

Female Sexuality and Motherhood: What Can a Child Reveal about a Woman's Desire?

Sexualidade Feminina e Maternidade: O que um Filho Pode Dizer do Desejo da Mulher?

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Sexualité Féminine et Maternité : Que Peut Dire un Fils sur le Désir de la Femme?

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Abstract

In Freudian psychoanalysis, motherhood is linked to femininity as one possible outcome of a girl's resolution of the Oedipus complex, alongside hysteria and homosexuality. We revisit Freud's elaborations on femininity to ask to what extent female desire finds its answer in motherhood, while considering the sociohistorical conditions that shaped his formulations about women. We highlight the mother's role in the constitution of infantile sexuality, insofar as the baby can occupy a privileged place for her as the object of her desire—a substitute for the wish to have a penis. We then question the idea of motherhood as the full realization of femininity, an effect of the Oedipal passage in which the girl experiences castration as penis envy. Working through these concepts, we probe the limits of phallic logic for thinking femininity and motherhood.

Keywords: motherhood, femininity, female sexuality, Oedipus complex.

Resumo

A questão da maternidade, na psicanálise freudiana, é ligada à feminilidade enquanto saída do Édipo na menina, ao lado da histeria e da homossexualidade. Retomamos o percurso de elaborações sobre a feminilidade para questionar até que ponto o desejo feminino encontraria respostas na maternidade, levando em conta os aspectos sociohistóricos inerentes ao contexto das formulações freudianas sobre a mulher. Destacamos a participação da mãe na constituição da sexualidade infantil, à medida que o bebê ocuparia para ela um lugar privilegiado enquanto objeto de seu desejo, substituto do desejo de ter um pênis. Questionamos, então, a noção de maternidade enquanto realização plena da feminilidade, efeito da travessia edípica na qual a menina vive a castração enquanto inveja do pênis. Trabalhamos esses conceitos a fim de questionar os limites da lógica fálica para pensar a feminilidade e a maternidade.

Palavras-chave: maternidade, feminilidade, sexualidade feminina, complexo de Édipo.

Resumen

La cuestión de la maternidad, en el marco del psicoanálisis freudiano, se vincula a la feminidad como una de las salidas del Edipo en la niña, junto con la histeria y la homosexualidad. Retomamos el recorrido de las elaboraciones sobre la feminidad para interrogar en qué medida el deseo femenino encontraría respuestas en la maternidad, considerando los aspectos sociohistóricos inherentes al contexto de las formulaciones freudianas sobre la mujer. Destacamos la participación de la madre en la constitución de la sexualidad infantil, en la medida en que el bebé ocuparía para ella un lugar privilegiado como objeto de su deseo, sustituto del anhelo de poseer un pene. Cuestionamos, por tanto, la noción de maternidad como realización plena de la feminidad, entendida como efecto del tránsito edípico en el que la niña vive la castración como envidia del pene. Trabajamos estos conceptos con el fin de interrogar los límites de la lógica fálica para pensar la feminidad y la maternidad.

Palabras clave: maternidad, feminidad, sexualidad femenina, complejo de Edipo.

Résumé

La question de la maternité, dans la psychanalyse freudienne, est liée à la féminité comme sortie d'Œdipe chez la fille, aux côtés de l'hystérie et de l'homosexualité. Nous revenons sur le parcours des élaborations sur la féminité pour nous demander jusqu'à quel point le désir féminin trouverait une réponse dans la maternité, en tenant compte des aspects socio-historiques inhérents au contexte des formulations freudiennes sur la femme. Nous soulignons le rôle de la mère dans la constitution de la sexualité infantile, dans la mesure où le bébé occupe une place privilégiée pour elle en tant qu'objet de son désir, substitut du désir d'avoir un pénis. Nous interrogeons alors la notion de maternité en tant que réalisation pleine de la féminité, effet de la traversée œdipienne où la fille vit la castration sous la forme de l'envie du pénis. Nous avons travaillé sur ces concepts afin d'interroger les limites de la logique phallique pour penser la féminité et la maternité.

Mots-clés : maternité, féminité, sexualité féminine, complexe d'Œdipe.

Motherhood is a classic theme in psychoanalysis and has been widely examined in its relation to the concept of femininity. Regarding Freud's reading of the condition of women, motherhood, and the desire for a child, psychoanalysts diverge considerably. Although the Freudian corpus contains no text devoted exclusively to the mother or to motherhood, this does not mean Freud failed to make important contributions to thinking about the experience of motherhood or about what it means, for a woman, to be a mother and have a child. Studies on this topic generally proceed from readings of the Freudian texts considered essential to the elaboration of a theory of femininity. As Marcos (2017) notes, researching motherhood inevitably summons the theme of femininity; after all, it is in the course of formulating the constitution of female sexuality that Freud addresses motherhood and the desire for a child. Even so, psychoanalysts offer different interpretations of the (mis)alignment between femininity and motherhood in Freud's work. Some theorists suggest that, in Freud, being a mother appears as a solution to the enigma of femininity — so that there would be, in his thought, a convergence between motherhood and femininity, insofar as having a child resolves the question of female desire — “What does a woman want?” [*Was will das Weib?*].

