

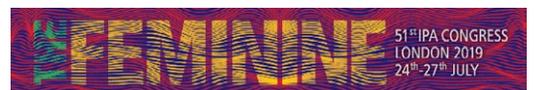
A **Routledge** FreeBook

# THE FEMININE

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group



INTERNATIONAL  
PSYCHOANALYTICAL  
ASSOCIATION



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 3 • **ABOUT THE IPA / FOREWORD**
- 4 • **INTRODUCTION**
- 6 • **1. THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS**  
*From *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation: The Feminine-Maternal Origins of Responsibility for the Other* by Viviane Chetrit-Vatine*
- 24 • **2. THE FEMALE BODY AS A CULTURAL PLAYGROUND**  
*From *The Female Body: Inside and Outside* edited by Ingrid Moeslein-Teising and Frances Thomson Salo*
- 34 • **3. KEEPING ENVY IN MIND: THE VICISSITUDES OF ENVY IN ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD**  
*From *Envy and Gratitude Revisited* edited by Priscilla Roth and Alessandra Lemma*
- 49 • **4. ARE WOMEN STILL IN DANGER OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD?**  
*From *On Freud's "Femininity"* edited by Leticia Glocer Fiorini and Graciela Abelin-Sas Rose*
- 63 • **5. TRAUMATIC SEDUCTION AND SEXUAL INHIBITION** *From *On Freud's "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety"* edited by Samuel Arbiser and Jorge Schneider*



## ABOUT THE IPA / FOREWORD

### ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL PSYCHOANALYTICAL ASSOCIATION

The IPA is a membership organisation – we exist because of our members, and for their benefit. One of our primary aims is to foster and enhance members’ sense of participation in and belonging to an international psychoanalytic organization and community. The IPA exists to advance psychoanalysis. It is the world’s primary accrediting and regulatory body for the profession, and our mission is to ensure the continued vigour and development of the science of psychoanalysis.

### FOREWORD

The IPA and Routledge have edited this stimulating online free book to celebrate the 51st IPA International Congress on “The Feminine”. Psychoanalytic theory and practice have an important part to play in addressing this current theme of intense debate. It is a subject that calls us to revisit many notions and to focus on many relevant issues that affect the everyday life and experiences of both women and men.

This free e-book is an embodiment of the Congress theme, since it gathers book chapters of different IPA authors that work on this topic from various perspectives. It invites us to a reading journey that clearly shows how such a wide theme as “The Feminine” inspires many authors to write pieces that are not only defined by their theoretical backgrounds but also by their own singularities and interests. The different chapters give us an idea of the direction the topic of The Feminine is currently taking.

I enthusiastically invite you to read this free e-book and to make the most of the invaluable opportunity it provides for debate on an issue that is currently engaging the whole world.

**Virginia Ungar**

President, International Psychoanalytical Association



# INTRODUCTION

*The Feminine* has been put together to showcase material drawn from books in the IPA's portfolio of series that is concerned very broadly with The Feminine.

In this FreeBook, you will find explorations of various topics such as the female body, motherhood, sexuality, and Freud's views on femininity. We hope this will provide a taste of the quality and depth of the material in the various IPA book series on the Feminine in particular, and of the writing on many other cutting-edge topics within psychoanalysis more generally.

## CHAPTER 1

Consider the question of ethics as responsibility for the other.

## CHAPTER 2

Explores the vicissitude of the disposability of the female body.

## CHAPTER 3

Draws on Klein's work to consider the role of envy in adolescent motherhood.

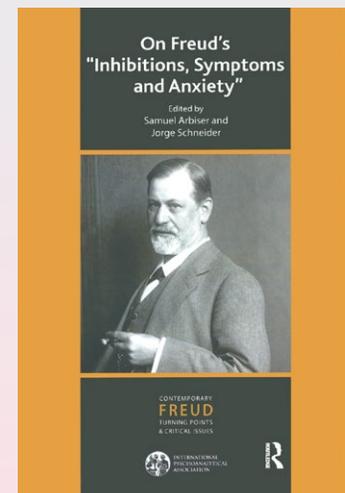
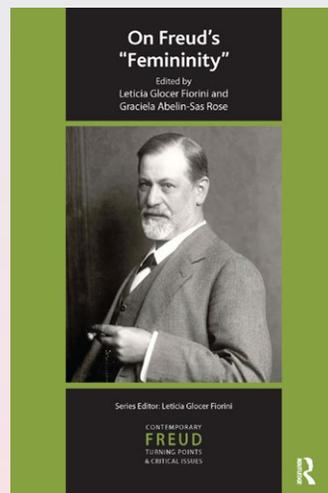
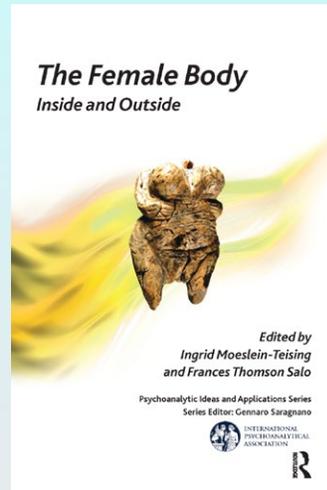
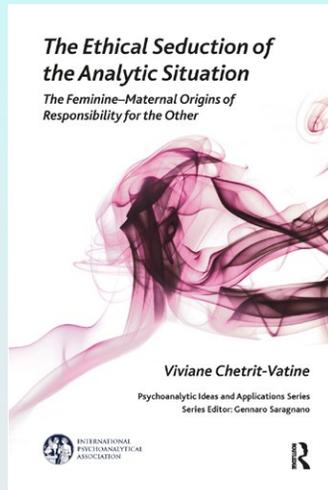
## CHAPTER 4

Explores how clinical data since Freud's time has changed our understanding of women.

## CHAPTER 5

Examines obsession and phobias in relation to sexual and traumatic experiences of women.

# READ THE LATEST CHAPTERS ON FEMININITY WITH THESE KEY TITLES



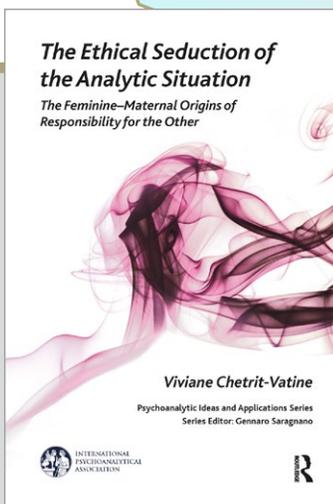
**SAVE 30%** ON THESE TITLES WHEN YOU ORDER ONLINE. SIMPLY ENTER YOUR SOCIETY DISCOUNT CODE [IPA30](#) AT THE CHECKOUT.

EXPLORE YOUR [IPA MEMBER PAGE](#)

CHAPTER

# 1

## THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS



This chapter is excerpted from

*The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation: The  
Feminine-Maternal Origins of Responsibility for the Other*

by Viviane Chetrit-Vatine.

©2014 Routledge. All rights reserved.

[LEARN MORE >](#)

# THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS

Viviane Chetrit-Vatine

Excerpted from *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation*

I am now going to consider the question of the foundations of ethics as responsibility for the other, in as much as it is bound up with the question of the feminine–maternal dimension in the human being.

I shall begin by making three assertions, which I shall come back to:

- to this day, no human being has developed elsewhere than in a uterus, in a human matrix;
- every adult in charge of a child is reminded of his or her own originary encounter with the feminine–maternal dimension of his or her first objects;
- this encounter, in the modalities set out above, is at the origin of the human being's capacity for responsibility for the other.

In order to reflect on the feminine–maternal origins of the human capacity for responsibility for the other, it is necessary to conceive of the feminine as going hand in hand with the maternal instead of falling into the classical alternative (maternal or feminine).

## THE FEMININE ORIGINS OF SEXUALITY, ACCORDING TO ANDRÉ'S PRIMACY OF THE PHALLUS?

When I discovered this work, entitled *Aux origines féminines de la sexualité* (André, 1995), I was already familiar with André's work and I knew that it was deeply inspired by Laplanche's thought. I thought I would find elements in it corroborating my own propositions. From the title alone, I imagined that the following thesis would be developed: at the beginning there is the woman, the mother, who proffers enigmatic messages to her child and who thus finds herself at the origin of his unconscious and, consequently, of his psycho-sexuality. (Aulagnier (1975) alludes to this thesis in her major work *The Violence of Interpretation*.) For my part, I already wanted, at that stage in my research, to insist on the no less ethical content of these messages and to propose the complementary hypothesis of the "feminine origins of responsibility for the other".

André's thesis is indeed based on Laplanchean thought. The parental other is quite systematically designated as the adult other, without specifying the gender. I had expected to discover a thesis specifying the importance of the feminine dimension of the other, the seductive other who proffers such messages.

# THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS

Viviane Chetrit-Vatine

Excerpted from *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation*

However, that is not his thesis; what interests him is the feminisation of the little human being, boy or girl, resulting from the *primal breach* originating in the messages compromised by the unconscious of the adult who is caring for the child.

Finally, this thesis, which I am taking up, enabled me to envisage the idea of a dual primal breach (*effraction*), consisting as much of the feminine as the maternal/matricial dimension of the adult caretaker.

For André, this primal breach is of a phallic order. He refers (1995, pp. 10–23, 45), in fact, to the *case of Dora* and to Freud's (1919e) article "A child is being beaten". For him, an adult intervenes in his or her phallic dimension—phallic, because it is penetrating, "intromitting". (We have seen that Laplanche differentiates between intromission and implantation. André only uses the term "intromission", thereby indicating, perhaps, that he is interested in the enigmatic messages that cannot be translated, but it is certainly also because this term is associated quite automatically with the hypothesis of a phallic quality to primal seduction.)

However, he criticises the way Freud and Lacan cling to the primacy of the phallus, along with their obliteration of the existence of the vagina as well as the uterus, which is even less visible than the vagina but obviously part of feminine sexuality and the vehicle of a considerable amount of fantasy activity in both men and women (Guignard, 1999). I would also add here the role of the breasts as significant erogenous zones as such, and hugely significant objects of fantasy (Parat, 2006), along with the vulva, which is "particularly unrepresentable" (Schaeffer, 2008). André points out that Freud himself situated the mother at the origin of infantile sexuality in the *Three Essays* (1905d) as well as in his text on Leonardo da Vinci (1910c).

Yet, in his writings, as if by an automatic reflex, the father returns in force. He acknowledges this himself in his introduction: as a male author he emphasises, he says, "the instinctual aspect of the feminisation of each human infant and not its identificatory aspect", which, in his view, might more naturally be the theoretical interest of a female author. Thus, it seems that the instinctual aspect of feminisation is of phallic origin. It is in so far as the seductive other is phallic that he or she creates the feminisation of the little human being, whether the latter is born male or female. In the end, if André accords decisive importance to the intersubjective situation of seduction in the constitution of primitive femininity, the key role is attributed to the father's penetrating desire (1995, p. 113). In my opinion, this is to bypass rather too quickly the mother's desire, awakened through her contact with the infant, in particular during breast-feeding. This desire is no less penetrating and,

# THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS

Viviane Chetrit-Vatine

Excerpted from *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation*

in my view, eminently feminine. Indeed, he comes back to this point when he writes, "But before the mouth, there is the breast, the breast of the mother, of a sexually mature adult, of a woman whose sexuality, essentially unconscious, is dominated by genitality" (André, 1995, p. 114, translated for this edition).

The phallic nature of the breast has been stressed (Lanouzière, 1992, cited in André, 1995, p. 114), coinciding with traditional Jewish perspectives attaching masculine attributes to a woman's breasts as well as to her hair. It is true, that hair and breasts are located, like the penis, in a visible space. Is it justified, however, to "reduce" them to phallic symbols?

Levinas did not avoid the drift of phallic primacy either. As Coblence (1994) has rightly noted, "By reducing alterity too swiftly to difference, and consequently to femininity, since 'femininity is the very quality of difference' (Levinas, 1948, p. 36), there is a risk of the feminine being dissolved in the categories of phallic logic" (cited in André, 1995, p. 10, n. 7, translated for this edition).

Coblence (1994) reports the following proposition of Levinas: "To love is to fear for the other, to assist him in his weakness, even prior to meeting him" (p. 175, translated for this edition). But she rightly emphasises that he closes his proposition again by passing from the loved woman to the relation with the same, since it is the relation between the father and the son. "For the Levinas of *Time and the Other*," she writes, "the passivity linked to Eros, that which is bound up with ambiguity, cannot be contained." She observes shrewdly how a shift occurs in Levinas's work: she writes,

Maternity is distanced from fecundity, and thus from Eros. He separates ethical fragility and feminine fragility, fecundity and love, the mother and the lover ... The encounter with alterity leads to an impasse; a woman does not have the "height" or distance (*hauteur*) required for ethics; a woman is "one who contemplates with ethics in view" [here Coblence is citing Chalier, 1982, p. 92]. (Coblence, 1994, pp. 175–176, translated for this edition)

Levinas returns to the all too familiar division between the private sphere as feminine and ethics as masculine! And though, as I pointed out earlier, maternity assumes its full rights again in *Otherwise than Being*, as exposure to the other, as risk, as hospitality (the "psyche as the maternal body") (1974a, p. 67), this body, according to Coblence, is devoid of all femininity.

## THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS

Viviane Chetrit-Vatine

Excerpted from *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation*

Here, Lichtenberg-Ettinger introduces some contradictory elements into the discussion. In an interview with Levinas (1997b, p. 214, 219–220), we can find the following dialogue, which she cites as evidence of an evolution in Levinas' thought.

*Levinas (EL):* Woman is the category, the ecstasy of the future. It is the possibility which consists in saying that the life of another human being is more important than my own; that the death of the other is more important to me than my own death; that the Other comes before me; that the Other counts more than I do; that the value of the other is asserted before my own. In the future there is what might happen to me; and there is also my death.

*Lichtenberg-Ettinger (L-E):* So could we say that the depths of the feminine are the ultimate measure of responsibility? Or the ultimate measure of the ethical relation?

*EL:* Yes, that is *Keduscha*. [Hebrew for Holiness] (translated for this edition)

Here, the feminine–maternal order is definitely present, but nothing indicates that Levinas has abandoned the sexual/maternal split; woman seems to be nothing but maternity.

Phallic primacy, which is no doubt linked to the “necessity” of maintaining a strict separation between the sexual and the maternal, is a common and widespread “symptom”. André speaks of a human phenomenon that he regards as unavoidable: the castration anxiety aroused in a man by the feminine in the other and in himself. However, if “fellatio succeeds a feed in fantasy, because it preceded it in the fantasies of the caring adult” (André, 1995, p. 114, translated for this edition), is it not possible that in the fantasies of the caring adult, of the one giving the breast, another scenario might be at the origin of a fantasy giving shape to the responsibility for the other, a fantasy, for instance, proceeding from the feminine/maternal order in her? Could this be the fantasy of offering herself as pasture, “a passivity more passive than all passivity”, which could be regarded either as the height of indecency or the summum of self-giving? For this to be considered as a pure act of self-giving, it would first have to be divested of any sexual connotations, of any form of eroticism, for the combination of this offer with the sexual is prone to arouse fears of incest and to be intrusive for the psyche. Is there not a sexual pleasure involved in this gift of the breast which is all the greater in that it is strengthened by the narcissistic pleasure of being able to help the infant grow, of giving a surplus of life?

# THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS

Viviane Chetrit-Vatine

Excerpted from *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation*

## PRIMACY OF PASSIVITY?

For Freud, it is not the fear of castration that is the cause of anxiety in a woman, but, rather, the fear of “losing the love of the object”. However, clinical experience does not always confirm such a division. André’s answer is that the feminine is common to both boys and girls. He writes,

The fear of losing the object’s love, which is a primitive form of anxiety, is common to the infant – regardless of its gender – and to the feminine; which means we have to think about how the latter overlaps with the infantile, well before the construction of the oedipal complex. (1995, p. 2. translated for this edition)

In opposition, then, to Freud’s hypotheses culminating in the idea of a little girl, initially masculine in character, who merely lacks a penis to feel happy, André puts forward his own conception of a primary feminine dimension in infants of both sexes, writing

Freud’s formulation, ‘fear of losing the object’s love’, however laborious it may be, contains two precious indications. Constructed in the third person, it underscores simultaneously the primacy of the other and the passivity that results from it ... The first lived sexual experiences, those that combine once and for all human sexuality and infantile life and which colour the first maternal ministrations, are ‘*naturally of a passive character*’ (Freud, 1931b, p. 236).... First, it is a question of passivity. The little human discovers that the experience of passivity and submission to the goodwill of the other are at the origins of sexuality, even if the identification with the seducer is as hasty as possible. (André, 1995, p. 2, translated for this edition)

Further on, he adds, “passivity enters psychoanalysis with the theory of seduction” (1995, p. 4, translated for this edition).

Thus, I posit at the origins of the maternal/matricial order, at the origins of ethics, this same experience of passivity and interpellation by the fragility of the other, even if retroactively (*après-coup*), in relation to primal passivity, it may be experienced in a regressive situation as a submission to the goodwill of the other, the persecuting baby. In keeping with the hypotheses formulated above, my conception of ethical seduction entails the following question: could it be that this deep anxiety in man also

# THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS

Viviane Chetrit-Vatine

Excerpted from *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation*

stems from the fact that, as an infant, he or she was breached not only by messages compromised by the adult unconscious, and particularly by the unconscious of the woman and mother who, quite apart from being seductive and nourishing, also had unlimited responsibility for him or her? For she herself was breached, intruded upon, by the interpellation of her child's fragility, by his total dependence, and was not always in a condition to respond to this interpellation. (We can see the outlines here of the hypothesis according to which a sense of guilt results from this imposed responsibility which cannot always be assumed, but from which it is equally impossible to escape.)

