The Therapist Who Mistakes Himself *for the King*

On the temptation of symbolic omnipotence

Patrick F. Woodtli
M.Sc., Psy.D. · Clinical psychologist · December 2025

Extending Lacan's remark that a king who believes he is a king is no less mad than a man who believes he is a king[1], one may question the position of the therapist who identifies with the function he occupies to the point of confusing it with his being.

The danger does not lie only in crude or caricatural narcissism. It can lodge itself in the most refined forms of care: the therapist-as-teacher who "enlightens," the therapist-as-benefactor who "knows what is good," the therapist-as-oracle whose interpretation is law, the guardian of the frame who ends up embodying the Law itself, or again the "transcendent" therapist who thinks of himself as a pure apparatus, outside the game.

In all these cases, the same movement is at work: *the function is taken for the being*. The clinician ceases to inhabit a symbolic place and becomes its owner. He is no longer "the one who, within this frame, welcomes, thinks, interprets, contains"; he becomes "the one who knows," "the one who is right," "the one who holds the truth of the other." This shift, often imperceptible, is precisely what Lacan calls the madness of the king.

Clinical practice, on the contrary, requires the therapist to remain divided, traversed by doubt, by not-knowing, by the enigma of what is at play. He is not so much the one who possesses knowledge as the one who consents to be the place where the patient's unconscious knowledge may come into being. This presupposes that he does not identify entirely with the figure of the analyst, but occupies that place in a supple, reversible way, capable of self-critique.

© 2025 Patrick F. Woodtli · All rights reserved · No reproduction without the author's permission · pfwoodtli.com

From a Winnicottian standpoint, one might say that the therapist-king stops playing. He "plays the shrink" instead of letting himself enter a shared area of play, where his interventions are not decrees but proposals, open to being refused, diverted, transformed by the patient. True analytic authority does not come from imposed mastery, but from the capacity to sustain a space where the subject can take psychic risks without being captured.

In this sense, resisting the royal temptation means accepting that the patient will not always recognize us as we would wish to be recognized, that he will use us according to his needs, that he will sometimes put us "in the wrong place" within his psychic economy. It means giving up the idea of coinciding fully with the figure of the ideal analyst, and consenting instead to be a transitional object: partial, fallible, yet useful to the story being woven.



[1] Jacques Lacan, "Propos sur la causalité psychique" (1946), in *Écrits*, Paris, Seuil, 1966; trans. Bruce Fink, "Presentation on Psychical Causality," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, New York, W. W. Norton, 2006.

© 2025 Patrick F. Woodtli · All rights reserved · No reproduction without the author's permission · pfwoodtli.com