Birman (2016, p. 24-25) undertakes an epistemological reading of femininity and female sexuality in psychoanalysis and argues that “feminism is partially right in its critique of psychoanalytic reason,” since there is indeed in the Freudian discourse an “unquestionable promotion of the figure of motherhood, by which the feminine would become woman in an indisputable way.” For the analyst, “there is no doubt that, in the Freudian discourse, motherhood would be the quintessential mode of realization of woman's being. That is to say, without motherhood a woman would not be a real woman from the strictly libidinal point of view,” since the “encounter with full femininity (...) would only occur with the assumption of motherhood.” He identifies this as “the foremost mark of the morality of patriarchy present in the Freudian discourse,” and also “the major theoretical choke point in Freud's reading of femininity” (Birman, 2016, p. 24-25). In agreement with Birman, Zafiroopoulos (2009), after surveying Freud's main positions on femininity and women's desire, states that, even while admiring Freud, we must acknowledge that his theory of the feminine “leaves us at the very least perplexed,” for “to Freud, the feminine ideal is nothing other than to be a mother.” This Freudian stance toward the feminine “remains stable throughout his work and above all when, in 1933 (Freud, 1933/2018g), he finally presents this ideal as the ideal of women themselves.” He concludes that, in Freud, motherhood appears as the ideal solution to the feminine Oedipus, with a child “the equivalent of the penis ardently desired by women” (Zafiroopoulos, 2009, p. 19-22). Kehl (1998) further recalls that, in Freud's time, women had virtually no options outside the home in the social sphere. Nothing more was expected than care for the household and children. Marriage and motherhood were thus the woman's endpoints.

Freud's claims about femininity should be read within the historical context that shaped Western societies in European modernity. Neri (2005) stresses that, until the mid-18th century, under the monist sexual model, only one sex — the male — was recognized as endowed with cultural, moral, intellectual, and affective capacities. The female sex was treated as an inferior male. With Enlightenment thought and the French Revolution, the concept of sexual difference was instituted and questions arose concerning women's place in society. Biology was used both to give women corporeality and to justify their social role. Because of the reproductive apparatus, women were assigned motherhood and domestic care as their function. For Nunes (2000), Freudian theorization does not correspond essentially either to the sexual-difference model or to the monist model; nevertheless, both paradigms can be observed in his work. The notion of infantile fantasy in which only one organ — the penis — is considered presupposes a monist ideal. By introducing masculinity and femininity as tied to activity and passivity, Freudian thought inscribes itself in an Enlightenment vision.

In *Femininity* — one of Freud's last texts devoted exclusively to the feminine question — one indeed reads a certain convergence of woman and mother, insofar as "normal" femininity is constituted through the desire to have a child. In Freud's words (1933/2018g, p. 333): "The female situation is only established if the wish for a penis is replaced by a wish for a child." Under this logic, we are led to think that motherhood is the route for the realization of female desire, since *the wish for a penis — the paradigmatic female wish* — finds its satisfaction in the child (as a substitute for the penis). In this way, a *woman's desire* seems to coincide with the *mother's desire* since female desire attains satisfaction when, finally, one has a child. From this angle, Freud appears to find in the figure of the mother a solution to the great question: "What does a woman want?"

In light of what seems possible to say about the mother, motherhood, and the desire for a child within Freud's theory of femininity, it is crucial, as Birman (2016) advises, to ask: is that all, or is it only one side of the psychoanalytic interpretation of the feminine? Thus, if Freud's view suggests that the question of female desire finds its answer in motherhood, on the other hand, as Zafropoulos (2009) reminds us, at the end of his teaching Freud himself confesses, in a letter to Marie Bonaparte, that he never found an answer to the enigma of femininity: "The great question that has never been answered, and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is: What does a woman want?" (Freud, as cited in Zafropoulos, 2009, p. 15).

Faced with this impasse, we propose a theoretical-bibliographic study that begins with readings of the texts considered essential to Freud's elaboration of a theory of femininity and then explores and problematizes the conception of motherhood he presents. Along the way, we highlight the ambiguities and contradictions that traverse and constitute Freud's elaboration and that are therefore essential to our inquiry. Attentive to other statements that allow us to question what seems graspable about motherhood in light of the relation established between a mother and her child, we seek what else Freud writes about the mother, motherhood, femininity, and what a child is. We ask whether, in Freud, there is in fact a convergence between a *woman's desire* and a *mother's desire*, and whether motherhood and the relationship with a child are merely sources of happiness and satisfaction for a woman.