Drawing on the first Freudian developments and the traces that bear witness to them, Laplanche proposed a thorough recasting of the theory of seduction, generalising it to the situation (at once anthropological and empirical) in which, in the first moments of life, an unbalanced psycho-sexual encounter takes place between an infant and an adult whose ministrations and love, without their realising it, necessarily communicate the sexual unconscious. Taking this recasting as his starting point, André would propose the hypothesis "of a continuity between the position of the child, who is inevitably seduced, and the feminine position" (1995, p. 5, translated for this edition).

After Laplanche, he takes up a citation from Freud, which formulates with the requisite force the inevitable combination of maternal love, with its seductive components, both passionate and ethical, with the "necessary confusion between primary love, maternal care, and the most incompatible sexuality":

A mother's love for the infant she suckles and cares for is something far more profound than her later affection for the growing child. It is in the nature of a completely satisfying love-relation, which not only fulfils every mental wish but also every physical need; and if it represents one of the forms of attainable human happiness, that is in no little measure due to the possibility it offers of satisfying, without reproach, wishful impulses which have long been repressed and which must be called perverse. (Freud, 1910c, p. 117)

I am wondering about "the long repressed impulses" in the case of mothers/women who are satisfied by their husbands/lovers, and I want to consider the projective effect of a Freud who was himself rather frustrated and certainly very excited by the situation just mentioned. I retain the idea, however, of an infant who is penetrated

# THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS

Viviane Chetrit-Vatine

Excerpted from *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation*

by the intrusion of maternal messages, and follow André's hypothesis of a primitive femininity "which is already a form of psychic processing, an elaboration, while remaining very close to the primary intrusion" (1995, p. 5, translated for this edition).

Strangely enough, Levinas speaks the same language:

The I (*Je*) – or me (*moi*) – approached as responsibility is stripped bare, exposed to being affected, more open than any opening, that is, not open to the world which is always proportionate to consciousness, but open to the other that it does not contain. (1993, p. 159)

Later, he writes,

The ethical relationship is not a disclosure of something given, but an exposure of the "me" [*moi*] to another, prior to any decision ... Here a sort of violence is undergone, a trauma at the heart of myself [*moi-même*], a claiming of this Same by the Other, a backwards movement of intentionality. The extreme tension of the command pressed upon me by another; a command prior to any opening on my part; a traumatic hold of the Other upon the same. This is a hold I discover in the extreme urgency that calls for my help, to the point where I always come too late, for there is no time to wait for me. We can call this way of laying claim to me, of stirring within me *animation* (which is not a metaphor; I am animated by the other), or again, *inspiration*. And it is in the ethical situation that the latter word receives its proper sense; it is when one uses it to speak of a poet that it is metaphorical. In our sense, it is an *alteration without alienation*. The psyche is that animation and inspiration of the Same by the Other. It is translated into a fission of the core of the subject's interiority by way of its assignation to respond, which leaves no refuge and authorises no escape ... If this alteration is the psyche, then the psyche is a seed of madness ... (Levinas, 1993, pp. 187–188)

To return to André's book, there is, therefore, an intrinsic connection between seduction and femininity, one that can be elucidated in the light of Laplanche's hypothesis of primal seduction. There is an equally important link with passivity. "Understanding what necessarily articulates the seduced and the feminine," writes

# THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS

Viviane Chetrit-Vatine

Excerpted from *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation*

André, “presupposes that we leave the register of psychopathology for one of the widest generality, namely, that of the human being” (1995, p. 109, translated for this edition). By passing from the perverse father to the mother of primary care and of the first important moments of excitation, Freud made a step in this direction. As we saw earlier (see Part II), it was Laplanche who took up Freud’s first intuitions in the *Project* (1895), and of the infant in a state of helplessness (Fr. *dés-aide*; G.W., *Hilfslosigkeit*), necessarily in distress at the beginning of life, and compared these intuitions with the encounter between a mother/woman, an adult mother endowed with adult sexuality and a sexual unconscious.

Laplanche emphasises that the position of the infant’s primal/originary passivity is inherent to the infant–adult situation. To show the general aspect of passivity, Laplanche refers to Leibnitz (1714), who writes in his *Monadology*: “The creature is said to act outwardly insofar as it has perfection, and to be acted upon insofar as it is imperfect” (§ 49, 50, cited in André, 1995, p. 109, n. 10). Passivity is, thus, held to be of the order of imperfection. André proposes that activity should be seen as a defence in relation to passivity. Originary passivity, on the side of the infant, he adds, is that which characterises the general situation of seduction, that which unites the newborn infant in distress and the caring adult. Consequently, he proposes that

If the girl owes nothing in terms of activity to the boy, it is not because she is a little man (as Freud (1933, p.118) maintained). Rather, it is because identification with the active pole allows her, like the boy, to master, to bind, that which is excessive in the passive position, that which overwhelms the integrative capacities of the ego. This excess resides in the conjunction of instinctual passivity and of the “seduced”. (André, 1995, p. 120, translated for this edition)

The idea of instinctual passivity then appears, which he formulates positively in these terms: “*Enjoy what happens (to you)*; participate with enjoyment in what penetrates you, intrudes upon you, that is to say the link between passivity and *the inside*”. Additionally, he proposes that “Passivity as an instinctual aim ‘takes over from’ the ego’s passivity in the face of an instinctual attack, which itself succeeds the traumatic passivity of the newborn child faced with the adult world” (1995, p. 122, translated for this edition).

Is this not what is reactualised in the mother during her pregnancy, and later in the relation at the breast with her infant, who is as much penetrated as penetrating?

# THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS

Viviane Chetrit-Vatine

Excerpted from *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation*

If, for André, this is what makes it possible to understand the repudiation of femininity in both men and women, paradoxically it is perhaps also what makes it possible to understand the seductive nature of Levinasian philosophy. In effect, it offers a reconciliation with this first feminine dimension in so far as it is linked—quite unconsciously for the philosopher and certainly for many of his readers—with that of the giving mother; a mother giving herself, in all her unconscious immodesty, the summum of seduction in her conscious dis-inter-ested love, for the other. It was not Levinas who would lend support to these considerations, for he wrote, “There is no libido in the relationship with the other; it is the anti-erotic relationship *par excellence*” (1993, p. 174).

Commenting on Levinas’s text, Rolland offers the following reflection:

Is the transcendence of the desirable – beyond interestedness and the eroticism in which the beloved stands – possible? ... In order for disinterestedness to be possible in desire, in order for the desire, beyond being, not to be an absorption, the desirable must remain separated within desire: near, yet different – which is, moreover, the very meaning of the word ‘saint’. [This is only possible if the desirable] commands me to the undesirable *par excellence*: to the other person (ibid., pp. 222–223). [The undesirable other is the other person received “not in the appeal of his face, but in the nakedness and misery of his flesh!”]. (2000[1993], p. 303 n. 12)

Here, we have the notion of love without Eros: Levinas makes a split between God as Other, as a desirable, lovable Good, and the other, the undesirable other person. In so doing, he justifies the split between ethics and responsibility for the other on the one hand and the erotic, the desirable, the loved one, thus the site of my concupiscence, on the other.

However, I draw on Levinas (1993) to express in his terms what takes place, in my view, in the mother, in her relation with her child, and which is at the basis of responsibility for the other. He writes,

‘Finite freedom’ is neither first or initial for the willing that it animates *wills* on the ground of a passivity more passive than any passivity, on the ground of a passivity that cannot be taken charge of. This freedom is finite because it is a relationship with

# THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS

Viviane Chetrit-Vatine

Excerpted from *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation*

another. It remains freedom because this other is another person [*cet autre est autrui*]. Finite freedom consists in doing what is our vocation, that is, in doing what no one other than myself can do. Limited in this way by the other, it remains freedom. It comes from a heteronomy that is inspiration—an inspiration that is the very pneuma of psychic life. The subject's for-the-other, which is this finite freedom, cannot be interpreted as a guilt complex, or as natural goodwill ... nor again as a tendency to sacrifice. (pp. 178–179)

The point I want to emphasise here is: neither guilt nor natural goodwill, nor a tendency to sacrifice.

## NEITHER GUILT NOR NATURAL GOODWILL NOR A TENDENCY TO SACRIFICE

André positions himself differently to Freud with respect to masochism. As far as an examination of the question in Freud is concerned, I refer the reader to André's critical recapitulation of it (1995, pp. 124–126). As for his own thesis, André upholds "both the necessary and primitive character of the relations between masochism and femininity". However, this masochism is not linked to the "castrated" condition of the woman, but to his hypothesis of a psychogenesis of femininity as an elaboration of the intromitted and naturally passive position of the child in relation to the intrusion of the sexual adult. Thus, this hypothesis associates *jouissance* and penetration/intrusion. It upholds both the necessary and primitive character of the relations between masochism and femininity. André writes,

At the time of the beginnings the most elementary level in which the pair masochism–femininity is rooted resides in the constitution of the unconscious itself and concerns masochism before femininity is associated with it. 1995, p. 127, translated for this edition]

So, in the beginning, there is pain! It is true that *jouissance* can be derived from co-libidinal excitation linked to pain. It will enable the suffering person to survive the pain. This pain can even, in the case of a perverse organisation, become the condition of this pleasure, at the risk of life itself (see Faure-Pragier, 2000).

Are we obliged, though, to uphold the primary character of masochism? If Laplanchean theory, which accords an "inaugural and founding" dimension to

# THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS

Viviane Chetrit-Vatine

Excerpted from *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation*

seduction, makes it possible to conceive of masochism as lying at the basis of every perverse organisation, does that necessarily imply that masochism is at the foundations of all human organisation? André writes,

Such masochism lies in the split generating the unconscious itself, in the return of the repressed in as much as it mingles intrusion and excitation. Pain begins with an excess of pleasure, with the powerlessness of the infant to metabolise the immoderate nature of fantasy. (1995, p. 129, translated for this edition)

At what point is this return of the repressed, which cannot be metabolised sufficiently, linked to an adult world that is not loving enough, not “binding” enough (Bion, 1962b)? An adult world that is itself overtaken, invaded, by its fantasmatic world, which is constantly experienced as excessive or denied as such? I nevertheless want to propose the idea that intrusion is not necessarily pain. It can be combined from the outset with a position of welcome – a position that is as much conscious as preconscious or unconscious on the mother’s part.

For André, Schaeffer evokes “an extremely close relation, a relation of quasi-structural superposition between masochism and femininity”, while insisting on the proximity between “the experience of *jouissance* and the welling up of anxiety”. Citing her, he writes,

Everything that is intolerable for the ego: passivity, loss of control, the erasure of limits, the intrusion of penetration, the abuse of power, depossession, is precisely what contributes to sexual *jouissance* ... defeat, in all the senses of the word, is the condition of feminine *jouissance*. (1995, p. 130 and n. 56, translated for this edition)

But Schaeffer makes an important distinction between feminine erotic masochism and moral masochism, sacrificial masochism. Psychological erotic masochism is, in her view, neither perverse nor acted; it counter-cathects moral masochism. “In unbinding,” Schaeffer (1999) writes, “it ensures the binding necessary for the cohesion of the ego so that it can undo itself and allow for very strong quantities of unbound libidinal excitation” (p. 34, translated for this edition). In this view, then, the ego has to suffer so that *jouissance* can occur, and this suffering is the condition of the binding necessary for its cohesion. Now, none of this seems at all evident to me. In

# THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS

Viviane Chetrit-Vatine

Excerpted from *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation*

fact, Schaeffer adds, “Jouissance does violence to the ego, but if the ego welcomes it, it will be enlarged; it will enrich itself with a pleasure of greater intensity” (p. 35, translated for this edition). Here, I am in agreement with Heenen-Wolff (2003) who affirms that feminine jouissance is not necessarily linked to pain, and that it can be linked to welcoming. This is also true of maternity and the capacity for responsibility for the other. So, with Faure-Pragier (1999, pp. 41–55), I wish to question the idea of primary masochism, whether feminine or moral.

## FEMININE-MATERNAL AND NARCISSISM

I should like to take this line of thinking further with some suggestions relating to the articulation between femininity and narcissism. They emphasise the factor of binding represented by Eros and, without proclaiming it openly, they temper André’s affirmations above, allowing me to concur with him more easily.

André writes,

The presentation of the psychogenesis of femininity has led us hitherto to place the accent, from breach (*effraction*) to intrusion, from intromission to penetration, on the opening up of the psycho-soma of the infant by the sexual adult. If this were the only aspect, it is not femininity that would result but, depending on the case, perversion or psychosis. Access to femininity presupposes that the penetration of the internal body is not the equivalent of evisceration or fragmentation. The gap between a seduction that is (also) structuring and psychoticising intrusion with acts of care does not lie only in the fact that the intrication of the sexual remains unconscious for the adult – if it is true that in reality the unconscious is always kept tightly sealed and out of reach of the conscious. It also lies in this ... that with the turning away which, strictly speaking, constitutes seduction, are intertwined acts of binding contributed by Eros. (1995, p. 150, translated for this edition)

He cites Laplanche, who proposes that caresses and “other forms of cuddling (also) permit the constitution and the confirmation of the total form, of the limit, of the closed envelope constituted by the skin’s surface” (p. 150 and n. 3, translated for this edition). And I agree with him when he writes, “Narcissistic pathologies are in fact pathologies of narcissism, whose source is located as much in the failures as in the excess, in

# THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS

Viviane Chetrit-Vatine

Excerpted from *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation*

the deficiencies as much as in the invasion by the (maternal) adult unconscious” (p. 150, translated for this edition). You will have noted the return to the specification—maternal—of the caring adult, which had disappeared in the course of the text. (I should like to point out that in Parts II and III of this book, I attempted to amplify these suggestions, knowing how much these “affected” (*affectés*) looks, caresses, sayings, if they are indeed linked to a capacity for responsibility for the child respecting his requirement for ethics, are at the origin of his subjectivisation, his creativity and curiosity, the richness of his psychic life, and the realisation of his potentialities.)

\* \* \*

Mary, who was told about her husband’s homosexual activities shortly before the birth of their fourth and last child, brought me a poem that she had finally managed to write after a long period of labour, entitled “Weaving love around the well”. This theme of the well from which a woman draws water to quench a man’s thirst is recurrent in biblical narratives. Mary would elaborate on this theme for several years in her psychotherapy, which she had entered after having a psychotic breakdown of the depressive type. This psychotherapy, in conjunction with neuroleptics, had avoided hospitalisation and allowed her to face the pain of betrayal, her initial blindness, and the fear of separating from a man she loved but whom she was beginning to hate without realising it, other than through hating herself.

Weaving ... commenting on Freud’s paper on femininity, Coblenz (2003) writes, “By intertwining or by separating the threads of beauty and excitation, the work of women is to weave a modest canvas aimed essentially at masking the ‘defect’ of their genital organ” (p. 27, translated for this edition). The defect of their sex?!

## TOWARDS THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS AND A PLEA FOR A NON-MASOCHISTIC PASSIVITY

I propose, then, to consider the human capacity for responsibility for the other as emanating from the feminine-maternal order in the human being.

Brun, for whom “seduction is maternal in essence”, insists on “the woman in the mother”. When I questioned her about her position, she told me in 2009,

The relationship of a daughter to her mother is based on the emergence of hatred towards the woman who is the mother as an object of desire of the man who is the father. This precocious

# THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS

Viviane Chetrit-Vatine

Excerpted from *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation*

hatred, nourished with love, will permit the development of the desire to become pregnant, the desire for a child, and the desire for maternity. The desire for a child emerges, in my view, at an extremely early stage, and has its origin in this trace of movements of hate and love. Added to this is an early identification with the father of prehistory (mother and father are undifferentiated) which paves the way for an unconscious sense of guilt which itself inaugurates the stages of separation with the first love-object, who is the mother, and identification with the lost object/refound in maternity, in the attraction for boys and in rivalry for men. There can be no deep analysis of women without approaching this early hatred for the woman who was the mother. The ties and identifications with the father are inherent to these processes. Where I feel very Freudian is in the role that must be attributed to early hatred in the necessity of separating from the first love-object, who is the mother, via the construction of the woman that she is or was. (1990b, p. 198)

I wish to emphasise here, “Precocious hatred, nourished with love, will allow for the development of the desire to become pregnant, the desire for a child, and the desire for maternity”. For Brun, the desire for a child originates in this trace of movements of hate and love.

From my point of view, this desire for a child is no less correlated with the human being’s feminine–maternal capacity to be responsible for this child. It is true that when this desire exists, it might serve as a support for this capacity, but not necessarily. It is worth asking ourselves if we should not make a difference between a conscious and an unconscious desire for a child. The conscious desire is often linked to a need for narcissistic reassurance, allowing for the illusion of an expansion of the self and/or the expression of an ego-ideal, sustained by a collective ego-ideal. (Evidence of this may be found in contemporary families in religious Jewish circles, the *Haridim*, which have an impressive number of children.) It might also be combined with the unconscious or conscious wish for reparation transmitted from generation to generation. This wish might be completely disconnected from the wish to care for a child. For some who have recently become mothers or fathers, the encounter with the actual newborn baby, the responsibility and the care that it requires, can provoke not only feelings of being destabilised, of being breached/ intruded upon (*effraction*) after the event, to which I referred earlier, but also a real

## THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS

Viviane Chetrit-Vatine

Excerpted from *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation*

inflation of overwhelming feelings of hatred. It is certainly anxiety about this potential hatred, insufficiently mingled with love, and perhaps inscribed during their own birth and childhood, which is at the origin of this lack of desire for a child. I am thinking here of two cases, one of a woman and the other of a man, neither of whom had any wish to have a child. The first, whose relationship with her mother was full of conscious feelings of hatred, hatred that had systematically been analysed, found herself, as a result of life's circumstances, with parental responsibility for her nephew and niece, and to this day she has brought them up remarkably well. It was only subsequently that she was finally able to express her own wish to have a child. In this case, the lack of desire to have a child stayed with her for a long time, whereas her capacity for emotionally invested responsibility for the other found its expression further downstream, as it were, in relation to this lack of desire.

