Soul Seeker*, 2002, by Roberto Faenza). New heights of sexploitation are scaled in David Cronenberg’s big-budget kitschy film, *A Dangerous Method*, with foreplay scenes of Jung spanking Spielrein and blood stained sheets of defloration, copied from Hampton’s play, the main source of the plot. The media blitz in the press was taken up in articles published in *Psychiatric News* and *Psychiatric Times*. Contrary to the claim in Wikipedia, Cronenberg’s is not a historical film but loosely fictionalized history, projecting our own morality regarding premarital sex and adultery on Spielrein and Jung at the beginning of the 20th century, pandering to popular tastes. It does not rise to the level of the German filmmaker Elisabeth Marton’s 2002 documentary, *My Name Was Sabina Spielrein*, a thoughtful and credible recreation of this fascinating trios’ relationships, or of the equally sensitive 1996 off-Broadway *Sabina*, by Willy Holtzman, a similarly delicate rendering of that drama, that leaves matters to the imagination, not for prudery’s sake but out of respect for the persons involved.

Having researched the life and work of Sabina Spielrein, I feel duty-bound to point out the many falsehoods in that film and in John Kerr’s book, *The Most Dangerous Method*, published in 1993, the other source of the screenplay. Kerr’s main source was Carotenuto and he did not yet know of the Swiss psychiatrist Bernard Minder who published Spielrein’s clinical chart or the existence of a Russian archive. My publications about Spielrein’s life and work started in 1996. Here are the historical facts.

1. The Spielrein drama did not initiate the historic correspondence of Freud and Jung, nor was she ever the cause of their breakup. The first to write was Freud, in 1906, thanking Jung for sending him his new book, *Diagnostic Association Studies*. They went on to developed a strong professional friendship with Jung appointed president of the fledgling International Psychoanalytic Association and editor in chief of the first psychoanalytic journal and chosen by Freud’s to be his crown prince. From the beginning, Jung expressed doubts about the universal validity of Freud’s sexual etiology of the neuroses and even more so of psychoses, later disagreeing with Freud’s interpretation of the Schreber case in 1911. Jung went on to substitute Freud’s libido theory with his own de-sexualized version libido in 1912 and attacked Freud’s personally whereupon Freud terminated their relationship in 1913.

2. Later in 1906 Jung anonymously reported to Freud about “treating an hysteric with your method. Difficult case, a 20-year old Russian girl student, ill for six years.” However, by 1906 Spielrein was no longer a patient, for she was Jung’s inpatient at the famed Burghizli hospital for nine months, from 1904 to 1905, and was now his student at the Zurich University School of Medicine. Spielrein wrote to Freud in 1909: “Four and a half years ago Dr. Jung was my doctor, then he became my friend and finally my “poet,” i.e., my beloved.” In 1999 I published hitherto unknown Spielrein letters showing what Spielrein meant by poetry: tender love, no sexual intercourse, and hopes to
3. John Kerr wrote in his book: “For myself, I find it at least plausible that the two stopped short of intercourse” (p. 224). In a 1999 paper I presented unpublished Russian letters exchanged between Spielrein and her mother stating and excerpts from her still unpublished Russian diary, stating the same: she stated she never crossed that boundary with Jung. Spielrein dreamt of marrying Jung but her mother told her to abandon such fancies. Whether she and Jung did or did not is not for us to prejudge or conclude. It could not have happened while she was an inpatient, nor in any office, for there was no record of any subsequent treatment or fees paid. Conclusion: no treatment, no boundary crossing.

4. On the other hand, Jung, who married one of the richest brides in Switzerland to become rich himself, confessed to Freud the issues he had with “polygamous components” in his marriage. In her 2005 official Jung biography Deirdre Bair documented Jung’s womanizing behavior and his being threatened with divorce by his wife. Jung made up nonexistent difficulties with Spielrein as patient instead of asking Freud for an analysis of his adulterous proclivities.

5. Between 1906 and 1909, Jung continued to mention Spielrein anonymously a few times (eg, “A female patient has kicked up a vile scandal solely because I denied myself the pleasure of giving her a child”). But this was no public scandal written about in the papers; the scandal was Jung’s indignation when he suspected Spielrein of spreading malicious slander about him. It turned out it was another woman who did the slandering such that the “scandal” was just a storm in the teapot. In 1909 it was Spielrein who finally came forward in a letter to Freud about her disappointments with Jung. Jung and Spielrein resolved their dispute in short order and continued their friendship, worked on her dissertation, and corresponded for years.

6. Jung’s talking in the film about the “method” he allegedly invented is false, as is his calling it psychanalyse, in French, which does not make sense for he was a German Swiss. Jung learned the method from Freud, by reading The Studies on Hysteria and The Interpretation of Dreams and other writings and by the many discussions about it and other patients they had in person, starting in 1907, and in their letters.

Down through the decades, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis have been portrayed in many Hollywood films and in television sitcoms but not with the suggestion that they are dangerous methods because sexual emotions are stirred up in therapy, or because boundary crossings happen regularly and frequently rather than sporadically, contrary to professional ethics, to become lawsuits that may wreck professional careers. It is thus a mystery why so many psychiatrists and psychoanalysts have lavished so much attention and praise on a mediocre film that has not only disappointed some Jungians and Freudians but many other viewers as well.

References/Suggested Reading

• Lothane Z. Review of Jung A Biography, by Deirdre Bair. Boston/NewYork/London: Little, Brown and
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• Lothane Z. The snares of seduction in life and in therapy, or what do young Jewish girls (Spielrein)
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