Infantile Sexuality and Maternal Sexuality

From its beginnings, Freud's project underscored the centrality of sexuality in constituting the subject of the unconscious. Early on, Freud (1896/1996) turns a spotlight on the first years of life and persistently foregrounds the infantile factor in symptom formation. It is in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Freud, 1905/2016) — and in the subsequent editions of 1910 (Freud, 1910/2018b), 1915, and 1920 — that he expands the concept of infantile sexuality and recognizes the "normativity" of sexual drive in early childhood, as well as its articulation with the relationships the child establishes with caregivers. In this inaugural moment of psychoanalysis, Freud illuminates the earliest phase of psychic constitution, emphasizing both the universal and traumatic character of sexuality and its polymorphous perverse disposition — without losing sight of the decisive role of a skillful seducer:

It is instructive that the child, under the influence of seduction, can become polymorphously perverse and be induced to all possible extensions. This shows that the child is constitutionally suited to it; realization meets with little resistance because the psychic dams against sexual extensions — shame, disgust, and morality — have not yet been erected or are still under construction (...). Under the guidance of a skillful seducer, [the child] will take pleasure in every perversion (...). It becomes impossible not to recognize something universally human and primordial in this uniform disposition to all perversions (Freud, 1905/2016, p. 98-99).

Freud shows that basic maternal care is traversed by the sexual. For the baby, it is a constant source of sexual excitations and pleasure that leaves deep, unconscious marks decisive for psychic constitution:

There may be reluctance to identify as sexual love the feelings of affection and esteem that a child has for the people who care for it, but I think a more precise psychological investigation will establish this identity beyond any doubt. For the child, dealings with its caregiver are a continuous source of sexual excitation and satisfaction for the erogenous zones (Freud 1905/2016, p. 144).

Breastfeeding is exemplary: a part of the mother's body (the breast) becomes a sexual (external) object; the baby's lips function as an erogenous zone; and the stimulus produced by the inflow of milk yields a sensation of pleasure. "It is in the bodily pleasure experienced in breastfeeding and in contact with the mother's body that the foundations for the development of the sexual drive are laid, in boys and girls alike" (Kehl, 2018, p. 362). Thus, among the earliest and most important sexual bonds in the process of subjective constitution, Freud (1905/2016) highlights the bond between the nurse and the nursing, insofar as this caregiver offers — or rather offers herself to — the baby as a sexual object. At the same time that the mother makes herself an object, the baby is also, for his mother, according to Freud (1905/2016, p. 86-87), a "substitute for a complete sexual object." On this point, Freud (1905/2016) writes that if care directed toward the baby is a constant source of sexual stimuli and satisfactions, it is because the person who cares for the child

— who is usually the mother — devotes to it feelings that originate in her own sexual life: she fondles it, kisses it, and rocks it, clearly taking the child as a substitute for a complete sexual object. The mother would probably be horrified if she were told that all her caresses excite the child's sexual drive and prepare the later intensity of that drive (...). And if the mother understood better the great importance of the drives for the whole of mental life and for all ethical and psychic achievements, she would spare herself self-reproaches even after being enlightened. She is merely fulfilling her task when she teaches the child to love (Freud, 1905/2016, p. 144-145).

Two points in this passage are especially significant for psychoanalysis — both for the complex process of psychic constitution and for the mother's primary role in it. First, there are no guarantees to be found in "nature" or the biological body. At no point does Freud appeal to a feminine nature or a supposed maternal instinct, much less to a given female physiology, to conceptualize a mother's relation to her child. What Freud seems to present here as a possible condition for the baby's sexual constitution is the mother's sexuality. It is from her own sexual life — her mode of satisfaction, her mode of jouissance — that a mother can, through care and caresses, erogenize the baby's body, thereby fixing sexual activity in some erogenous zones rather than others. This underscores the complexity and singularity of subjective constitution.

Second, the passage situates the child as a *substitute for a complete sexual object*; from that position, a mother can love (fondle, kiss, and rock) the child. What, for Freud, is a *complete sexual object* of which the baby serves as a substitute? Beyond a child, what else does Freud consider a substitute for a complete sexual object? If the mother's feminine sexuality has constitutive effects, what more does Freud articulate about women's sexual life? And, alongside this, what does he say about motherhood and what a child is for a woman-mother? Are there other places assigned to a child in Freud's work?

On this matter, it is telling that in *Three Essays* Freud (1905/2016, p. 43), when discussing the overvaluation of the sexual object in a man's love life, says he was unable to investigate this question as regards the love life of women, which was still "shrouded in impenetrable obscurity." In 1920, however, he adds: "In typical cases, women show no 'sexual overvaluation' of the man, yet they almost never fail to show it toward the child they have borne."¹ Thus, even amid the obscurity surrounding women's sexual life, Freud nevertheless notes something about a woman's relation to her child and the place of a sexually overvalued object that the baby may occupy for the mother. Here, feminine sexuality appears to find less satisfaction in relation to the man as object of desire than in relation to a child. It bears emphasizing that the complex relation between a mother and a child rules out any attempt to posit a universal, transhistorical maternal love (Corrêa, 2022). As Badinter (1985) also argues, the notion of a maternal instinct — responsible for some natural orientation of women toward motherhood — is a social and historical construction.