The second case is of a patient who would begin to have suicidal thoughts as soon as his partner of the moment expressed the wish to have a child. Today, he is the responsible and emotionally invested (*affecté*) father of several children, and soon to be the father of another one, but, once again, without any conscious desire for this new paternity. The expression of his death wishes, of his hatred towards the foetus, within the setting of a long-term psychotherapy with an analyst in a setting that is a repository of ethical seduction will perhaps help, as with the first children, to liberate his capacity to be emotionally responsible for the child to be born. I will not go any further into the question of the "desire for a child" as such; I would just like to say that, in the above cases, the question of a non-masochistic feminine-maternal order has been raised.

I pointed out earlier that Faure-Pragier (1999) has developed a theory that specifically backs up the hypothesis of a non-masochistic feminine-maternal order. She writes,

When feminine identification is possible, thanks to the support represented by a mother who recognises the active role of the father, passivity can be integrated successfully. On the other hand, if the father is not recognised and does not validate his daughter as a woman for the future, the passivity becomes threatening, for it delivers her over to the mother and then masochism becomes the obligatory path to jouissance. The third object, the father, is present from the outset in the mother's desire, which is focused on someone other than the child. (p. 52, translated for this edition)

# THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS

Viviane Chetrit-Vatine

Excerpted from *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation*

In the two cases above, feminine identification was practically impossible. Not only did the mother not recognise the father's active role but the father did not validate his daughter as a woman, or his son as a man, for the future. In fact, the encounter with the parental figures caused a traumatic breach (*effraction*), without there being any possibility for the enigmatic messages from both parents to be metabolised. Analytic work made it possible for the masochistic passivity—thus, for me, pathological passivity—in each of these patients to be transformed into non-masochistic passivity, into a passivity of welcome, into a capacity for pleasure devoid of pain.

So, to return to my preliminary question concerning the maternal–feminine origins of responsibility for the other and the classically related question of primary masochism, I share the position that masochism is not an unavoidable source of *jouissance*. By the same token, I agree with the affirmation that “masochism, as an obligatory path to *jouissance*, is directly linked to the invasion of the child by the maternal sexual messages which have not been sufficiently deflected onto the other, the father, the lover” (Faure-Pragier, 1999, translated for this edition).

If the feminine–maternal messages can be envisaged as being deflected on to the father, the lover, and, in the man, on to the mother, the mistress, or any other libidinal investment, I would add that it is precisely because they contain in them this ethical aspect of responsibility for the child, a responsibility that is devoid as far as possible of guilt. Faure-Pragier considers that “the swing” between the mother's investment of the maternal dimension and her investment of the feminine dimension only seems to take account of a conscious movement. “Certainly,” she writes,

there is an alternation between the investments of night time and day time; the censorship of the woman-as-lover (*censure de l'amante*) is keeping watch, but is it linked to mechanisms of repression, of splitting? Or is the maternal a form of drive inhibited in its aim, which allows many sexual messages to persist? (Faure-Pragier, 1999, p. 52, translated for this edition)

As far as I am concerned, I would prefer to speak of a feminine-maternal dimension constituted from the outset by the ethical seduction of the adult, which is at the foundations, in the woman, of the censorship of the woman-as-lover, and, in the man, of the censorship of the man-as-lover.

We have seen that the enigmatic messages addressed to the child become for him or her a primal seduction, and are at the foundations of the formation of his or

## THE FEMININE-MATERNAL ORIGINS OF ETHICS

Viviane Chetrit-Vatine

Excerpted from *The Ethical Seduction of the Analytic Situation*

her unconscious. “The mother’s sexuality,” Faure-Pragier writes, “plays an active role here but unconsciously, partly involving the fantasies forged by her infantile sexuality”, and she continues,

The guilt that obliges the mother to operate a repression is not obligatory, but depends on the quality of the movements of integration and symbolisation which continue throughout life; they are once again particularly necessary during the disturbance created in the mother by the experience of pregnancy and giving birth. Denying the powerful maternal libidinal current and evoking the importance of masochism seem to me to be the expression of the persistence of an infantile sexual theory, the denial of the mother’s sexuality, which implies that she cannot be seductive other than mechanically, by means of the ministrations she provides. On the contrary, the mother will – fortunately – invest in her child all her narcissistic and libidinal expectations, without there being any reason in general to fear the perversion that haunts the theoreticians, at least as long as a third party is invested. (1999, p. 53, translated for this edition)

Here, I should like to add that the mother will invest in her child all her narcissistic and libidinal expectations, without fearing perversion, provided that, while making these indispensable investments, which tend to reduce her child to the same, she remains interpellated in her responsibility for him by his face and his alterity.

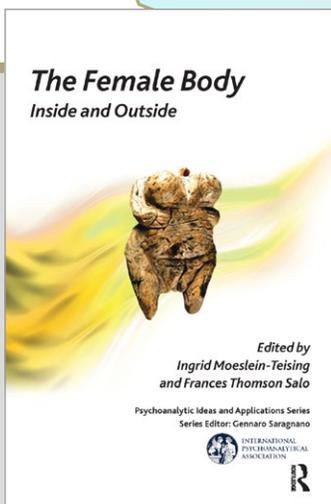
So, I do not see any incompatibility between the feminine and the maternal. They go together. The maternal consists at once of narcissistic investments, of libidinal investments, and of responsibility that takes into account the child’s alterity.

When the love of the woman-as-lover leads to the desire for a child, when having descendents becomes proof of love, love appears as the capacity to make room in oneself for the other, as responsibility. The mother, the father, the parental environment will then be said to be in a matricial position, ethical seducers of their child.

CHAPTER

# 2

## THE FEMALE BODY AS A CULTURAL PLAYGROUND



This chapter is excerpted from  
*The Female Body: Inside and Outside*  
edited by Ingrid Moeslein-Teising  
and Frances Thomson Salo.

©2013 Routledge. All rights reserved.

[LEARN MORE >](#)

# THE FEMALE BODY AS A CULTURAL PLAYGROUND

Marianne Springer-Kremser

Excerpted from *The Female Body: Inside and Outside*

## ABSTRACT

The focus of this Chapter is on the vicissitude of the disposability of the female body. After a short summary of aspects of female sexual development, the culture-specific demands and tensions arising from the interaction between cultural and psychodynamic conditions are stressed. Case vignettes from the gynecological psychosomatic outpatient's clinic will demonstrate the influence of cultural and socio-political demands on individual female suffering. Socio-political positions and regulations concerning female reproductive capacity influence pathological development, especially conflicts concerning the disposal of the female body. Finally, examples of female creativity are presented to illustrate this conflict. The process of civilisation is a modification, which the vital process experiences under the influence of a task that is set by Eros and instigated by Ananke—by the exigencies of reality; and that this task is one of uniting separate individuals into a community bound together by libidinal ties. (Freud, S.E.)

## INTRODUCTION

In my capacity as a psychoanalyst, a psychiatrist for a gynecological ward, as well as head of a psychosomatic liaison service; the many facets of suffering among female patients in connection with their bodies have consistently fascinated me, just as the pain inflicted by various institutions on the female body and psyche has outraged me (Springer-Kremser, 1997). A drawing by Aloise, a long-term patient at the clinic in Lausanne was a dominant feature in my office at the clinic. Aloise had created lovely pencil and coloured pencil drawings, mainly of women, in a simple exercise book (Figure 1). In her imagination, Aloise disposes of female bodies and she re-fashions them.

On the development of an autonomic picture of the individual person, their own body, and a conception concerning its disposability.

Freud described the ego primarily as a body-ego. Bodily functions were used as models in order to describe psychic functions. (2009) Bronstein observes, that incorporation and evacuation became models for the concepts of introjection and projection. The development of an individual coenaesthesia, (the ability to establish boundaries between oneself and others, perceptions of vulnerability and integrity, the real or symbolic meaning ascribed to individual orifices of the body (mouth, vagina, anus)), are relevant to a theory of female psychosexuality. In the following passages,

## THE FEMALE BODY AS A CULTURAL PLAYGROUND

Marianne Springer-Kremser

Excerpted from *The Female Body: Inside and Outside*

such developmental processes shall be discussed in detail, as they significantly affect the perception of the bodily disability.

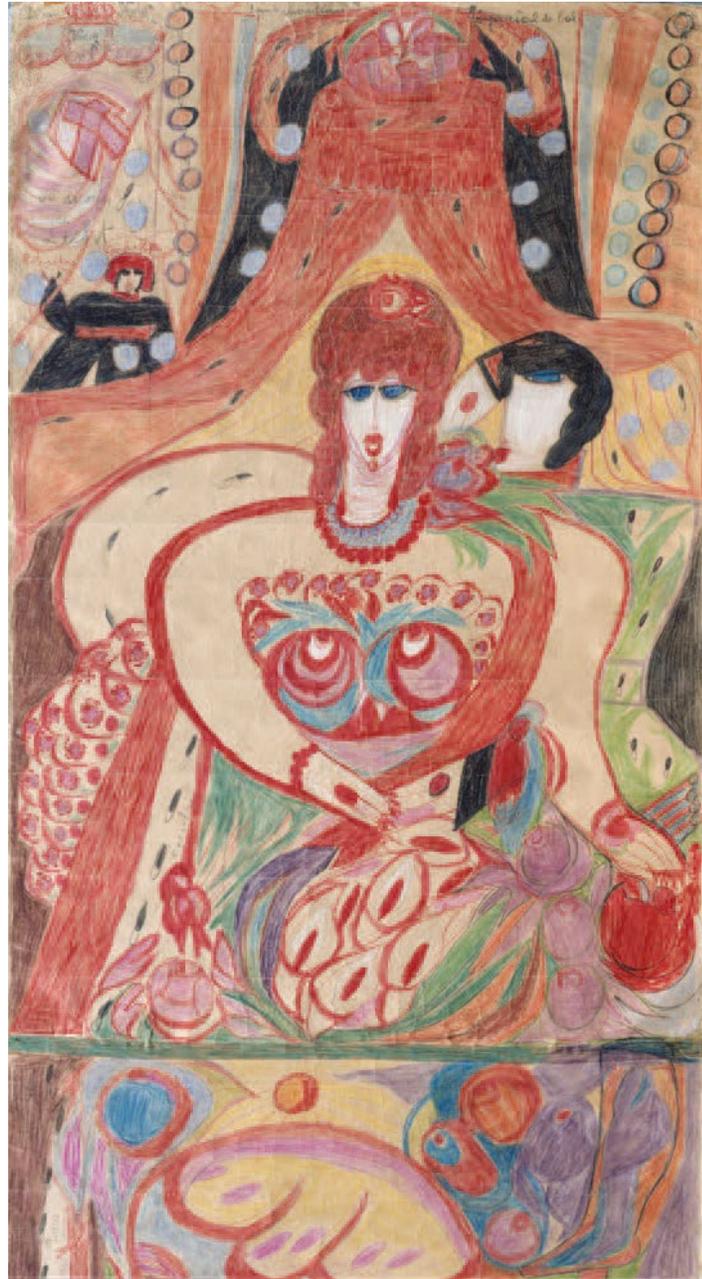


Figure 1.

# THE FEMALE BODY AS A CULTURAL PLAYGROUND

Marianne Springer-Kremser

Excerpted from *The Female Body: Inside and Outside*

## BODY PATTERNS/BODY SELF

There is no doubt that primal female sexuality influences children. The fact that there is no doubt as to the primal female sexuality of the child has influence on the child. Consequently the girl in the respective society and family will develop a feeling of being female. This feeling is furthered by vaginal sensations, among other body sensations, as has been described by Greenacre (Greenacre, 1950). The child's sexual identity also comes from the manner in which main attachment figures interact with their infantile body.

A "good enough mother" (Winnicott, 1965) has the ability to correctly identify the child's needs and react to them, whilst not ascribing her own meanings to them. When the child cried, she is capable of judging whether it is hungry, suffering from wind, or simply need affection. She will understand the source of discomfort and will find a suitable remedy. If the child's needs are misinterpreted according to the mother's needs, the child develops a primal distrust. Over time, the child, being dependent on its surroundings, loses the capacity to correctly interpret its own body-signals. This re-interpretation of the child's body signals, also the mother's exploitation of the wishes for dependency, and an extreme bondage on the instinctual drive-level, as described by Stierlin (1974), help maintain in the imagination the total disposability of the child's body by the mother.

## OBJECT RELATIONS

The smallest mental entities are unconscious fantasies, which gain special significance during adolescence. These fantasies help to establish an affective connection between an image of an object of relation, and an image of oneself. An object of relation is an object representation, even if it may be primitive and incomplete. It may include only partial-objects, for example the breast of the mother. An image of oneself can be understood as self-representation, however primitive and limited to parts. For example this may be the mouth, instead of the entire person.

The internalization of such interactions represents the initial structuring of the inner world. This inner object-relation is composed of an object-picture interacting with the self, and a self-picture interacting with the object. An affective imaging of the object picture and the self-picture under the influence of the predominant derivatives of instinctual drives at the moment of interaction.

## THE FEMALE BODY AS A CULTURAL PLAYGROUND

Marianne Springer-Kremser

Excerpted from *The Female Body: Inside and Outside*

These earliest introjections are essentially shaped by the affective conditions pervading the little girl's mind and imagination. A first internal structure emerges when entities with a similar affective valence combine. This leads to the development of good internal object images in affective connection with images of a good self, as well as to images of a bad internal object, in affective combination with a bad self, which is also consistent with a bad body self.

The positively or negatively charged self-and-object images become more and more differentiated, which makes for an increasing separation of self and object images, and a stabilization of the ego. In a further stage of development, the affective divergent images (representations, internal objects) will, by means of the synthetic function of the ego, be integrated into such images as increasingly do justice to the object of relation in its entity, as a physical and mental person.

The ego as a structure expands and improves its functions through a growing ability to use repression as a defence mechanism. Furthermore, the superego increasingly emerges as an autonomous authority with depersonalized commands, prohibitions and ideal conceptions. All this contributes to the ability to perceive and live the external world and one's own physicality with an increasing sense of reality. (Schuster, 2010)

### RECOGNITION OF SEXUAL DIMORPHISM—THE EARLY GENITAL PHASE

Between the eighteenth and the twenty-fourth month of their lives, children gradually become capable of recognizing their own sex. Boys react with an increased activity. A boy is able to touch his genitals and the penis involuntarily grows larger. It is therefore an interesting, awesome object, which needs to be protected. Girls react to the discovery of sexual dimorphism with an increasing ability to symbolize. They become creative. They are able, for example, to express themselves graphically to a greater extent (Roiphe & Galenson, 1972).

This anatomy-oriented difference may mean that little girls react with envy; they want something others have, as is often the case with children at a young age. To explore their genitals, girls have to resort to their imagination, which also explains the creative surge. The girl's envy of the penis disappears in the course of normal development; the more the girl is accepted and valued as such. The girl's fear of castration is initially related to the imagination, as the penis was taken away from the girl. Later, the fear of castration can be understood symbolically as the fear of having lost something irretrievably; to have been cut off from something indispensable.

# THE FEMALE BODY AS A CULTURAL PLAYGROUND

Marianne Springer-Kremser

Excerpted from *The Female Body: Inside and Outside*

The roots of this fear reach deeply into the mother/child symbiosis, to feelings of helplessness and the possibility of being abandoned, to the dawning awareness that child and mother are separate beings. This feeling of total helplessness is an inevitable primal feeling, which originates from the long developmental period and the resulting dependency of human beings (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1970).

The self image which emerges is not very stable; it is in a state of dynamic interaction with internal and external realities. The body also disappoints us time and again with constant changes or pain, especially in adolescence, when the integrated body experience is easily undermined (Pacteau, 1994).

## ADOLESCENCE

The way the mother deals with the infantile body becomes accentuated during adolescence. If the mother mainly satisfies her own needs for contact and affection, and the child's needs are not sufficiently realized, the girl becomes fixated on this particular treatment and on this infantile body. Every change in the infantile body and therefore also of its inner representation may be experienced as disobedience requiring punishment, as the superego watches over the identification pattern with the mother (Laufer, 1981). The loss of sexual neutrality at the beginning of adolescence poses a threat. All these confusions may lead to adolescent girls hating their body. After all, the strong sexual and aggressive content of the imagination also causes intense feelings of guilt. The mother, who used to have a stimulating as well as a protective function for the girl's body, is now perceived as adversarial. Some body modifications such as exaggerated piercing might for example be perceived as self-punishment to reduce guilt-feelings.

Adolescent girls very often have the feeling that their mother knows everything about them. The menarche puts such girls in a difficult situation, because to touch their own body, especially their genitals, means to perceive that the mother has equipped them with a body whose maturity is now experienced as superfluous, troublesome and abnormal. It is exactly this sort of tension which creates a very close bond between the girl and her mother. Manipulations with the girl's body and the feeling of absolute control by the mother, play a large role in which the disposability of the body is contested.

With the end of adolescence, the sense of reality ought to be stabilized, the identification process concluded, and a conception of the body's disposability formed. The end of adolescence however, as Blos has already noted, is open. In contrast to other civilized nations—or "primitive" ones—the rituals of our western culture do not

# THE FEMALE BODY AS A CULTURAL PLAYGROUND

Marianne Springer-Kremser

Excerpted from *The Female Body: Inside and Outside*

seem to have within them the power to empower children to become fully-fledged members of the “adult culture” with defined rights over their own bodies (Blos, 1973).