From Sexuality to Femininity: The Girl's Path

Sex difference is a concern for Freud from the very beginnings of psychoanalysis. Early on, he is both curious about — and often perplexed by — the psychic process through which a subject becomes a man or a woman. In addressing "sexual aberrations," Freud (1905/2016) warns that the anatomical division between the sexes does not map onto the presumed man-woman complementarity upheld by social norms. He thus affirms that sexual difference cannot be reduced to the notions of feminine and masculine as then conceived by biology and sociology, since his findings point to the absence of any purely masculine or purely feminine "nature."

Although Freud's work reveals recurrent misalignments with the feminine, it also shows a clear effort to grasp the particularities of how female sexuality is formed — even if, to do so, Freud (1905/2016) must begin from what he can more readily access: descriptions of the boy's path of sexual subjectivation. In this way, the theory of infantile sexuality is first constructed from a male model, which initially assigns a central place to the penis. How, then, does Freud derive two sexes from one — namely, the male? What conception of femininity becomes possible for Freud alongside his conception of masculinity?

¹ This observation seems to stem from Freud's discussion of the paths that lead to the choice of a love object, presented in *On Narcissism: An Introduction* (Freud, 1914/2010).

Having a Child from the Father

One of the notable, foundational infantile sexual theories is, according to Freud (1905/2016), the supposition that every human being has a penis. Boys tenaciously maintain this belief. Only after “hard internal struggles,” which Freud names the castration complex, does the boy relinquish it. The girl, by contrast, he says, recognizes the difference at once and is seized by “penis envy, culminating in the wish — with momentous consequences — to be a boy as well” (Freud, 1905/2016, pp. 103–105). In the 1920 edition of *Three Essays*, however, Freud revises his view and also attributes a castration complex to women: at an initial moment both boy and girl fantasize that all women originally possess a penis, which is later lost through castration. As André (1998) notes, at this stage of Freud’s elaboration, boy and girl alike ratify the universality of the penis — yielding, respectively, fear of castration in the boy and penis envy in the girl. Years later, Freud (1923/2018c) modifies this thesis: the universality of the penis gives way to the primacy of the phallus. The child’s interest in the genitals leads to the notion that “for both sexes, only one genital — the male — plays a part. Therefore, there is no genital primacy, but a primacy of the phallus” (Freud, 1923/2018c, p. 239). In any case, the organ retains an important — if imaginary — role.

In 1924, Freud (1924/2018d, p. 253) marks an essential difference in how girls and boys position themselves with respect to castration: “The girl accepts castration as an accomplished fact, whereas the boy fears the possibility of its fulfillment.” From Freud’s perspective, this undermines “a powerful motive for the establishment of the superego and the interruption of infantile genital organization.” In girls, he proposes, such changes seem to be — more than in boys — effects of education and the intimidation that threatens them with loss of love. The girl’s Oedipus complex “is far more unambiguous than that of the little bearer of a penis; (...) it only rarely goes beyond the substitution of the mother and the adoption of the feminine position with respect to the father” (Freud, 1924/2018d, p. 253). Even so, “renunciation of the penis is not tolerated without an attempt at compensation”:

She slides — one might say along a symbolic equation — from the penis to the baby; her Oedipus complex culminates in the wish, which is maintained for a long time, to receive a child from the father as a gift, to give him a child. We have the impression that the Oedipus complex is abandoned so slowly because *this wish is never fulfilled*. Both wishes — to possess a penis and to have a child — remain strongly invested in the unconscious and help prepare the feminine being for her future sexual role (Freud, 1924/2018d, p. 253).

In other words, the girl enters the Oedipal scene seeking to compensate for her lack (of a penis) by inscribing the wish to receive a child from her father. Yet “this wish is never fulfilled.” At some point (and in the best of cases), the little girl meets the inevitable, painful disappointments that contradict the complex’s content: “The little girl, who wants to consider herself the father’s favorite beloved, will one day have to suffer severe punishment from him and find herself cast out of paradise” (Freud, 1924/2018d, p. 247). Such experiences leave, Freud says, the mark of “the absence of the expected satisfaction and the continued *deprivation [Versagung] of the desired child*,” which ultimately “dissuade the little lover from her hopeless inclination.” The Oedipal love is thus doomed by its internal impossibility, and the Oedipus complex is dissolved.

Even though the little girl cannot realize her wish to receive a child from the father — or to give him a child — this is not to say, Freud cautions, that the wish for a child no longer has a place in her psyche. On the contrary, the wish to have a child, like the wish to have a penis, Freud writes (1924/2018d, p. 253), “remains strongly invested in the unconscious” of the female subject.

Having a Child from the Mother

In 1931, Freud (1931/2018f) advances the theory and reveals “a dimension that until then had remained ignored: the earlier fixation on the mother” (André, 1998, p. 170). He reexamines women’s frequent, intense relation to the father while drawing attention to two facts that point to both the importance and the duration of the pre-Oedipal mother–daughter bond. First, where a particularly intense father–daughter tie is found, “there had previously existed, according to analytic testimony, a phase of exclusive attachment to the mother, equally intense and passionate” (Freud, 1931/2018f, p. 285–286). Thus the relation with the father during the Oedipus complex proper appears largely as a repetition of the earlier relation to the mother, adding almost nothing new to the girl’s erotic life (Freud, 1931/2018f, p. 286). Freud therefore concludes: “A woman’s strong dependence on the father is merely the legacy of an equally intense attachment to the mother” (Freud, 1931/2018f, p. 288). He acknowledges he had “underestimated the duration of this attachment to the mother” (Freud, 1931/2018f, p. 286). It is within this original relation that “the longest part of the first sexual flowering” of the little girl occurs, for this phase “lasted for an unexpectedly long period” — which is the second fact, concerning duration. Freud (1931/2018f) notes that many women remain bound to this original attachment and may in fact never turn toward men, which can lead to a homosexual object choice.

Given the importance, duration, and indelible marks of the mother–daughter relation, Freud concludes that the pre-Oedipal phase has greater significance for women than for men. He therefore proposes “to revise the general statement that the Oedipus complex is the nucleus of neurosis,” since in women the pre-Oedipal mother–daughter phase “provides room for all the fixations and repressions to which we trace the origin of neuroses” (Freud, 1931/2018f, p. 286). Freud (1931/2018f) thus becomes convinced he must broaden the concept of the Oedipus complex to account for the constitution of femininity. The girl’s Oedipus complex is divided into two phases. The first corresponds to the earliest moments of sexual constitution in the tie to the mother — the “pre-Oedipal” mother–daughter relation — dominated by a phallic/masculine/negative character. The second corresponds to the normal/positive/feminine Oedipal situation, when the girl separates from the mother and takes the father as love object; only this second phase is specifically feminine. In the masculine phase, Freud writes, “the distinctions between the sexes recede completely behind their congruences. We now have to recognize that the little girl is a little man,” with the clitoris as leading erogenous zone and constantly manipulated as an “equivalent of the penis”; the vagina, Freud (1931/2018f) supposes, may be absent from a woman’s life for many years (Freud, 1933/2018g, pp. 320–321). “What is essential in the genital life of a woman’s childhood must develop around the clitoris” (Freud, 1931/2018f, p. 289). In other words, “the child, whatever the anatomy, is at first always a boy in relation to the mother; only later can a feminization — separating boys from girls — occur in relation to the father” (André, 1998, p. 24).

What, then, does the little girl demand of the mother? What are her sexual aims during this period of exclusive attachment? Freud answers: “The girl’s sexual aims toward the mother are both active and passive, and are determined by the phases of the libido through which the child passes” (Freud, 1931/2018f, p. 298). Activity and passivity are thus (dis)articulated in the mother–daughter relation:

The child’s earliest sexual — or sexually tinged — experiences with the mother are naturally passive. She is suckled, fed, cleaned, and dressed by her and taught to do all she needs to do. Part of the child’s libido remains attached to these experiences and enjoys the satisfactions connected with them; another part strives to convert them into activity (Freud, 1931/2018f, p. 299).

Freud makes clear the active role of the drive in the bond with the mother: the girl enjoys the satisfactions that arise from maternal care. If at first she experiences this care from a passive position — as the mother’s object — soon after, Freud writes, she will try “to do herself what was previously done to her or with her” (Freud, 1931/2018f, p. 299–300), which appears in her play with her mother or with dolls. As André (1998, p. 185) notes, the activity/passivity dialectic emerges here as a struggle over the place of the object, an “oscillation between being the mother’s object and taking the mother as object.” This helps explain the love–hate ambivalence structuring the mother–daughter relation: “for the girl, the mother appears both as love object and as a pole of identification.” She loves the mother and, at the same time, rebels against her and wishes to take her place. In sum, “the girl’s libidinal relations with the mother” assume multiple forms:

They traverse all three phases of infantile sexuality; they also take on the characteristics of each phase and express themselves through oral, sadistic–anal, and phallic wishes. These wishes contain both active and passive motions (...). They are completely ambivalent, and may be of a more tender or more hostile–aggressive nature (...). What emerges most clearly is the *wish to make a child in the mother*, as well as its counterpart, to give her a child — both belonging to the phallic phase, strange enough, but analytically observed (Freud, 1931/2018f, p. 323).

The *wish for a child* thus first addresses the maternal figure. The girl expects more from the mother than the mother can give, though she has not yet recognized this limit. Many sexual wishes are directed to the mother, but “for the most part they cannot be satisfied,” which undoubtedly becomes “an abundant source of the child’s hostility toward the mother” (Freud, 1933/2018g, p. 327). This sheds light on the frequent ambivalence in the mother–daughter relation. But is this enough to awaken the girl’s interest in the father? Kehl (2018, p. 362) notes that if “female sexuality is necessarily constituted on the basis of an intense attachment to a same-sex object,” what prompts the later shift of libido to a male object?