Puberty rituals in primitive cultures, despite their cruelty, clearly mark the beginning of adulthood and thus the disposability over the own body in a given culture, as the following digression shows.

## DIFFERENT FORMS OF INITIATION RITES ON DIFFERENT LEVELS OF CIVILIZATION FOR PRE-ADOLESCENT CHILDREN

Winterstein described these often very cruel initiation rites in his text, *Girls' puberty rites and their traces in fairy tales* (1928). In many cultures these rites, which are often brutal, mark the transition from child to sexually mature, socially adequate human being. This collection of puberty rites includes African countries, Australia, Indonesia, the North and South American Indians, and also East Asiatic peoples, as in Cambodia.

The following ceremonies/rites are schematically identified:

1. The girl is usually isolated after the first menstruation (darkness, solitude). She is looked after by an older woman, who brings her food. She is instructed by her in sexual matters, or, sometimes by a medicine man. The girl often occupies herself rehearsing domestic activities such as weaving, braiding, and spinning. She has to pass certain tests, such as being whipped or bitten by ants, which are supposed to prepare her for the pains of childbirth.
2. She is sometimes tattooed or painted.
3. Sexual operations are conducted (e.g., excision of the clitoris, circumcision of the small labia and artificial defloration).
4. Other rites connected with imagining death and reincarnation are performed. Among these are ablutions, baths, a new name, and new clothing.
5. The candidate is “freed” from the powers of a menstruation-demon (for example a snake) by certain rites.
6. Magical activities are designed to express the wish for easy childbirth.
7. Symbols of coitus may also play a role. Dances, songs, eating often conclude the initiation rite.
8. Immediately after the termination of her exile the girl is introduced to a sex life. Her first sexual experience is with an older man, usually a chieftain, or priest.

## THE FEMALE BODY AS A CULTURAL PLAYGROUND

Marianne Springer-Kremser

Excerpted from *The Female Body: Inside and Outside*

Formerly, in psychoanalytic interpretation, the father's incestuous inclination towards his daughter was staved off by the girl's exile. Interestingly, however, her defloration is entrusted to an elder or priest; in other words, a father substitute. The girl's defloration outside of wedlock, that is, before maritally sanctioned sexual intercourse, may also express the intention to relieve the bridegroom from a dangerous performance, which mobilizes fears of castration. For him defloration is part of a taboo. The real wounds of traditional culture do also have a symbolic meaning which can be connected to the individual psychodynamic.

The rituals in our culture e.g., bar mitzvah, bar minha, confirmation; in contrast to traditional culture, do not hold the power to help young people terminate adolescent development, and to feel themselves to be adequate members of the "adult" culture with clear ability to dispose of their body.

### CLINICAL EXAMPLES

Our present socio-cultural scenario seems to produce complex situations, which manifest themselves in conflicts/symptoms with which we are confronted in the psychosomatic outpatient clinic. In addition, the technical development, especially fertility technologies and cosmetic surgery, fosters self-damaging actions.

Intra-psychic and externalized dramas which revolve around the disposability of the own body and, as the case may be, its total disposability through others, are expressed, for example in the following:

- The wish of a twenty-two year old patient for a hysterectomy without somatic indication after long-lasting sexual abuse by her stepfather with her mother's apparent toleration. The experience of being totally disposed of by others, as in sexual assault, rape or incest, stimulates body-violating mechanisms. These mechanisms also could be seen as a desperate attempt to re-establish disposability over one's own body. Lemma describes different unconscious fantasies, which might underpin body modification and cosmetic surgery. The reclaiming fantasy, where one's own body could be experienced as container of other's (the mother's) hostile projections. Lemma suggests that "(R)emoval ... of a body part thus serves the function of rescuing the self from an alien presence, which is now felt to reside within the body; that is the modification [here the hysterectomy] is driven by what I am calling the reclaiming fantasy" (Lemma, 2010, p. 136).

## THE FEMALE BODY AS A CULTURAL PLAYGROUND

Marianne Springer-Kremser

Excerpted from *The Female Body: Inside and Outside*

- The wish of a thirty-eight year old female patient to continue futile in-vitro fertilizations (IVF) to heal an unexplained infertility. She had already had six failed IVF attempts with her husband's sperm and was assigned to the psychosomatic gynecological clinic. These IVF attempts had all been carried out at a private clinic in a nearby country. Because the husband worked in this country, the couple had met there solely for the IVF for longer than one year. Behind the patient's shrill and demanding manner, a deep distress and confusion were perceptible. Also evident was her distance towards her own body, and towards her body functions. Her psychic organization showed an inclination towards identity diffusion; she could neither describe her partner nor herself. Her sense of reality and reality-testing was close to borderline personality organization while her response to others was limited entirely to self-reference. The painful, humiliating insufficiency, which she tried to hide behind her demanding behaviour revealed the narcissistic wound, which Lemma described as central to the perfect match fantasy, clustering around an idealized self with an idealized object—the foetus? The mother-image?

Body-modification can be seen as an endeavour to accentuate the disposability of the body and definition of borders towards the mother, to remove the body from maternal control and to symbolize sexual maturity. In other words, to be adult. The wish for cosmetic alteration of individual body-parts in order to match an idea of beauty or maybe to fulfill other unconscious demands becomes increasingly important.

Freud himself stated "Regrettably, Psychoanalysis has not much to say about beauty". (1910)—Early female psychoanalysts also contributed to this topic and Riviere with her concept of 'femininity as a mask' captured the significance of "beauty" in a given culture (1929).

The two clinical examples clearly demonstrate the cross-linking of individual and intra-psychic structures and the socio-politically motivated right to dispose of the female body. Who disposes of the female body? Is it the individual woman? Which institutions presume to dispose of the female body; and by what means? What desperate measures are undertaken by women in order to prove; partly for themselves, partly in connection with their environment; that they are in possession of this right to dispose, that they are mistresses in their own house? Throughout the female life cycle, in connection with pregnancy and childbirth, women are directly or indirectly at the mercy of institutions, the medical system being the most obvious. The increasing medicalization and economization of the female life cycle facilitate this disposability.

## THE FEMALE BODY AS A CULTURAL PLAYGROUND

Marianne Springer-Kremser

Excerpted from *The Female Body: Inside and Outside*

The subjective image of disposability is therefore of interest. Which are the relevant fields of interaction between psycho-sexual development, and the differentiation of internal and external object relations, which cause the body's disposability, or else the helpless admission of disposability through others? The self-destructive dimension of the desperate attempts to dispose of the person's own body, together with the attempts to master the fear of their own destructive power, and attempts to avert the persecution by internalized evil, are truly shattering.

The fact that individual institutions or their representatives assume the right to dispose of bodies, especially those under their care, not only affects women. This is evident from the current dispute about sexual abuse within institutions, especially the Catholic Church.

Finally, we should remind ourselves that psychoanalysis always had a radical edge, and so have certain female artists. In works of performance art, the debate with structures of power is immanent. Female artists, who wanted to express the concern of the female sex radically, seized the possibilities, which offered Body Modification in this respect. Similar to the "Viennese Actionism"; a violent movement in 20th-century art, some female artists wanted to highlight social structures of power and suppression by symbolic and metaphoric actions, which included self-violation. The moment of substitutional actions elucidating intended shocks by confrontation with real violations has achieved considerably significance (Springer, 2010).

CHAPTER

# 3

## KEEPING ENVY IN MIND: THE VICISSITUDES OF ENVY IN ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD



This chapter is excerpted from  
*Envy and Gratitude Revisited*  
edited by Priscilla Roth and Alessandra Lemma.

©2008 Routledge. All rights reserved.

[LEARN MORE >](#)

## KEEPING ENVY IN MIND: THE VICISSITUDES OF ENVY IN ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD

Alessandra Lemma

Excerpted from *Envy and Gratitude Revisited*

What ties us to our objects? Is it love and gratitude—a sense that we have been given something freely, and that we value it and can tolerate that we need the other person to provide this for us? Or is it envy and grievance—a sense that we are locked in dispute with the one who, we feel, has deprived us of something good that *should* have been ours? Another way of looking at this is to ask whether the tie to our objects is one that supports our development and separateness or one that keeps us enslaved to the object by whom we feel deprived.

Klein's thoughts about love, gratitude, and envy have always deeply moved me as they speak so directly to the struggles we all face when we try to make sense of how love and hate shape our relationship to the good things in our life. Her ideas have been especially helpful to me in my work with adolescent mothers and the children born to young mothers (I am referring here to work with adult patients who were born to adolescent mothers), which is the focus of this chapter.

### ENVY AND DEPRIVATION

In her seminal work Klein focused on a question we now all take so much for granted that it is difficult to imagine it not being somewhere in our minds when we are with a patient: How did the baby experience the breast? Was it felt to be full or empty? Was it joyfully offered and received? Or was it felt to be selfish, “mean” and “grudging”, as Klein put it, becoming the source of envy and grievance?

In *Envy and Gratitude* Klein introduces her notion of an innate, “primary envy” defined by the attack being on a “good” object *because* of its goodness. The idea of innate destructiveness has courted controversy. Klein has, indeed, been criticized for either dismissing altogether or minimizing the impact of the actual mother on the development of the baby. This work, along with others, acknowledges that the “real” mother, not just the phantasy mother, plays an important part in helping the baby to manage his envy. Klein refers to how the mother's state of mind at the time of feeding, for example, may well impact on the baby's experience of the breast. Moreover, she discusses the relationship between deprivation and envy:

If we consider that deprivation increases greed and persecutory anxiety, and that there is in the infant's mind a phantasy of an inexhaustible breast which is his greatest desire, *it becomes understandable how envy arises even if the baby is inadequately fed.* The infant's feelings seem to be that when the breast deprives him, it becomes bad because it keeps the milk, love and care

## KEEPING ENVY IN MIND: THE VICISSITUDES OF ENVY IN ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD

Alessandra Lemma

Excerpted from *Envy and Gratitude Revisited*

associated with the good breast all to itself. [Klein, 1957, p. 183, emphasis added]

Although she refers to the unavailable breast as a source of deprivation and so as a trigger for envy, it is fair to say that Klein does not develop her ideas about this more reactive envy, lending primacy instead to envy deriving from an innate degree of the death instinct. Yet deprivation as an internal and actual experience figures in her thinking about envy and in her case material. Indeed, whatever assumptions we make about the origins of envy, the patient's experience as it appears in the transference is invariably one of feeling deprived in some way.

Although it is theoretically interesting to speculate about origins (and they can never be more than speculations), it is the patient's *experience* of envy and what she does with that experience that matters most in the consulting room. To this extent, although I remain unconvinced by the notion of an innate envy, in my clinical work I have nevertheless found invaluable Klein's ideas on the destructive impact of envy on object relations, on how the self defends against awareness of envy, and on how awareness of dependence on the good object can arouse a wish to spoil the goodness of the object. While envy manifests itself in different ways, Klein helps us to understand how the envious spoiling of the good object functions as a defence against psychic pain: the pain of separation, of loss, of longing, and of awareness of envy itself.

In this chapter I am concerned with envy arising from an actual experience of deprivation. Just as Klein describes it in the case of primary envy, an experience of deprivation may also result in attacks on the good object—that is, even when the object is not being depriving—as a way of defending against need and dependency on the object.

### THE SOURCE OF ENVY

For most of those young girls who become mothers during adolescence, this represents a point of acute crisis. Internally, motherhood adds a layer of complexity to the psychic process of adolescence, which typically sets in motion an unsettling review of personal identity. The young person must now integrate into her sense of who she is the reality of the mature sexual body (Laufer & Laufer, 1984). This is inextricably tied with the resurgence of primitive anxieties about dependency and separation from parental figures and of oedipal conflicts. Adolescent mothers experience these primitive anxieties all the more urgently if, as is often the case, the

## KEEPING ENVY IN MIND: THE VICISSITUDES OF ENVY IN ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD

Alessandra Lemma

Excerpted from *Envy and Gratitude Revisited*

earliest relationship with their own mother was in some way disturbed (see, e.g., Madigan, Moran, & Pederson, 2006; Pines, 1988).

A mother who enjoys feeding her baby helps the baby to move away from envy towards gratitude. Just as she freely offers her breast, so she freely offers her mind, too. She provides psychic nourishment—it is a breast with a mind (see Bion, 1962a; Winnicott, 1954). A mother who does not enjoy “feeding” is therefore experienced as also withholding her mind. This may lead to the internalization of an object felt to be unreceptive to the self’s projections and therefore felt to be incapable of transforming psychic pain.

I would like to suggest that if the adolescent girl has internalized a maternal object that did not enjoy “feeding”, then the losses and anxieties associated with becoming a mother during adolescence are more likely to mobilize internally an experience of deprivation that cannot be reflected upon. As she turns to her internalized mother for understanding, this young mother meets an object that is not felt to be generous and capable of sustaining the self at a time of significant crisis. Her own experiences as a daughter, and now as a mother, become very confused in her own mind. She literally cannot “keep in mind” and bear either her own or the baby’s experience of deprivation and the envy that this may elicit in both of them. An internal climate of recrimination and grievance may then take root.

The troubled young mother’s difficulties are indeed often manifest in her identification with the baby rather than with the wish to become a mother herself (Pines, 1988). The representation of her baby in her mind is thus typically distorted (see, for example, Slade et al., 2005). In my experience the quality and perniciousness of the envy mobilized in the young mother towards her baby depends on whether the baby is represented in her mind as a rival robbing her of her adolescent freedom and opportunities or as a withholding, depriving mother who keeps all nourishment for herself.

If the baby is experienced more as a rival who deprives the young mother of her felt “adolescent” entitlement, I am suggesting that envy of the baby takes on a less pernicious course. This is largely because the young mother in this scenario has some sense of herself and of having a mind of her own, even if projective processes still hold sway, as is the case for most adolescents as they struggle to discover who they are. Becoming a mother impacts, of course, on the conflicts around separation and on the oedipal anxieties that are inevitably revisited during adolescence, but this young girl is nevertheless approaching the challenges of early motherhood with a

## KEEPING ENVY IN MIND: THE VICISSITUDES OF ENVY IN ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD

Alessandra Lemma

Excerpted from *Envy and Gratitude Revisited*

more integrated experience of herself. Crucially, she has some desire to separate from her primary objects, however ambivalent she may also feel about this.

As she feeds her baby, this young mother, I am therefore suggesting, relates to her breast as a “sexual breast”. It is a symbol of her desire to develop her own emergent, separate identity. Indeed, the typical “complaint” voiced by this young mother is that the baby “gets in the way of having a life”. The baby is felt as depriving the mother of her entitlement to the developmentally appropriate need to experiment and “play” so as to find out who she is. Because she feels deprived of “opportunities”, this can then interfere with her ability to take pleasure in her baby and in his pleasure and opportunities. Significant problems can ensue for both mother and baby. This is, nevertheless, quite different to experiencing the baby as getting in the way of the very psychic survival of the self, which is the internal experience I am primarily concerned with in this chapter.

Where the core anxiety in the young mother is about psychic survival and fragmentation of the self, my impression is that the envy aroused in her by the baby takes on a more destructive course. Here, the envious attack is aimed at obliterating awareness in herself of longing, dependency, and separation. She feels deprived of a nourishing, loving breast, but her own longing for the breast becomes converted into hatred. In this scenario, I am therefore suggesting that the young mother, whose experience of herself is as a deprived baby, envies the nourishing breast the baby depends on. In her mind, the baby is unashamedly “taking”. She hates him because he is felt to be oblivious to what *she* needs. In other words, the baby is not a baby in this mother’s mind; rather, the baby represents a depriving maternal object who has no awareness of her baby’s needs. This young mother can therefore all too readily experience the baby as a hostile presence in her life. It is not just that the baby takes something away from her; rather, the baby torments her. In the transference, it becomes possible to discern how the aim of the envious attack on the good object is to eradicate *her* longing for the nourishing, loving breast. (The mother’s intolerance of the baby’s access to good things may then be managed by establishing a relationship of ownership towards him. This thwarts the baby’s attempts to separate from her. Instead, the baby is bound to her through obligation because she feels she has done so much for him. From the baby’s perspective, I am suggesting that these are the foundations for an internal world dominated by an economy of ownership, debt, and obligation.)

## KEEPING ENVY IN MIND: THE VICISSITUDES OF ENVY IN ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD

Alessandra Lemma

Excerpted from *Envy and Gratitude Revisited*

In two of the cases I worked with more extensively it became clearer in the transference that these young mothers envied a particular state of mind attributed to the baby/mother. Its main feature is an absence of any awareness of painful thoughts or feelings—a kind of psychic Nirvana where it is the “(m)other” who has to absorb all psychic pain leaving the baby, quite literally, *care-free* to enjoy his feed. (I have chosen the expression “care-free” because it has come up a few times in my work with young mothers where they have used it to refer to their perception of the baby’s enviable state of mind.) The “care-free” state of mind attributed to the baby/mother stands in total contrast to the young mother’s experience of her own mind. Her mind now feels intruded upon by the baby’s needs and by the disturbing feelings and thoughts that are stirred by the baby. Klein captures well the demand placed on the mother by the baby who feels that “it is up to her to prevent all pain and evil from internal and external sources” (1957: 185). The baby thus seeks relief from his own destructive impulses and his anxieties without any concern for the object. But the young mother’s own deprived state of mind makes it less likely that she will be able to receive the baby’s projections. This undermines the possibility for the baby’s experience to be “kept in mind” by her.