The girl is required to take one step further in the Oedipal traversal: to separate from the mother and turn to the father, entering the “normal,” positive phase of the Oedipus complex so that, at the end of this passage, she may “fulfill her destiny of becoming a woman and a mother.” At some point the girl must switch sex — replacing clitoral pleasure with vaginal pleasure — and switch the sex of the object — replacing the mother with the father. Both substitutions are problematic. As André (1998, p. 182) emphasizes, they may not be carried out completely, for clitoral pleasure is not entirely abandoned and, although the mother is in part “relinquished as love object, she nevertheless remains present as a pole of identification.” Freud (1931/2018f, p. 290) seems aware of this when he asks: “By what paths does this transformation occur? How fully or incompletely is it carried out? And what different possibilities present themselves in this development?”

Separation from the mother is, in any case, a crucial step in the girl’s Oedipal passage. Yet Freud asks (1933/2018g, p. 324): “What brings this powerful attachment of the child to the mother to an end?” Although the “usual fate” of the attachment to the mother is to give way to an attachment to the father, Freud observes that “it is not a simple exchange

of object. The turning away from the mother takes place under the sign of hostility; the attachment to the mother ends in hatred” (Freud, 1933/2018g, p. 325). Breaking away from the mother to make room for a relation with the father is not simple and does not occur without complications, since the father marks a point of separation between the mother and her baby. In this shift from mother to father, hatred plays a structuring role in the feminine.

Freud (1931/2018f) lists the many complaints and reproaches commonly directed at the mother, which help explain the child's hostile feelings: that she gave too little milk or did not nurse long enough; that she forced the child to share her love with others; that she never satisfied all the child's loving expectations; or that she stimulated the child's sexual activity and then forbade it. Such accusations “seem much more an expression of children's general dissatisfaction (...). So great is the voracity of infantile libido!” (Freud, 1931/2018f, p. 296-297). At the end of this first phase of attachment to the mother, the strongest reproach emerges — the one that propels the girl's turning away: “the reproach of not having conceived her with the proper genital, that is, of having borne her as a woman” (Freud, 1931/2018f, p. 296). Freud (1933/2018g, p. 328) is struck to discover that “the girl holds the mother responsible for her lack of a penis and does not forgive her this disadvantage.” The girl's encounter with her lack of penis leads to her entry into the Oedipus complex. In the passage from mother to father, both the confrontation with castration and the discovery of the mother's castration play a fundamental role in the trajectory toward femininity — bringing us to a final point for discussion.

(Mis)encounters with Castration: Becoming Hysteric, Homosexual, or Mother?

According to Freud (1933/2018g), the girl's castration complex makes her feel *gravely disadvantaged*. She often “declares that she would also like to have something like *that*,” which precipitates *penis envy* (*Penisneid*). This “leaves indelible marks on her development and on the formation of her character, and even in the most favorable case will not be overcome without an extreme psychic expenditure” (Freud, 1933/2018g, p. 329-330). Freud thus assigns enormous weight to penis envy, stating that “the wish to finally obtain the longed-for penis” is what brings many women to analysis. He proposes that a woman's investment in pursuing an intellectual profession can be “identified as a sublimated transformation of this repressed wish,” and he also attributes to penis envy “the surplus that exists in women” (Freud, 1933/2018g, pp. 329-330). Having traveled far in theorizing femininity, Freud (1933/2018g) then treats the girl's encounter with castration as a turning point in female sexuality: “From it proceed three directions (...): one leads to sexual inhibition or neurosis; the next, to a change of character in the sense of a masculinity complex; and the last, finally, to normal femininity” (Freud, 1933/2018g, p. 331).

From Sexual Inhibition to the Hysterical Symptom

Discovering the anatomical difference between the sexes can lead the little girl — who “has lived until then in a masculine way” and has obtained pleasure through clitoral masturbation as an equivalent of the penis — to spoil the pleasure of her phallic sexuality under the influence of penis envy. Comparing herself with the “much better endowed” boy, she feels her self-love injured. The clitoris then loses its value as a phallic object, and the girl “renounces masturbatory satisfaction on the clitoris, rejects love for the mother, and at the same time not infrequently represses a good part of her sexual wishes” (Freud, 1933/2018g, p. 331). Yet she may fail to eliminate clitoral pleasure completely, engaging in a “violent struggle” in which “the girl herself assumes the role of her mother” — who earlier forbade masturbation — “and expresses her full dissatisfaction with the inferior clitoris, opposing satisfaction with it” (Freud, 1933/2018g, p. 332). Freud had already noted that

many women atrophy in their sexual function — either through their attachment to this clitoral excitability, so that they remain anesthetic in intercourse, or because repression proceeds to excess, to the point that its effect is partly lifted by a *hysterical substitute formation* (Freud, 1908/2018a, p. 104).

The hysterical symptom can thus appear as a substitute formation and become a source of satisfaction for a woman. She may not find sexual satisfaction through intercourse or a partner, yet find it via her symptom. In this light, sexual inhibition can be a pathway toward femininity, since the “turning to the father as object is accomplished with the aid of passive wishes” (Freud, 1931/2018f, p. 303). In 1933, Freud writes:

With the abandonment of clitoral masturbation, a part of activity is renounced. Passivity now prevails, and the turning toward the father is accomplished predominantly with the help of passive drive motions (...). Such an impact on development, which removes phallic activity from the path, levels the ground for femininity. *If not too much is lost to repression in this case, that femininity may become normal* (Freud, 1933/2018g, p. 333).

The Masculinity Complex

A second possible “way out” in the face of lack sets the woman on a more arduous path toward “normal” femininity. It is the opposite of what occurs with sexual inhibition, since a pronounced masculinity complex develops, marked by a partial refusal of castration. On seeing the boy’s genitals, the girl concludes that hers “has become much too small.” She feels wronged and inferior, yet consoles herself with the expectation that later — when she grows up — she will acquire an appendage as large as the boy’s and thus be equal to men (Freud, 1924/2018d, p. 252). According to Freud (1931/2018f, p. 291), this hopeful feeling can be preserved “until incredibly late times,” elevated to a life goal; the fantasy of being a man after all “often remains structuring for long periods,” and may culminate in a manifest homosexual object choice. Rather than relinquishing phallic activity in the face of the phallus’s absence, the girl clings to her masculinity and intensifies clitoral activity, avoiding the move toward passivity that would open the way to femininity. She takes the father not as love object but as a figure with whom to identify, or she may never in fact turn toward him, identifying instead with the phallic mother — the mother of the first Oedipal phase. As the girl refuses to acknowledge her lack of a penis, she likewise seems to refuse to recognize the mother as a woman and, therefore, also subject to castration.

Regarding women’s love choice, Freud (1914/2010) examines the paths that can lead a woman to select a love object. In puberty, women may experience an *intensification of primary narcissism*. This hinders a genuine object choice and favors the sexual overvaluation of the love object. This helps explain the earlier point: the girl may never choose the father (or anyone else) as love object, since nothing seems to be lacking and she presents as phallic. In some women, Freud (1914/2010) writes, this produces a certain *self-sufficiency*. Indeed,

such women love only themselves with an intensity similar to that with which they are loved by men. Their need lies not so much in loving as in being loved (...). Such women exercise the greatest attraction over men, not only for aesthetic reasons (...). For it seems fairly clear that a person’s narcissism has great fascination for those who have given up the full measure of their own narcissism and are seeking object-love (Freud, 1914/2010, p. 23).

Attraction thus proceeds via narcissistic coherence: attractive women keep away from the ego anything that could diminish it, maintaining an unassailable libidinal position. In the same text, however, Freud presents motherhood as a possible “solution” for narcissistic women, since it enables them to direct their love to an object. On giving birth, “a part of their body confronts them as another object, to which they can then give, out of narcissism, *full object-love*” (Freud, 1914/2010, p. 24). From this perspective, motherhood can be a route to secondary narcissism in some women, making it possible to invest libido in other objects.

From this vantage point, Freud himself allows us to question the presumed convergence between woman and mother and the supposed equivalence of a woman’s desire with the desire for a child — issues developed in the next section. In the article cited, Freud (1914/2010) notes that there are, not infrequently, women who “are sufficient unto themselves” and therefore have no need to seek an object for narcissistic satisfaction. He thus envisions the possibility that a woman finds satisfaction by a route other than motherhood. In this account, female desire is not identical to the desire to have a child. Becoming a mother is not the only path to a woman’s satisfaction. As noted², a woman’s need is less to love than to be loved. On this point, Freud (1933/2018g, p. 338) adds: “We therefore assign to femininity a greater degree of narcissism, which also influences object choice, so that being loved is a stronger need for a woman than loving.” Taken together — what Freud proposes in 1914 and in 1933 — his work seems to offer another answer to the question he later formulates: “What does a woman want?” It appears that what she wants is to be loved.

From this perspective in Freud’s text on narcissism, we can ask: i) What leads a phallic (self-sufficient) woman to desire motherhood? ii) What makes it possible for a mother to grant her baby the place of her love object? iii) Can the child become the mother’s sole object of desire? These and other questions guide the continuation of our inquiry in the following sections.