The histories of these two young mothers suggest that their own mothers’ difficulties had prematurely impinged on the earliest experience of dependency on an object who could digest disturbing states of mind. They powerfully conveyed through the transference an expectation that my mind would be unreceptive to their projections. I was often experienced as selfishly withholding my psychic space, which was felt to be unburdened by painful experiences. One of the patients often described me as “mean”. She was convinced that I had “the answers” because my life seemed to her to be “cosy”, but that instead of relieving her of her pain, I simply left her alone to work things out for herself. On one occasion, when I had to cancel a session at very short notice, this patient was convinced that I was going to have a last-minute holiday. It proved impossible for her to even entertain the thought that I might be ill or have to attend to some serious matter. I was often therefore a depriving, narcissistic mother who was, moreover, experienced as provocatively flaunting her riches. This more provocative quality of the object was a striking feature in both cases: I was felt to be cruelly exposing what they lacked while I enjoyed privileged access to good things, in particular my unburdened mind. These young mothers were both at the mercy of an object felt to be narcissistically wrapped up in itself and in identification with it—as was evident in their own mothering.

# KEEPING ENVY IN MIND:

## THE VICISSITUDES OF ENVY IN ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD

Alessandra Lemma

Excerpted from *Envy and Gratitude Revisited*

### THE COMFORTS OF HATRED

The infant receives milk and other creature comforts from the breast... Suppose his initiative is obstructed by fear of aggression, his own or another's. If the emotion is strong enough it inhibits the infant's impulse to obtain sustenance. Love in the infant or mother or both increases rather than decreases the obstruction partly because love is inseparable from envy of the object so loved... The part played by love may escape notice because envy, rivalry and hate obscure it, although hate would not exist if love were not present [Bion, 1962a, p. 10]

#### MS E

Bion's words were often in my mind as I worked with Ms E, whom I first met aged 21. The needed, nourishing breast tormented her. Faced with the pain of longing for the object's psychic nourishment and love, hatred of the object provided a kind of comfort. Here the envious spoiling of the object was a defence against the pain of loving and the dependency this exposed. It killed two birds with one stone, as it were: the envied object and the self who longed for the object (Segal, 1993). This process became the focus in my work with her.

Ms E had become pregnant at the age of 16. She was referred because of depression and difficulties in managing her son. From a clinical point of view, however, the most important feature of her presentation was her narcissistic personality. She was a bright and, in many respects, likeable young woman. By the end of the four years of treatment she had made some limited, but encouraging progress in her capacity to be more receptive to her son's needs.

Ms E had been on drugs at a party when she had unprotected sex and became pregnant. Although not a heavy drug user, she regularly smoked cannabis, as a way of "not thinking", as she put it. Her parents were quite wealthy and had supported her financially, adopting a seemingly liberal attitude towards the pregnancy. Ms E had nevertheless been suspicious of her mother's encouragement to proceed with the pregnancy at a time when it was clear that this would severely disrupt her studies and social life. She felt that her mother had envied her freedom and popularity with friends, especially since her mother had become quite ill around this time.

As our work unfolded, it became clearer that Ms E had always experienced her mother as exciting, provocative, and unavailable. Ms E's mother had just turned 19 when she was born. The picture that emerged was of a narcissistic woman who, Ms E felt, had resented getting pregnant. She had not had any more children, which had

## KEEPING ENVY IN MIND: THE VICISSITUDES OF ENVY IN ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD

Alessandra Lemma

Excerpted from *Envy and Gratitude Revisited*

confirmed Ms E's belief that the mother had not really wanted her. The father had remained a hazy figure throughout her life: the provider of money but not much else, as far as she was concerned. Ms E shopped excessively, using material acquisition as a way of deflecting her need for the object's love. It was difficult for her at first to even acknowledge that her parents had given her the money for shopping and for her analysis, if nothing else. Instead, Ms E behaved as if this was "owed" to her, thereby bypassing an experience of being in any way dependent on them.

As a child, Ms E felt she had always got in the way of her mother's work and her active and seemingly very exciting social life. She was left in the care of nannies for extended periods of time. This was the basis of her main accusation that her mother "wanted it all". It is, of course, impossible to know the actual quality of the mothering received by Ms E. I nevertheless gained the impression in the transference that she related primarily to an object felt to be wrapped up in itself and in some way denigrating towards her. I came to understand that Ms E had not had an opportunity to internalize an experience of a maternal object freely offering her space in her own mind. This was at the root of her very entrenched grievance towards her mother.

Her son was experienced as spoiling the good things in her life. Ms E ascribed malignant intentionality to his behaviour. For example, she once said to me that he had broken something in the flat "on purpose, to get at me because he knows I like it". She perceived him to be "without a care" or "always playing". She experienced this as if he were purposefully flaunting his freedom, and this aroused her envy as she felt burdened by this thing she called "responsibility". Over time we came to understand that "responsibility" meant for her the burden of "thinking and feeling" for both of them. She envied therefore what she perceived to be his privileged psychic space unburdened by painful thinking or feeling. Of course, in reality, this little boy was very disturbed and burdened.

At some level Ms E's destructiveness towards her baby elicited profound guilt in her. But she could not turn to an internal object that could bear to know her and forgive her for what she had done to the baby. She had no choice, as it were, but to continue envying and hating her son, who was felt to be the one draining her of all her resources. Grievance defended against the guilt about her own destructiveness.

Ms E projected her view of her own depriving, narcissistic mother into her son, and into me in the transference. She often ascribed a "care"-free, narcissistic, unthinking state of mind to me. She was then exposed internally to the presence of a "selfish", uncaring object who was felt to keep all good things for itself. This typically elicited

## KEEPING ENVY IN MIND: THE VICISSITUDES OF ENVY IN ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD

Alessandra Lemma

Excerpted from *Envy and Gratitude Revisited*

a wish to rubbish or somehow spoil what I offered her or what she perceived to be good things in my life, as I hope to illustrate with a few sessions from the second and fourth year respectively of her analysis.

### *Year 2*

In the Wednesday session Ms E said that she felt very angry with her son because he asked too much of her when he had already taken all that she had. She accused him of being selfish and “always wanting more toys, more of everything”, she said. She brought a dream in which she answered a ring at her door, and it was the porter, handing her a parcel. She was then silent. I broke the silence and asked her if she could remember any more or had any thoughts about it, and she replied emphatically that there was nothing more. She sounded irritated with me, and I felt reprimanded for having asked for associations.

Ms E added that she could not “afford the luxury of analysing dreams”. She said that she had too much on her mind to “play around at being Freud”, and anyway her life was still a mess thanks to me (she was referring here to her repeated accusation that I did not offer her enough practical help with her son). I said that instead of helping her when she felt so besieged by her son’s needs, she felt that I had handed back to her a parcel full of the feelings she wanted to get rid of while I kept a “luxury”, fun parcel for myself.

In the Thursday session (the last session of the week for her), Ms E sounded irritable. She told me that one of the school teachers had praised her son over a task Ms E could never manage herself to get him to do (and with which this teacher had patiently helped this little boy over many months). She said that she had concerns about this particular teacher because she was often taking time off due to vague illness, and her class then had to be run by an assistant teacher. She felt that they should not employ unreliable teachers. This was why she had decided to change schools, because she did not have to put up with “their attitudes”. She went on to say that she felt that as the school was a state school, the staff were probably envious of her more privileged background.

She then told me that she had been on the phone all day trying to get information about a breast enhancement. She said that one of her friends “had her breasts done” recently, and she was now seriously considering this option for herself. She spoke to me about her hatred of her own breasts, which had been “sagging” since she stopped breastfeeding. (She had only breast-fed her son for three weeks). She had

## KEEPING ENVY IN MIND: THE VICISSITUDES OF ENVY IN ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD

Alessandra Lemma

Excerpted from *Envy and Gratitude Revisited*

been thinking about breast-feeding on the way to the session after she had seen a woman on a bench in the park breast-feeding her baby: "There will be nothing left of them [the breasts] once he [the baby] has finished with them", she said. She then added dismissively: "My friends were having the time of their lives when my son was born, and I was expressing milk. What fun! I gave up on this. Too much hassle ... and the bottle is good enough anyway. He's such a little fatso [her term for overweight], so clearly it did him no harm." Her voice had a harshness to it that I had noticed on other occasions.

Ms E went on to talk about how her friend's breast enhancement had not been such a success: "They look fake", she added somewhat disparagingly. (This was a friend who had been quite consistently supportive of her.) Her mood then flattened, and she was silent for a while. I felt redundant in the session, a bit like the teacher and school who had been sacked by her.

She eventually resumed talking to tell me that her weekend was looking dreary because she would have no help with her son, as her parents would be away. She mocked her mother's tendency to "over-fill" her suitcase even when she was just going away for two days: "She always thinks she's going to see the Queen", she added. She said she had offered to pack her case because she wanted to spare her looking ridiculous.

Ms E went on to say that she was fed up with everything and that despite her efforts to fit in analysis while she was also trying to resume her education and having to look after her son, she was still feeling stuck and unhappy. I was aware of feeling somewhat drained by her repeated accusations of being useless to her. Like her, I felt in need of some kind of breast enhancement. I said that she was surrounded by "chubby, over-full people", but that she felt drained of good things for herself. Ms E said she hated analysis because it was "all talk", and what she needed was practical help. She thought that talking about feelings was overrated. She had recently read a review about a self-help book, and she thought it was very good because it gave tips on how to manage. This is what she wanted, and she said that maybe I should read it. She then angrily said that therapists should be more upfront about the fact that they never give actual help: instead, they just talk about feelings. I said that she seemed to feel that my mind was full of useless ideas about feelings and that she now wanted to pack my mind with exactly what she thought should be in there about her for me to take away over the weekend. Ms E laughed. She said that I had a way of putting things that made her laugh. I said that she hated the experience of actually feeling

## KEEPING ENVY IN MIND: THE VICISSITUDES OF ENVY IN ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD

Alessandra Lemma

Excerpted from *Envy and Gratitude Revisited*

that what I offered her was of help; instead, it was more bearable to turn me into someone with “fake” breasts she could laugh at—not a real, helpful person she might actually miss.

Ms E’s eyes filled with tears, and she was silent for a long time. She eventually broke the silence and said that she was upset because she felt that she was a bad mother and that she hated having to think about that, that she would rather be like her friend, who was “without a care” and only had to think about where to go on holiday. Her tone then switched back into harshness and she called this friend “a stupid cow” because she had no idea about real life and, anyway, she just looked down on others. I said that she had managed to connect with an upset feeling inside when she saw herself as a “bad” mother and was able to tell me about it, but it quickly felt too painful. As soon as she connected with this feeling she hated me for making her think about these things, especially because I then went off for the weekend without any painful thoughts in my own mind. It was this unthinking, stupid cow of an analyst who was now looking down on her struggling with her feeling of being a bad mother.

Ms E said: “Even the teacher is better than me at helping my son. I know she disapproves of me. They all do at the school. They all think: “Rich kid gets pregnant ... serves her right.” She felt that everyone saw it as her mistake and that she had to pay for it. She said that her son had been a mistake she would have to live with for the rest of her life. “He’s got it easy”, she added, “Now he has me to do everything for him. He doesn’t even have to think about brushing his teeth, and then, when he’s older, because he’s a boy, if he gets a girl pregnant he can just walk away, just like his father did.” She then shook her head and angrily repeated: “It’s all crap, it’s all crap anyway”. She told me that she had been trying not to smoke (cannabis) but that she was going to get some because that was the only way she could feel at peace. She was planning to drop her son off at a friend’s house and then she would just “get out of my mind”.

I said that she feared that I disapproved of how difficult it had been for her to take pleasure in her son’s recent achievement. It pained her that he could allow himself to be helped, but she could not. I said that she wanted to walk away from all this right now in the session and not have to think about anything. I added that this seemed like the only option open to her, because she believed I also wanted to walk away now that I was faced with her feeling that what I offered her was “all crap”. We were near the end of the session: Ms E simply shrugged her shoulders and said that there was “a lot to be said for drugs”. She was then silent until the end.

## KEEPING ENVY IN MIND: THE VICISSITUDES OF ENVY IN ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD

Alessandra Lemma

Excerpted from *Envy and Gratitude Revisited*

### *Discussion*

In the Wednesday session Ms E starts by telling me of her experience of feeling scooped out by her son's demands and then by me asking her to think about the dream. On reflection, I had intervened too quickly and unthinkingly, perhaps enacting the projective identification into me of this demanding, greedy child/mother who cannot think about *her* experience. She sees me only as interested in more good things for myself (her son, she tells me, always wants "more toys, more of everything"). She feels I ask *her* to provide me with analytic material for me to "play" with, but I give her nothing, leaving her to sort out the contents of her own mind while I have the "luxury" of playing at being Freud. By now in the work this was a familiar transference scenario, whereby she experienced me as the one with no worries and no capacity to think about her. Like her mother, I was felt by her to always be in some other, more exciting, "luxurious" mental space, where there was no space to think about her pain. Breaks were typically experienced by her as me cruelly forcing her to look at all the good things I had. By giving me her dream, she had wanted me to take away with me over the weekend a parcel full of her painful thoughts/feelings, but, instead, I became intrusive in her experience.

By the Thursday session Ms E is feeling very besieged. She finds it impossible to enjoy her son's achievement and the fact that he is able to allow his teacher to help him. This helpful teacher becomes the target for the envious attack: she is unreliable and has to be sacked. Any envy is firmly located in the staff, who, she feels, envy her privileged background. The envious attack masks the pain of knowing that she actively spoils this good experience for her son. It is painful for her to acknowledge the teacher's help, because this success horribly reflects back to Ms E a sense of her own "badness".

Ms E's experience of feeling deprived is acute in this session, most probably because she is also facing the weekend break. I think she longs for me to feed her, but this longing gets perverted: her envious undermining of me is her triumph over her desire. She tries to soothe herself through her thoughts about breast enhancement, thereby letting me know that she can give herself something without needing to depend on me. I am, in any case, felt by her to be unreliable, like the teacher who goes off sick, and all I offer is "fake" breasts anyway. Like her mother, I am narcissistically wrapped up in myself ("The Queen") and she has turned me into a useless object of ridicule that needs her help. The internal representation of the maternal object as "Queen" also conveyed Ms E's experience of her mother as cruelly

## KEEPING ENVY IN MIND: THE VICISSITUDES OF ENVY IN ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD

Alessandra Lemma

Excerpted from *Envy and Gratitude Revisited*

parading the riches withheld from her. I think that it was this more narcissistic quality of the object that fuelled the envious retaliation.

Ms E is eventually able to respond to my interpretation about how she hates recognizing any attachment or dependency on me and becomes distressed as she then sees herself as the bad mother. She manages to briefly stay with this feeling, which, I think, was genuine. But it then proves too much to bear, and she quickly retreats into a denigrating stance: I become a stupid, unthinking cow “without a care”. This is the state of mind she wants for herself (and that she lets me know she *will* get for herself later by smoking cannabis). In her experience I am like her son at this moment who, she says, “doesn’t even have to think about brushing his teeth”, while I leave her to think about being a bad mother. Crucially, at this point, I think it becomes clearer that her inability to allow space for a more feeling and thoughtful her is disrupted by the ascendance, again, of an experience of me not only as unable to feed her, but also as someone who would denigrate and shame her when at her most vulnerable. I think that Ms E was in identification with this denigrating quality in her mother, and she frequently experienced me in this way through projective identification.

### *Year 4*

I would now like to present a brief excerpt from a session fifteen months later, when Ms E was coming only three times per week. By then she knew that I was pregnant. Before the announcement of my pregnancy, she had in fact already decided to end the analysis, because she was moving out of London. Although my pregnancy therefore was not the trigger for the ending, it did nevertheless mean that we would be ending three months before we had in fact agreed to end. This was the first session of the week for her, three weeks after the announcement of my pregnancy. The week before I felt that we had made some meaningful contact.

Ms E began by telling me that she had been listening to the radio while having breakfast, and there had been a news item on child abuse. She was very critical of paedophiles and thought that there was no excuse for behaving in such a way towards children. As far as she was concerned, such people should be locked up forever—and, actually, the more she thought about it, she came to the conclusion that the death penalty should be brought in for those who committed the most serious offences. She went into quite a tirade about this. I eventually said that someone stood accused in her mind and had to be very severely punished.

## KEEPING ENVY IN MIND:

### THE VICISSITUDES OF ENVY IN ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD

Alessandra Lemma

Excerpted from *Envy and Gratitude Revisited*

Ms E paused for a while, became tearful, and then said that she had overstepped the mark the previous night with her son. She had shouted and sworn at him and then slammed the door behind her. He had been very upset. She regretted it, but at the same time she was furious because he had torn up one of her photo albums—a particularly important one, because it had photos of her days at secondary school, and she liked to look back on this time. I said that there was perhaps a way in which my going off on maternity leave and cutting short the ending of our work felt like me perpetrating a heinous crime against her—like me tearing up the album of our work together, so that she was left with nothing good to hold on to. I said that she experienced this as spiteful, as me spoiling something important to her by effectively putting my needs before hers.

Ms E said that she knew I had to stop. She herself felt ready to stop, and in fact thought that she could have stopped much sooner, as we were now “just covering old ground”. She was silent for a while and then told me that she had a very bad dream two nights ago. She was not sure she should tell me about it, “because it might come true”.

Eventually she told me that in the dream *I had given birth to a baby with Down’s syndrome*. She clearly felt uncomfortable elaborating. She became very restless on the couch, and it took a long time for her to tell me that because of my age she thought it was more likely that I would give birth to a disabled baby. She imagined that I would find it hard working with someone like her at a time like this in my own life. It was nothing personal, but that’s how life was—the older you got, the greater the chances of disability. She imagined that I would not want such thoughts in my mind. She thought I had looked so happy since I became pregnant—“glowing and all that”, she added. She said she could not bear to look after a disabled child. She hated herself for feeling this, because she knew it was “wrong”, but she felt repelled by disability: “I know people say babies with Down’s syndrome are friendly, but I find them ugly.” I said that she feared that I could not bear to look with her at her “ugly” feelings towards me. Instead, I would be repelled by the her who gives me a damaged baby. I said that she feared that I would neither understand her nor forgive her for this, but would sentence her to the death penalty instead.

#### *Discussion*

By the time this session took place, Ms E was more connected overall with destructive aspects of herself. She could think more about her grievance towards her mother and her son, and by now she was more supportive of the therapeutic help he was also receiving.

## KEEPING ENVY IN MIND: THE VICISSITUDES OF ENVY IN ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD

Alessandra Lemma

Excerpted from *Envy and Gratitude Revisited*

Ms E starts the session undermining the good work of the previous week by relegating it to a redundant “covering old ground”. The dream is an envious attack on my ability to give life to a healthy baby. It also reflects her pain about losing me in the form of retaliation for the crime I perpetrate against her. My crime is not just that I leave her prematurely, but that I leave her so as to feed another baby when she is still so hungry. The experience of her own hunger for the breast and the phantasy of the baby inside me who will in reality have the breast triggers the wish to spoil, and so she omnipotently gives me a disabled baby. Ms E did feel envious of what she perceived to be my happiness about my baby, and this gets projected into me when she voices how *I* will be envious of her youth.

I will not enter into further detail about the session. I simply want to draw attention to the heightened anxiety at the point at which she starts to tell about the dream. One could understand this anxiety in different ways. I thought that it was connected to her experience of herself as spoiling something good for me and her fear about my response. Envy creates a fear of retaliation, which then reignites the destructive cycle. Ms E anticipates an unreceptive mind that not only cannot bear to dwell on “ugly” feelings, but will actually punish her very brutally for having such feelings: I will execute her. The anticipated ejection from the other’s mind is therefore experienced as brutal violence against the self and is terrifying.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

There are many possible readings of a work as rich in ideas as *Envy and Gratitude*. For me, Klein’s work is fundamentally about the reality of the pain of loving and how envious spoiling is an attempt to obliterate any awareness of the anxieties that will arise when we can be vulnerable enough to love and accept our dependency on the other.

My work with young mothers and their children has helped me to appreciate that feeling “known” and forgiven by the object for one’s destructiveness, as Klein evocatively draws it, fosters a capacity for loving. It promotes the most profound sense of gratitude towards our objects. It helps us to internalize a generous object that offers its mind freely and can therefore tolerate knowing about both the good and bad aspects of the self and other. Disturbances in the earliest relationship with the mother undermine the possibility for such an internalization. In turn, as with Ms E, this can place the young mother and her baby at the mercy of a destructive cycle of envious retaliation.

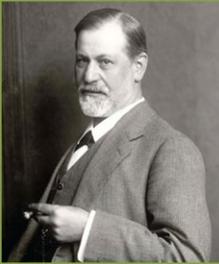
CHAPTER

# 4

## ARE WOMEN STILL IN DANGER OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD?

On Freud's  
"Femininity"

Edited by  
Leticia Glocer Fiorini and  
Graciela Abelin-Sas Rose



Series Editor: Leticia Glocer Fiorini

CONTEMPORARY  
FREUD

TURNING POINTS  
& CRITICAL ISSUES

R

This chapter is excerpted from  
*On Freud's "Femininity"*  
edited by Leticia Glocer Fiorini  
and Graciela Abelin-Sas Rose.

©2010 Routledge. All rights reserved.

[LEARN MORE >](#)

## ARE WOMEN STILL IN DANGER OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD?

Graciela Abelin-Sas Rose

Excerpted from *On Freud's Femininity*

At the end of his lecture on "Femininity", Freud writes:

If you want to know more about femininity, enquire from your own experiences of life, or turn to the poets, or wait until science can give you deeper and more coherent information. [1933, p. 135]

This chapter will try to honour that final paragraph. Our thoughts have been enriched by the many years that have elapsed since Freud presented his ideas, the unexpected cultural changes that have taken place, and the careful work of numerous authors. Thus facilitated, my own experience with a variety of clinical encounters guides me to consider possible ways of re-thinking femininity.

Although Freud offered a fascinating view of the development of the girl and its differences from that of the boy, some of his inferences are questionable, as are his conclusions. I am referring, specifically, to the idea of the girl developing first as a little boy (a theory questioned, among many, by Greenacre, 1950; Jones, 1935; Kleeman, 1976; and Klein, 1928) which led Freud to propose that the girl turns angrily against her mother, who has not granted her a penis or a baby and betrays her with the birth of a sibling (see Dio Bleichmar, chapter 9, this volume). Others have contended that the girl's sense of femaleness is present early on, including early experiences of vaginal sensations (Richards, 1996). In my view each patient's babyhood experiences, the quality of her sensuous relationship with her own mother, father and others, her parents' emotional investment in her gender through their own personal histories as unconsciously conveyed to their offspring, early life traumas, early losses and disappointments, family life, the birth and characteristics of siblings—all these contribute to the unique way in which a girl will experience her body and gender (see Galenson & Roiphe, 1974; Mahler, 1963; Stoller, 1968b).

We can thus ponder whether the passage of attachment from mother to father is more subtle and complex; less centred on the lack of a penis, and more responsive instead to those other variables. Besides, the little child might feel attached to both parents equally since variations intrinsic to the family constellation and the models presented to the little girl differ not only in the character of each parent and from one culture to another, but also from one decade to the next.

The connection between the fear of castration in boys and super ego development might also be put into question since castration doesn't promote the girl's sense of morality. Moral values might be present long before this particular phase of development takes place. In this regard, either sex might be influenced from the

## ARE WOMEN STILL IN DANGER OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD?

Graciela Abelin-Sas Rose

Excerpted from *On Freud's Femininity*

start by the quality of parental mirroring, so important in the development of empathy; by the first triangulation, the relationship established between the infant and both parents, linked to a foundation of a sense of otherness (Abelin, 1980); and by the identifications with available models—all of which may take a different turn in relations to the oedipal triangulation, where gender differentiation assumes such an important role (in terms of the relationship between child and either parent, and between the parents, see Herzog, 2005).

Today, in our consulting rooms, we observe different female patients from those Freud conjectured about in Vienna in 1932. Let us hear his impressions:

The fact that women must be regarded as having little sense of justice is no doubt related to the predominance of envy in their mental life; for the demand for justice is a modification of envy and lays down the condition subject to which one can put envy aside. We also regard women as weaker in their social interests and as having less capacity for sublimating their instincts than men. The former is no doubt derived from the dissocial quality which unquestionably characterizes all sexual relations... The aptitude for sublimation is subject to the greatest individual variations. On the other hand I cannot help mentioning an impression that we are constantly receiving during analytic practice. A man of about thirty strikes us as a youthful, somewhat unformed individual, whom we expect to make powerful use of the possibilities for development opened up to him by analysis. A woman of the same age, however, often frightens us by her psychological rigidity and unchangeability. Her libido has taken up final positions and seems incapable of exchanging them for others. There are no paths open to further development; it is as though the whole process had already run its course and remains thenceforward unsusceptible to influence—as though, indeed, the difficult development to femininity had exhausted the possibilities of the person concerned. As therapists we lament this state of things, even if we succeed in putting an end to our patient's ailment by doing away with her neurotic conflict. [1933, pp. 134-135]

## ARE WOMEN STILL IN DANGER OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD?

Graciela Abelin-Sas Rose

Excerpted from *On Freud's Femininity*

### OUR CLINICAL DATA

Some clinical illustrations might clarify the issues I am trying to address. They contradict three major statements made by Freud in relation to women—namely, that their superego development was poor, that they were unable to change, set rigidly in their ways quite early in life, and that they were more self-involved than men. I found my patients to be capable of intense moral and noble judgement, in great part to the detriment of their self-esteem. Approaching menopause, they were able to change: in fact, they were eager to look into their internal worlds. Besides, all of them felt responsible for the well-being of their partners and other members of their families—to a greater extent than their partners, who were more self-involved.

Their masochistic stance did not appear to be innate—that is, an instinctual vicissitude inherent in women—but a solution to complex infantile object relations that were later on reproduced in adulthood and were, thus, acquired and treatable.

I illustrate through four short vignettes.

#### CLINICAL VIGNETTE 1: “MONIQUE”

Monique, a talented writer, had set her partner up in the role of a castigating presence. As an idealized authority, he was the only one who could claim authorship and creativity. Her assessment of his limitations was denied consciousness in the name of her love for him, while her own creative force was denied importance. Would we consider this a situation of primary masochism? We learned that she had felt guilty for being a well sibling of a younger disturbed brother. We couldn't find sadistic trends in her relationship to him but the sense that she shouldn't have been so much his superior. This made her feel undesirable as a woman. Her tragic surrender was based on *guilt about her endowment*, in a culture that would have preferred the male to be the intellectual.

#### CLINICAL VIGNETTE 2: “JACQUELINE”

Jacqueline, who had lost a revered father soon after her marriage, established, with the willing participation of her husband, a relationship where the father/child dynamic was kept alive. She was enslaved to an authoritarian man, unable to find expansiveness, locked in an unconscious contract where

## ARE WOMEN STILL IN DANGER OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD?

Graciela Abelin-Sas Rose

Excerpted from *On Freud's Femininity*

the loss of her father was made less real. Here, *her masochistic relationship seemed based on a desire, as a young woman, to re-find a loved object more devotedly related to her than her often sick and self-involved mother*, by marrying an older controlling man. She mistook his need to control her as his devotion and interest.

### CLINICAL VIGNETTE 3: "DEBRA"

In Debra, a successful art lawyer, the existential knot was one in which the *loyalty to her mother's limitations pre-empted her from a creative life of her own*. She could only improve and protect the creativity of others while she felt stilted in her own life. Her mother, who had been physically ill and addicted to alcohol since Debra had left home for studies abroad, had died shortly after Debra's marriage.

### CLINICAL VIGNETTE 4: "HEIDI"

As for Heidi, a highly qualified professional, *her role, in her family of origin, as regulator of the passionate feelings of others had impeded any fruitful development of her own*. At the time of her first consultation, her working conditions betrayed her unconscious contract: her office had doors that communicated with the offices of two older editors on each side, a man and a woman, who often asked her for help. Unable to limit their demands, she was left with no time for her own work.

In reviewing these vignettes, I observed certain common elements: all of these women, upon realization of the unconscious conflicts that kept them uncreative and therefore depressed, were able to make great leaps in their development, towards improving the quality of their lives and their emotional contract with their partners.

We should keep in mind the great variety of expressions of each woman's concept of femaleness and how that experience evolves in the course of her life, depending on her age and surrounding circumstances. For instance, as women approach the end of their reproductive years, having fulfilled an important biological and psychological task, they are often propelled to seek newer horizons. Freud vaguely referred to it in the same article:

## ARE WOMEN STILL IN DANGER OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD?

Graciela Abelin-Sas Rose

Excerpted from *On Freud's Femininity*

But do not forget that I have only been describing women in so far as their nature is determined by their sexual function. It is true that that influence extends very far; but we don't overlook the fact that an individual woman might be a human being in other respects as well. [1933, p. 135]

Objectification of what defines femininity may be founded in prejudice unless we take into account the historical and cultural context in which our patient exists. Many women seek treatment for depression. As I have observed, this situation is often linked to a limitation in the expansiveness of their talents, also and consequently in the poor quality of their intimate relationships.

The following further underlines issues of the 1980s noticeable in the United States in the course of the years that separate us from Freud's last paper on femininity. It also puts the accent on changes that we have observed since the 1980s, compared to the female patients who consult us today, to which I refer later on in this chapter.

### SOME ISSUES OBSERVED IN THE 1980S

The overall picture suggested that, *once committed to a relationship*, these women lost their concept of an independent other and insidiously became more and more insecure about their values and wishes, amalgamating them with those of their loved one.

Thus, in relation to their partners, these women acted as though they had surrendered their judgement, their values, and their sense of identity—in all, their autonomy. Intimidated by their partners' authority, they tolerated inconsiderate, irritable, and critical behaviours, which devalued and limited their autonomy. Even though outside their marital relationship they were active, productive, and efficient, their self-images did not integrate these qualities with their domestic worlds. Instead, the affect state of their significant other determined their own sense of value and well-being. Intimidated and submissive, they were nonetheless also aware of their partners' vulnerabilities. However, they acted as though it was their responsibility to justify those vulnerabilities by avoiding all confrontations. They experienced intense guilt if they failed to provide their partners with the expected support. A more assertive, reality-oriented, and demanding attitude made them question their own femininity and inspired concerns about being abandoned by their partners.

## ARE WOMEN STILL IN DANGER OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD?

Graciela Abelin-Sas Rose

Excerpted from *On Freud's Femininity*

This constellation showed the woman investing her partner with the qualities of an ego-ideal to which she showed great deference. However, the so idealized character appeared to be envious and to covet her talents, her autonomy, and her possessions. In an apparent misplaced maternal empathy and dedication, she treated him as a vulnerable and rivalrous little child.

These observations pointed to an underlying concept the woman had of her role: to be the tamer of her partner's irritability, vengefulness, and attacks of rage. We saw her trying to justify his moods, to "understand" him, while bringing him back to reason. In other words, *she considered her responsibility to regulate his affects.*

None of these women could articulate their needs and disillusionment in a meaningful way, either to themselves or to their partners. Disappointment and the experience of emotional sterility in the relationship could only be expressed through symbolic performances, such as forgetfulness, losing objects, fleeting inattentiveness.

Why this barrier to awareness of her thoughts? For the woman, the man was seen in two different roles: the despotic frustrating master and the vulnerable child in need of protection and care. It took some time to realize that her turning from her first perception of her partner to the second seemed to happen when his irritation and anger made her aware of her disdain for him, an awareness that she feared. At that precise instant, in a reversal of roles, she attributed his irrational reaction to her supposed wrongdoing, invalidating her perception by acting guilty and solicitous. *Therefore, what was unacceptable was a conscious knowledge of her devalued image of her partner:*

Having in mind the fate of the beautiful maiden who was companion to the king at night but lived in fear of being beheaded every dawn, years ago I named this constellation of symptoms the "Scheherazade syndrome" (Abelin-Sas, 1994). Scheherazade, a mythical creature, lived in fear every day of losing her head. King Schahriar, who had been betrayed by his wife, overcame his humiliation by every morning killing a young virgin with whom he had spent the night. Obsessed by the image of woman-as-betrayer, able to humiliate him before his court, King Schahriar finds no solution to his defeat other than to exterminate all women, lest one of them ever again expose him to his helplessness, his castration. Through her thousand and one stories, her voice, and her wisdom, Scheherazade manages to escape the inevitable death sentence, obtaining one more day of life so that, at the end of each day, she can provide an ending to the story she had left unfinished the night before.

## ARE WOMEN STILL IN DANGER OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD?

Graciela Abelin-Sas Rose

Excerpted from *On Freud's Femininity*

In our own reading we see her eliciting the curiosity of this child-man, whose compulsion to kill does not differentiate between one woman and the next. As a loving mother would do in order to alleviate her child's insecurity at bedtime, she creates a world of fantasy and art. She succeeds in differentiating herself from the witchlike castrator and finds a way to lead this child/king out of his monothematic nightmare. And so, in a dreamlike process, the king's propensity for action is translated into words, as Scheherazade's stories replace his narrow reality with hundreds of fictional characters. Through their experiences, wisdom, and humanity, the king, a sanguinary baby grown omnipotent, relearns laughter and sorrow and begins once again to perceive the value of life, words, poetry, and love.

Through a thousand and one "sessions", Scheherazade performs the miracle of interrupting the repeated killings. She uses her creativity not only to win over the master-baby, but to uncover the potent man hidden under the castrated master: a man now able to love, create, and procreate. In the end she becomes the king's wife, and we learn that they had conceived three children during the thousand and one nights.

But let us keep in mind that Scheherazade herself was in an impossible situation. Her creativity was forced to be totally *invested* in placating the king's vengeance; at the same time, she was constantly threatened by his power over her.

Looking into the lives of these women, or into this fictional story created more than ten centuries ago, we find a woman who believes that she will be sentenced to death—metaphorically no longer loved, abandoned—unless she cures her partner's sense of humiliation and castration.

### THE PSYCHODYNAMICS OF THIS CONSTELLATION

As we just mentioned, the woman, unable to accept her feelings, did not verbally confront her partner. Instead, inattentiveness, indifference, or neglect became symbolic expressions of her dissatisfaction and disillusionment. Unable to read the latent message, question it, and self-reflect, her mate responded in a similar modality. His attempt to cancel out an intolerable image of failing as her ego-ideal (a narcissistic castration) resulted in a symbolic act: impotent rage.

The woman's difficulty in confronting him perpetuated his omnipotence. In fact, instead of bringing the problem to a fully conscious level of awareness, she fearfully altered the scene: her man became her distressed child while she became his concerned and guilty mother, as though she had indeed injured him.

## ARE WOMEN STILL IN DANGER OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD?

Graciela Abelin-Sas Rose

Excerpted from *On Freud's Femininity*

Offering her man the promise of undoing his sense of failure through the sacrifice of her awareness contributed to his illusion that strength is obtained by “beheading” her. It could be argued that becoming the victim of an omnipotent, unruly child puts the woman in a special position of power: a unique moderator of his human aspects. In this master-and-slave concept of relating, each of them is an equal participant in a state of affairs that leads to tragedy. *This situation cannot change unless the woman overcomes her terror of seeming to be intensely aggressive by accepting her own power, realizing that she is entitled to be an assertive, creative, autonomous adult.*

Of course, the outcomes of a woman’s difficulty to assume power in relation to her partner and/or indeed in relation to her public life can be many and varied. Sometimes she will react resentfully or with open anger to her partner’s assertiveness. At other times, feeling utterly dejected in her own self-devaluation and envious of his more fulfilled position, she will become devaluating and disrespectful. When envious of her partner’s display of joy, she may even become severely authoritarian, *expecting a similar destiny for her partner.*

### DETERMINANTS OF THE CONCEPT OF ASSERTION AS IMMORAL AND DANGEROUS

We have noted that the woman fears that if she grows, she will appropriate a function that does not belong to her—one that might even hurt her partner. She feels intensely guilty and anticipates punishment (abandonment, loss of feminine identity) if she becomes independent and is seen as assertive and potent.

*It is as though the woman unconsciously connects being influential and in command with being a castrating witch. This taboo can lead her to think of herself as immoral. In consequence, she may at times negate her own power; relinquishing knowledge of her abilities, judgement, expertise, and status. (In one such situation, a wife unknowingly provided her husband with the main ideas that permitted him to graduate with honours from a prestigious university. In another, a candidate’s wife completely rewrote her husband’s doctoral thesis, she told me this months after beginning her treatment.)*

We have found that for many women, the anatomical differences destine her to submission and to a sense of responsibility. Her concern with appropriating masculine traits leads her to equate her power with immorality. Although in some cases this could be the result of an unconscious, envious wish to destroy maleness, it betrays her failure to believe that both sexes are entitled to creativity and power. This may explain the sense of shame that overcomes her when there is no man in her life,

## ARE WOMEN STILL IN DANGER OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD?

Graciela Abelin-Sas Rose

Excerpted from *On Freud's Femininity*

or the sense of utter despair at imagining herself alone (without love, home, or the ability to survive).

We will now briefly explore this aspect of the dynamic between the partners. In this, I will again quote Freud's lecture on femininity, as he refers to the transference of the woman's maternal relationship to her husband.

The determinants of women's choice of an object are often made unrecognizable by social conditions. Where the choice is able to show itself freely, it is often made in accordance with the narcissistic ideal of the man whom the girl has wished to become. If the girl has remained in her attachment to her father—that is, in the Oedipus complex—her choice is made according to the paternal type. Since, when she turned from her mother to her father, the hostility of her ambivalent relation remained with her mother, a choice of this kind should guarantee a happy marriage. But very often the outcome is of a kind that presents a general threat to such a settlement of the conflict due to ambivalence. The hostility that has been left behind follows in the train of the positive attachment and spreads over on to the new object. The woman's husband, who to begin with inherited from her father, becomes after a time her mother's heir as well. So it may easily happen that the second half of a woman's life may be filled by the struggle against her husband, just as the shorter first half was filled by her rebellion against her mother. [Freud, 1933, p. 133]

Certainly the woman might transfer her hostility from mother to husband. In a marital regression, both partners might transfer experiences of early childhood, with either parent, to their partner. There is also a singular way in which a woman may remain linked harmfully to her mother. Depending on the quality of their relationship and on the mother's personality, as well as her unconscious and overt relationship to the other gender, the girl might even fear that her own growth may put her mother's power and strength at risk. This may be an obligatory passage for many women and one that poses many problems for them.

### CLINICAL VIGNETTE: "CHER"

I present here a dream brought by Cher, who in the course of a difficult process of differentiation from her ailing mother

## ARE WOMEN STILL IN DANGER OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD?

Graciela Abelin-Sas Rose

Excerpted from *On Freud's Femininity*

demonstrates some of the anxieties to which I am referring:

*I dreamt that I was in a place like my country house. There was a large mirror on the wall. I could see a crack beginning in the lower right-hand corner. I was frightened, because I could foresee that the whole wall, which was made out of glass, was going to shatter into pieces and come tumbling down. I started to scream for my husband.*

Through analysis, we began to uncover a fundamental unconscious situation with her mother like the one present in her fantasies with men.

She had consulted after the miscarriage of her second pregnancy, which had precipitated a serious state of depression: she reproached herself for having been unable to keep her baby alive. We learned that her self-reproach somehow corresponded with the guilt she had felt on reproaching her mother for having left the family for a few weeks with no explanation when she, the daughter, was about 3 years old. Due to Cher's hospitalization for her miscarriage, she had been forced to leave her own 3-year-old daughter at home, the way she had been left at that same age. But, most important, the walls tumbling down in her dream led the way to an unconscious fantasy: that as long as she and her mother were one, she could keep her mother alive. This woman disregarded her own intellectual achievements and the depth of her emotional attachment to others as though she judged herself by the extent to which she and her mother were alike. This confusion of identities is not unusual.

This is an internal mother whose life and power depends on the daughter's immature mirroring. It might demonstrate the unconscious interchangeability of concepts such as "big", "powerful", "mother", and "phallic". Their equation would lead the woman towards this particular mirroring, where she must remain small in relation to a powerful adult whose strength depends on her smallness. Any commitment to a man would threaten this mother-daughter system, replicated later on with her partner. This particular situation:

## ARE WOMEN STILL IN DANGER OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD?

Graciela Abelin-Sas Rose

Excerpted from *On Freud's Femininity*

- demands that the woman remain a submissive daughter to complete her mother's strong image;
- promotes the repetition of the same situation with her partner;
- defines her own womanhood as necessitating "completion" through her partner.

### A NEW GENERATION

Considering in this way the female patients whom I have observed in the prime of life over the last 30 years (I am referring here to white middle-class American and South American women living in New York City), they presented—unlike the women who seek my help today—the following central issues that impeded attaining contentment:

1. being unable to give up the feeling that a social assertive stance was robbing the man of his central role, as well as their own mother of a role of authority;
2. considering that their partner was the one to carry out their own de-centred, displaced ambition;
3. feeling more and more troubled and disappointed in their idealization of their partner and, as a result, turning into his fiercest critic.

But culture has evolved and has had an intense impact on the ways in which women experience their femininity, and the same pertains to men. Today's young woman in America has had sexual experiences that have permitted her to be aware of her patterns of sexual excitement, her conditions for obtaining pleasure, and her demands for the achievements of her partner, be the relationship heterosexual or homosexual. She has ambitions of her own that don't centre on her acquiring them through her partner.

The last four decades have witnessed great cultural changes that impact on the roles of women and men, with new challenges and possibilities. Legalized abortion permits the woman to influence the timing of pregnancy, or to surmount obstacles to pregnancy by means of donor eggs and surrogate motherhood, to mention only two. These revolutionary changes demand corresponding changes in gender theory.

The concept of gender relationship has profoundly changed for both sexes. Roles are easily interchangeable in the household, and both sexes show a multiplicity of expressions of their masculine and feminine tendencies that are far from being categorically established.

## ARE WOMEN STILL IN DANGER OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD?

Graciela Abelin-Sas Rose

Excerpted from *On Freud's Femininity*

In the newer generations conflicts are based less on gender-expected behaviours and more on the appreciation and tolerance of complementarities and differences between the partners' temperaments.

Those marked changes do create a conflict between the woman's career and her wish to establish a family. She might find herself in the terrifying situation of having compromised herself by delaying motherhood while searching for achievement. We now find issues of a different order, such as:

1. the struggle to settle the uncertainty of roles that has resulted from the woman entertaining wishes different from those of previous generations, for which she has few models, mainly in terms of gender roles;
2. differentiating her maternal role from her ambivalent identifications with her own mother, mainly in relation to her mother's concept of gender roles;
3. putting into perspective her fantasized expectations of gender roles and ideals, learning to tolerate her disappointments, and regulating her demands for power and her aggression towards her partner.

Autonomy and self-definition have been acquired by this younger generation. No longer dependent on their men, these women think that commitment and maternity could affect their self-sufficiency. They often feel overwhelmed by the tasks they have taken on. No longer idealizing their partner, they demand equality—a demand that is at times inappropriate in relation to their partner's potential.

### SUMMARY

It has been suggested (Glocer Fiorini, 2007) that the intersection of femininity, sexuality, and maternity is the locus of women's subjectivity. I would only add that as a result, female identity evolves throughout the life span. This constant redefinition takes place in relation to both genders as well as to changing life, personal, and social circumstances—biological changes, levels of desire, power relations, love, maternity, and work.

In thinking about Freud's opinions about women—leaving aside the historical constraints of the times—I wonder whether he succeeded in describing and adopting women's own defensive positions. Rather than uncovering and analysing the unconscious infantile principles that promoted those fixed masochistic defences, was "the dark continent" possibly the name he gave to the blind spot he shared with his female patients?

## ARE WOMEN STILL IN DANGER OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD?

Graciela Abelin-Sas Rose

Excerpted from *On Freud's Femininity*

In that sense, we have learned that analytic listening requires a constantly open and adventurous mind. We analysts have a responsibility to stimulate a woman's curiosity and acquaint her with the principles and unconscious narratives that guide her relationship to her body, her gender, her sexuality. We may help her to become aware of the singular creative organization of her experiences and fantasies, her unknown theories, and their genesis and, in this way, offer her the potential freedom to undo forced identifications due to circumstantial events in her life and thus clarify her "dark continent" for herself and her analyst. We could help her centre on the problems that she encounters negotiating with the norms and expectations of her immediate intimate and cultural surroundings, the way she feels about being a woman and a mother, her theories and expectations about men, about what attracts her and what ignites her desire. We might thus help her gain the knowledge that may lead her to greater satisfaction with herself and others, independently of gender.

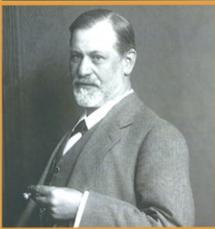
CHAPTER

# 5

## TRAUMATIC SEDUCTION AND SEXUAL INHIBITION

On Freud's  
"Inhibitions, Symptoms  
and Anxiety"

Edited by  
Samuel Arbiser and  
Jorge Schneider



CONTEMPORARY  
FREUD  
TURNING POINTS  
& CRITICAL ISSUES



This chapter is excerpted from  
*On Freud's "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety"*  
edited by Samuel Arbiser and Jorge Schneider.

©2013 Routledge. All rights reserved.

[LEARN MORE >](#)

# TRAUMATIC SEDUCTION AND SEXUAL INHIBITION

Elsa Schmid-Kitsikis

Excerpted from *On Freud's Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*

I now watch from a distance the symptomatic reactions that are accompanying the introduction of psycho-analysis into the France which was so long refractory. It seems like a reproduction of something I have lived through before, and yet it has peculiarities of its own. Objections of incredible simplicity are raised, such as the French sensitiveness is offended by the pedantry and crudity of psycho-analytical terminology... Another comment has a more serious ring (a Professor of Psychology at the Sorbonne did not think it beneath him): the whole mode of thought of psycho-analysis, so he declared, is inconsistent with the *génie latin*.

Sigmund Freud, *An Autobiographical Study*, (1925d, p. 62)

From the very beginning of *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926d), Freud recalls the obsession and phobic acts in relation to sexual and traumatic experiences. He writes: "Some inhibitions obviously represent a relinquishment of a function because its exercise would produce anxiety. Many women are openly afraid of the sexual function. We class this anxiety under hysteria, just as we do the defensive symptom of disgust which, arising originally as a deferred reaction to the experiencing of a passive sexual act, appears later whenever the *idea* of such an act is presented. Furthermore, many obsessional acts turn out to be measures of precaution and security against sexual experiences and are thus of a phobic character" (p. 88, italics in original).

## AFFECT INHIBITION AND PSYCHIC FUNCTIONING

Miss E, one of my patients, complains about different psychic states during which she feels petrified and anaesthetised. These different states make her feel a psychic lifelessness, a feeling of dissolution. She gives the impression, through transference, that she is fighting against a state of fascination, due to too much perceptive activity which muddles space-time markers and produces a falling-away of her psychic limits. She recalls these feelings with a mixture of terror and sensual pleasure that seem to connect to a seductive experience full of excitement. Unable to contain such excess, she fails in her attempt to elaborate infantile sexuality and is overwhelmed, obliging the ego, as Freud underlines, to defend itself by considering the "irreconcilable" representation as "unreachable". The traumatic aspects of such a seductive experience take refuge in a sort of intense eroticism grounded in great perceptive activity, feeding automatic repetition without restriction. The intense

# TRAUMATIC SEDUCTION AND SEXUAL INHIBITION

Elsa Schmid-Kitsikis

Excerpted from *On Freud's Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*

eroticism, accompanied by much excitement, seems to prevent access to affect and acts as a last resort in helping the patient overcome unbearable psychic pain.

The question which still remains open concerns the state of anaesthesia. It reminds us of psychic narcosis which hinders psychic elaboration and confronts us with ego dependence, the one underlined by Freud concerning the hysteric ego and its unconscious guilt (1923b). If such is the case, another question arises concerning my patient, which has to do with the nature of the falling-away of her psychic limits. Is it in some way connected to the one described by D. W. Winnicott, as the only possible psychic outcome in the face of an unsymbolised past event? Or does it concern the frequent fallingaway as experienced by the young child in the context of an inadequate environment unable to contain and metabolise psychic limits? In such circumstances the only psychic outcome will be the maintenance of a continuous source of excitement in an effort to disavow any affect susceptible to creating pain. Consequently, the outcome would prevent the ego from drawing the conclusion which is, according to Freud, to see "itself deserted by all protecting forces and [it] lets itself die" (1923b, p. 58).

## FREUD AND ANAESTHESIA: FROM SOMATIC INNERVATIONS TO THE DISCOVERY OF TRANSFERENCE

Freud's considerations about what links inhibition and anxiety were already at work in the context of his first theory about seduction and his discoveries on hysterical psychic functioning. He introduces a certain number of hypotheses which prefigure his subsequent theoretical elaborations. Relying on clinical work, these hypotheses take into consideration his theory on conversion and integrate his doubts concerning, and his questioning of, a probable equation between body activity and somatic innervations. Freud queries, among others things, in relation to the case of Fraulein Elisabeth von R., the substitution process involved, admitting the possibility of a purely symbolic conversion without any organic dysfunction. Freud writes:

I also expressed my view, that the patient had created, or increased, her functional disorder by means of symbolization, that she had found in the astasia-abasia a somatic expression for her lack of an independent position and her inability to make any alteration in her circumstances, and that such phrases as "not being able to take a single step forward", and 'not having anything to lean upon', served as the bridge for this fresh act of conversion. (Breuer & Freud, 1895d, p. 176)

# TRAUMATIC SEDUCTION AND SEXUAL INHIBITION

Elsa Schmid-Kitsikis

Excerpted from *On Freud's Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*

The problem of paralysis had retained his attention since 1893, in the context of his work on hysteria and on the fundamental role played by representation in relation to affect. He stresses the excessive aspects of hysteria, as well as the existence of absolute and profound anaesthesia, with its weak link to any organic lesion. He concludes that hysteria and some other manifestations, act, in such circumstances, as if anatomy were unknown or nonexistent.

At this point, one might wonder if what Freud calls *representation* in the context of hysteric functioning has to do with a figurative action as his future research on the subject—as well as on dream activity—will show. The patient seems to seek, through his or her symptoms and their excesses, a way to figuratively designate the object of desire, similar to a game with images and sensations, in order to be able to endure the consequences of its absence.

Two years later (1895), Freud moves on to the problem of anxiety neurosis and its paralysing effects. He seems interested both by “coordinatory vertigo” and by the vertigo in “oculomotor paralysis”, and their specific discomfort such as “sensations of the ground rocking, of the legs giving way and of its being impossible to stand up any more; while the legs feel as heavy as lead and tremble or the knees bend” (1895b, p. 95). As this vertigo, adds Freud, never leads to a fall, it may be replaced by a profound fainting fit, or by virginal anxiety, as experienced by the adolescent or young married woman, whose first approaches to sexual activity provoke a psychic anaesthetic state. Thus, inferring an intimate relationship between anxiety neurosis and hysteria, Freud writes:

it is not to be wondered at that hysteria and anxiety neurosis regularly combine with each other, as is seen in “virginal anxiety” or in “sexual hysteria”, and that hysteria simply borrows a number of its symptoms from anxiety neurosis, and so on.  
(p. 115)

Furthermore, it is probably at this time that Freud starts wondering if there is a necessity to consider the symptom as part of our understanding of hysterical phenomena. To a certain extent the hysterical body, its dramatisation and symptoms do not fascinate Freud that much; he seems more interested in the paradox present in the body of the hysterical patient. The case of Dora (1905e), “a small hysteria with banal somatic symptoms”, will become, in that respect, exemplary. Freud seems to question the significance of acts such as those found in his patients who suck, bed-wet, or masturbate while “listening” to their parents’ sexual intercourse.

# TRAUMATIC SEDUCTION AND SEXUAL INHIBITION

Elsa Schmid-Kitsikis

Excerpted from *On Freud's Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*

Following Freud's interpretations of such phenomena, which are usually organised through intensive imagery made of absence and exclusion, I wonder to what extent the patient lets him- or herself be fulfilled with fixed and static images in order to deny painful absence. One of my patients, who could not see her father because of her parents' divorce, and who pretended to be totally indifferent to the situation, discovers during her analysis the link between the absence of her father and the static images which concern him and invade her while she masturbates.

During this same period, Freud becomes more and more interested in clues which concern not only motor difficulties. The body is no longer synonymous with motor innervations. The sensorial sphere is privileged, and even though it remains under the control of the sense organs, Freud gives a new direction to his theoretical construction. The body's functions will be considered from now on, with its pleasures and displeasures, as a territory for desire and for symbolic travesty. His friendship with W. Fliess, will stimulate his interest in the sense of smell, as developed in the report concerning the case of Miss Lucy R. (1888), in which Freud explicitly supports the idea that the traumatic effect of an event is due to an affect conflict and that the olfactory sensation attached to it, remains as the symbol of a traumatism. But it is his interest in what connects one sense to another that guides his theoretical investigations in the field of perception/fantasy links. For Freud, a new element of unconscious production appears. He draws the so-called "architecture of hysteria", describing the subject's aim to arrive back at the primal scene. He affirms that if in a few cases this can be achieved directly, in other cases a roundabout path *via* fantasies is necessary. These fantasies "combine things that have been experienced and things that have been heard, past events (from the history of parents and ancestors) and things that have been seen by oneself" (1892, p. 248). This new approach to psychic functioning lessens the power of the conversion theory. Indeed, from then on, Freud's examples of suppression and inhibition mechanisms in relation to anaesthetic or paralysis phenomena emphasise the prevalence of sensorial activity. He suggests that a sensorial function that is not associated to another sensorial function may lead, because of its overbearing perceptive power, to a point of breakage or fixation, excluding the necessary space for representation activity. The risk is that the latter succumbs to an "overcharged organ" or to a "displeasured organ" producing the same inhibition as the one which is due to fascination or petrification.

With Dora's case, Freud confirms his lack of interest in somatic symptoms and his greater interest in the destiny of affect. He points out the importance of perceptive activity (Herr K's sex erect against her), acting as a fascinating object which can

# TRAUMATIC SEDUCTION AND SEXUAL INHIBITION

Elsa Schmid-Kitsikis

Excerpted from *On Freud's Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*

produce a traumatic effect: shock, lack, attraction, displacement, and inversion of affect, inhibition. From now on the body plays a role in transference. Freud is conscious of this reality, all the more so since he admitted his lack of attention to it during Dora's treatment. He writes:

I have been obliged to speak of transference, for it is only by means of this factor that I can elucidate the peculiarities of Dora's analysis. Its great merit, namely, the unusual clarity which makes it seem so suitable as a first introductory publication, is closely bound up with its great defect, which led to its being broken off prematurely. I did not succeed in mastering the transference in good time. Owing to the readiness with which Dora put one part of the pathogenic material at my disposal during the treatment, I neglected the precaution of looking out for the first signs of transference, which was being prepared in connection with another part of the same material—a part of which I was in ignorance. (1905e, p. 118)

The particular position, the one occupied both by the analyst and the patient, will be explored by Freud after his proposition of a second topography (1920). In his work *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921c), he analyses once more the ego's extreme psychic positions, its impoverishment because of submission—as in the case of a person in love—in order to evoke how in such circumstances the hypnotist's power occupies the ego ideal's place as a unique object. Consequently, Freud thinks that paralysis arises from the relationship between a too-powerful person and a powerless and defenceless one. He points out the manner in which a patient can be abused during a psychoanalytical treatment.

## TRAUMATIC SEDUCTION AND PSYCHIC INHIBITION

The complexity of the analytical work is very often due to the variety of seductive situations. The scenario and the seductive scenes recounted by our patients offer a polysemy of what is "seen and heard but half understood" or what remains ambiguous because of caresses, slight touches, or psychic abuse, and therefore becomes a source of overwhelming excitement defensively transformed into different inhibition patterns. These patterns do not always signify hysterical functioning and do not always end up in a motionless psychic position even if they are part, as Joyce Mc Dougall points out, of the traumatic nature inherent in normal sexuality.

# TRAUMATIC SEDUCTION AND SEXUAL INHIBITION

Elsa Schmid-Kitsikis

Excerpted from *On Freud's Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*

Nevertheless, the effects of the most violent scenarios usually lead up to the so-called "psychic commotion" described by Ferenczi, a sort of psychic shock resulting in a feeling of terror and self annihilation.

On the other hand, Paul Denis's work (1997) concerning vulnerable patients underlines the fact that, traumatic or not, seduction has always to do with power and ascendancy. Even though seduction does not always have a purely sexual quality, it nevertheless submits the child to a particular type of relationship with one of his/her parents, usually the mother. The struggle against affect, by way of defence mechanisms, becomes a priority so as to avoid suffering. Freud writes in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939a, p. 76), about "negative reactions" transformed in "defensive reactions", that their principal expression are what are called "avoidances", which may be intensified into "inhibitions" and "phobias".

However, as a last resort, another outcome is possible which I have experienced with my own patients: the defensive use of recurrent perceptive images. Freud, in the work just quoted, tells us that images do not appear spontaneously, but relate to

impressions which impinge upon a child at a time when we would have to regard his psychical apparatus as not yet completely receptive. The fact itself cannot be doubted, but it is so puzzling that we may make it more comprehensible by comparing it with a photographic exposure which can be developed after any interval of time and transformed into a picture. [p. 126]

This type of image which can reappear suddenly in the absence of diachronic time and space for representation constitutes, for a while, an efficient protection against psychic distress.

## PSYCHIC COMPULSION AND SEXUAL INHIBITION

Miss E, previously referred to, is a young woman who grew up in a backward and stifling environment. Her endless waiting for reparation of what had been missing during her childhood, intrusive maternal care, the father's inertia, and excessive tolerance created strong anxieties that overwhelmed her so suddenly and so intensely that only psychic anaesthetic states, hours of sleep, and frenetic and interminable hours of useless intellectual work could give her the illusion of some sort of calm out of which she arose, paradoxically, physically and emotionally exhausted. She relates during the sessions the first years of a difficult life. Her

# TRAUMATIC SEDUCTION AND SEXUAL INHIBITION

Elsa Schmid-Kitsikis

Excerpted from *On Freud's Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*

arrival as a “desired” child so as to avoid her parents’ divorce and the place she occupied among brothers and sisters already adolescents. She emphasises somatic complications: breathing, sleeping, and motor difficulties but above all she describes how, when she was four, her legs suddenly became paralysed and how, a few months later, they suddenly returned to normal. As Freud’s writes (1926d, p. 89),

In hysteria there will be a paralysis of the motor apparatus, or this one special function of the apparatus will be abolished (abasia). Especially characteristic are the increased difficulties that appear in locomotion owing to the introduction of certain stipulations whose non-observance results in anxiety (phobia).

She says: “My mother never wondered why paralysis appeared and disappeared so suddenly. It’s her lack of interest that hurt me and not so much the physical pain”. She speaks of all these difficulties without any emotion, with no affect. She expresses her emotions through a myriad of images and details underlining her mother’s power and ascendancy over her. As for me, I do not feel her emotional pain, but I feel her permanent sensation of exhaustion which “fascinates” me, but which also makes me feel uncomfortable. My listening capacity is invaded by theoretical knowledge. I feel obliged to fight against this tendency, against a tendency to establish a comfortable pathological diagnosis, one about hysteria, and forget my work as an analyst. In such circumstances, I feel unable to think and since I feel she denies me the right to experience my concern and my maternal preoccupation, experiences she fears as potentially too infused with warmth and excitement, my space for intervention becomes increasingly restricted.

As things moved along, I wondered if her tendency to feel anaesthetised or close to a falling-apart state was due to the different scenarios which pursue her. It appeared to me more and more plausible, that these scenarios constituted the basis on which quasi-hysterical functioning developed defensively. For a while, I felt imprisoned in her decision to talk about these recurrent crude fantasies which overwhelmed her when certain events took place: the announcement of a future birth was felt by her to be an emotional catastrophe which could provoke a collapse; she was subject to obsessive images, such as a baby sucking at a breast that suddenly turns into a penis and makes her feel nauseous; a routine gynaecological check-up provokes intense anxieties and the desire to vomit; she fantasised that a medical assistant in a gynaecological office occupied by male physicians, had to fulfil their sexual desires. She recalls: “The other day I was in a library. I opened a book by chance and saw a

# TRAUMATIC SEDUCTION AND SEXUAL INHIBITION

Elsa Schmid-Kitsikis

Excerpted from *On Freud's Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*

woman taking a penis in her mouth. I was petrified. I couldn't move or leave. I see the scene over and over again".

All these scenarios appeared to me as if her fascination for the penis, a source of disgust, had something to do with the type of intellectual activity she developed at times. Even though she was a brilliant university researcher, she evoked periods of her life subject to so much frenetic and useless intellectual work that she would vomit and then fall asleep for interminable hours. She then felt as if her creative capacities were ineffective. Freud writes the following about inhibition in work (1926d, p. 89):

the subject feels a decrease in his pleasure in it or becomes less able to do it well; or he has certain reactions to it, like fatigue, giddiness or sickness, if he is obliged to go on with it. If he is a hysteric he will have to give up his work owing to the appearance of organic and functional paralyses which make it impossible for him to carry it on.

And he adds

... and with what tenacity the ego clings to its relations to reality and to consciousness, employing all its intellectual faculties to that end—and indeed how the very process of thinking becomes hypercatheted and erotized—then one may perhaps come to a better understanding of these variations of repression. (p. 119)

She invades me with all these fantasies and descriptions, never followed by free associations, as if she wanted to avoid my interventions. She only mentions anaesthesia, petrified states which did not, happily, avoid a discrete entrance in the field of desire in its reversed form, disgust. This opening towards the expression of affect, even though it intensified her uneasiness, showed how these anaesthetic states and psychic conflicts due to "blank" or overly invasive images, served a psychic protection. The psychic protection needed to be all the more efficient since her unsatisfied infantile curiosity remained intense. But at the same time this excessiveness did not help the organisation of a symptomatic functioning that could have protected the ego from suffering, from being subjected to huge responsibilities such as containing and delimiting, and with the help of despair investments, anxiety which tended to overflow.

The memories which emerge make her realise that she not only feels repulsed but also attracted by these scenarios. She wonders what attracts her since she

# TRAUMATIC SEDUCTION AND SEXUAL INHIBITION

Elsa Schmid-Kitsikis

Excerpted from *On Freud's Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*

feels so horrified. She wonders if she has been abused as a child. She says: "It's an impression, but I remember a sort of uneasiness when I got close to my father, when my mother would tell me to get down from my father's knees while at the same time I had to take a bath with him".

She gets angry, she feels as if her mother steals or excites her driving energy. She says: "At home my mother didn't let us close the doors. Even when we had to go to the toilet we had to leave the door open. My mother would enter my room without knocking and it is still the case today. I always felt as if I were doing something wrong. I never got to know what the meaning of intimacy was". She adds: "My mother has always been unexpected. The only way for me to protect myself was to pretend I didn't exist, as if I were dead. When my boyfriend penetrates me I do the same. I let him do so because I am afraid of being abandoned. I feel the same when you intervene, as if your interventions were unexpected. It is a terrible moment, an hour of non-existence. I can't think anymore. For a while I feel nothing just like the day when my boyfriend entered the bathroom. I was under the shower and felt paralysed, I could no longer feel the difference between warm and cold water".

## "I CAN'T TOUCH AND I CAN'T BE TOUCHED"

Sensual motion, the ego's somatic search for satisfaction, has to perpetually fight against excitement and its overflow. During the object pleasure investment process, which leaves bodily traces, excitement has to find a sort of equilibrium in its relationship with imagination, by regulating valence, texture and envelope, so that too much excitement does not become an obstacle to sensual feeling. When excitement tends to submerge the body, defensive splitting mechanisms appear and prevent the senses from functioning properly thus increasing the risk of traumatic experiences.

Miss E evokes during a session her "innocence" concerning sexuality because of the prudishness of her parents, the embarrassment of the nuns of the Catholic school she attended when she was adolescent, and the way the "old" doctor of about fifty years old gave her courses on sexuality. Sexually she feels as if her body were a hole instead of the femininity that she expected to feel. She permanently feels repulsed by her female body about which she knows nothing. She thinks that this permanent feeling has to do with the way she feels about her mother. She says: "When men started to look at me as a woman I felt my body empty, as if it were a hole". She feels repulsion, which she never links to her mutilating experiences. She refuses to use imagination, to use fantasy, being overwhelmed by strange and unknown feelings.

# TRAUMATIC SEDUCTION AND SEXUAL INHIBITION

Elsa Schmid-Kitsikis

Excerpted from *On Freud's Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*

She evokes love for her mother. She realises that she can't live far from her, even though she also experiences strong negative feelings. She accuses her mother of not having helped her to construct good protective defences and the strong limits she needed and she still needs. She is convinced that she grew up in an environment which did not understand what a child desires and expects. Freud writes:

Since there is no doubt that hysteria has a strong affinity with femininity, just as obsessional neurosis has with masculinity, it appears probable that, as a determinant of anxiety, loss of love plays much the same part in hysteria as the threat of castration does in phobias and fear of the super-ego in obsessional neurosis. (1926d, p. 143)

Miss E is also convinced that her mother never really touched her when she was a baby. She says: "In the family, we don't know what kissing means". She mentions feeling suffocated and her profound and perpetual fear of being touched or to touch. She adds: "It has to do with this particular moment when an ordinary caress slides towards an erotic gesture. During this particular moment I can't say yes or no. I just flatter, hypnotise myself. It is then followed by a sort of contagion, the same impression which lasts and repeats itself".

During a session, she announces that she and her boyfriend have decided to start horseback riding. This was followed by a period of intense elation. Miss E expresses her pleasure while trying to get in contact with and to master the unexpected movements of the horse. A new tendency towards the integration of a sensual bodily contact appears, but which also reactivates at the same time old traumatic experiences which she is able to more or less confront. Freud, concerning anxiety, asserts that in certain circumstances it is "not newly created in repression; it is reproduced as an affective state in accordance with an already existing mnemonic image". He adds:

Affective states have become incorporated in the mind as precipitates of primaeval traumatic experiences, and when a similar situation occurs they are revived like mnemonic symbols. I do not think I have been wrong in likening them to the more recent and individually acquired hysterical attack.... (1926d, p. 93)

She says: "Saturday I went horseback riding with my boyfriend. There was a dog wandering around. I was able to touch it, to caress it but it gave no sigh, it didn't

## TRAUMATIC SEDUCTION AND SEXUAL INHIBITION

Elsa Schmid-Kitsikis

Excerpted from *On Freud's Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*

move. Suddenly it rubbed against me, lay on its back, lifted its paws as if to be caressed on its belly. I felt disoriented for it gave no sign if I could touch it or not".

I remember that I had listened to this account as if it were a dream. Through transference I had considered, at that time, the displacement of a sensual contact on a dog as an important change. It reminded me of how Miss E, at the beginning of her analysis, related to the couch. She was lying on it as if she were in levitation, even though she left traces, for the cover was upside down when she got up at the end of the session. It was as if excitement, despite everything, had ended up on the couch.

A few days later she arrives at her session looking extremely moved. She says: "I was riding somebody else's horse. It tried to grasp my sweater and bite me [I thought to myself: the sweater which hides her breast]. It took me some time to realise that it didn't try to bite me but to play with me as a child". She adds that even though she likes animals she can never be sure if they will attack her or not.

A process seems in progress towards a better integration of infantile sexuality. Miss E's fantasies are more and more connected to fears and anxieties about being touched or to touch, to be penetrated or to penetrate. During a session, she looks prostrate. She says: "I can't ride a horse anymore. I feel nauseous and terrified". She adds: "It is as if I made love". This traumatic scene represents a dividing line. Psychic figurability is from now on open to infantile sexual theory misconceptions. She evokes her sexual anxiety through a dream.

She recalls: "I stand in front of a loose-box with three horses, a small one and two big ones. I have the impression that they are three mares. Suddenly, I realise that one of them is a stallion which sticks its penis in the adult mare. The mare continues eating as if nothing happened. I feel relieved. It wasn't a catastrophe". She continues: "When my mother is calm it always means a catastrophe. I have the impression that I can't count on her love. I wasn't the desired child. I am convinced that one day she will abandon me".

Several authors make a distinction between neurotic love which concerns the Oedipus conflict and addicted love which delegates to the object the magic power to repair or to avoid conflict and negative feelings. The so-called normal capacity to love has to do with loving and being loved. Such a capacity concerns the subject's aptitude to develop and transform his/her narcissistic functioning, to question the prerogative of his/her ideal ego and ego ideal, and to confront the violence of his/her infantile sexual fantasies. It implies meeting the other who is ready to both receive and return love, in a way which avoids the alienation and mutilation of its own psychic functioning.

# TRAUMATIC SEDUCTION AND SEXUAL INHIBITION

Elsa Schmid-Kitsikis

Excerpted from *On Freud's Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*

Because of having a depressed mother, Miss E did not have the opportunity to be in contact with her mother's body, skin, smell, voice, and eyes. The necessary connection with sensual experience was lacking, compromising therefore the construction of an object relationship and the integration of desire. Such a psychic state prevented the formation of bodily memory experiences, the recognition and integration of non-intrusive feelings of the somatic sensations, leading to the capacity for auto-eroticism. Freud writes:

It is the fate of sensual love to become extinguished when it is satisfied; for it to be able to last, it must from the beginning be mixed with purely affectionate components—with such, that is, as are inhibited in their aims—or it must itself undergo a transformation of this kind. (1921c, p. 115)

## BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

Freud's considerations about what links inhibition and anxiety were already at work in the context of his first theory about seduction and his discoveries on hysterical psychic functioning (1888, 1895b). He introduces a certain number of hypotheses which prefigure his subsequent theoretical elaborations. With Dora's case (1905e), he points out the importance of perceptive activity which can produce a traumatic effect, such as inhibition and anxiety.

The case of Miss E presented in this text illustrates Freud's remarks (1926d) about inhibitions which represent the relinquishing of a function, such as a sexual function which if, exercised, would create anxiety. Indeed Miss E was regularly overwhelmed by feelings of terror and an impression of internal death. These psychic states were always followed by a threat of collapse which was persistent yet held some sort of attraction for her. She thought she could test her courage, through mutilating sexual experiences.

The analytical work led me to focus on the place and meaning of perceptive activity and on the resulting transference and countertransference difficulties. Two reactions seemed to regularly confront each other in the course of the patient's associations in relation to traumatic seduction: that of anaesthesia linked to an excess of perception which led to disturbed spatial-temporal references experienced as fascination, and that of a collapse of psychic limits that Miss E experienced with a mixture of fear and pleasure.