Motherhood and Femininity: Possible (Mis)encounters

The third possible “destination” for the little girl after her encounter with castration is, according to Freud (1931/2018f, p. 291), the one that “flows into the *final normal feminine configuration*, which takes the father as object and thus finds the feminine form of the Oedipus complex.” Yet the path the girl must travel to become a woman is, in Freud’s words, “quite indirect.” “In this case, it is not easy to provide more exact temporal data or to establish typical courses of development. The very moment of discovering castration is variable; many other factors seem inconstant and dependent on chance” (p. 294). Even so, among the three trajectories Freud outlines (1933/2018g, p. 334), motherhood takes on particular prominence: “normal femininity” is truly attained only if the discovery of castration is followed by substituting the wish for a penis

² The second avenue of loving satisfaction within the Oedipal terrain described by Freud (1924/2018d) concerns the feminine position. Here, the (heterosexual) girl identifies with the mother and therefore wishes to be loved by the father. Thus, what appears to weigh upon girls is the desire to be loved.

with the wish to have a baby from the father — marking the girl's entry into the Oedipal scene. Recall that the wish for a child already had a place in the girl's desire and is originally directed toward the mother.

At first, the girl takes the absence in her body of a counterpart to the boy's organ as merely an "individual misfortune." Only later does "the generality of this negative feature" extend to all women and, finally, to the mother herself. With this recognition comes a devaluation of femininity and, consequently, of her mother (Freud, 1931/2018f, p. 295). As Freud puts it (1933/2018g, p. 331), "her love related to the phallic mother; with the discovery that the mother is castrated, it becomes possible to abandon her as object." The girl also confronts the mother's inability to give her a child — i.e., to satisfy her wish for a penis — since the mother does not possess it either. Discovering the mother's castration is thus decisive in breaking the girl's tie to the mother and turning her toward the father:

the wish with which the girl turns to the father is undoubtedly, originally, the wish for the penis which the mother has refused her and which she now expects from the father. However, the female situation is only established if the wish for a penis is replaced by a wish for a child; thus the child takes the place of the penis, according to an age-old symbolic equivalence (Freud, 1933/2018g, p. 333).

It is precisely because the mother denies her daughter satisfaction of the wish for a penis that the girl seeks it elsewhere. In other words, a first mark of "privation" of the desired child must be inscribed early in the subject's constitution within the mother-daughter relation. Here the mother's primordial role stands out: to say "no," to some extent, to the daughter's myriad demands (as to the son's). Yet because the girl is not yet wholly "deprived," she continues her path in search of the wished-for penis. As Jerusalinsky (2009, p. 122-123) suggests, girls exit the castration complex with a kind of "mortgaged phallus" in the promise of motherhood and, from the matrix forged in the first love relation with the mother — knowing herself castrated — arrive at a specifically feminine knowledge: not to have it, but to know where to seek it.

Turning to the father and transferring to him the place of love object previously occupied by the mother, the girl expects him to "give" her a baby, insofar as he is presumed to be the bearer of the penis-phallus. In this sequence, the mother becomes the object of jealousy and the girl's rival for the father's love, since the mother "receives from the father everything that the girl desires from him" (Freud, 1933/2018g, p. 334). The girl's hatred of the mother intensifies, and "the little girl transforms herself into a little woman" (Freud, 1925/2018e, p. 268). Even then, she remains in the Oedipus complex "for an indeterminate time, dismantling it only later and incompletely" (Freud, 1933/2018g, p. 334-335). If, in childhood, the wish to have a child-penis from the father becomes "the aim of the most intense feminine desire," then in adult life:

Great is the happiness when this wish for a child later finds its actual fulfillment — particularly if the child is a little boy who brings with him the longed-for penis. In the expression 'a child from the father' the emphasis very often falls on the child, and the father is not underscored. Thus the old masculine wish to possess a penis still operates through consummated femininity. But perhaps we should rather recognize this wish for a penis as a wish that is feminine par excellence (Freud, 1933/2018g, pp. 333-334).

And shortly thereafter he adds:

We see that the old factor of the lack of a penis has not exhausted its force in the difference between the mother's reaction to the birth of a son or a daughter. Only the relation to a son brings the mother unlimited satisfaction; of all human relations it is absolutely the most perfect and the most free of ambivalence. Upon the son the mother can transfer the ambition she had to repress in herself and expect from him the fulfillment of all that remained to her of her masculinity complex (Freud, 1933/2018g, p. 339-340).

Here, Freud identifies the woman's — feminine — desire as, in essence, a desire for a penis. Elsewhere he proposes that the wish for a child takes the place formerly occupied by the wish for a penis; by this logic, feminine desire appears equivalent to the desire for a child. From this angle, one can indeed point to a certain convergence of woman and mother: a woman's desire seems to coincide with the mother's desire, and motherhood — as "consummated femininity" — would be the privileged route to the realization of feminine desire. The great question — "What does a woman want?" — would then receive an answer in motherhood: "She wants to have a baby." In this perspective, the bond between mother and baby seems to acquire a kind of guarantee, since the baby — as substitute for the penis/phallus lacking to the woman-mother — is welcomed in the place of what she desires, which she does not have but wants to have. The arrival of the baby thus stages an encounter of woman and mother; from this point of view, motherhood becomes a source of happiness, fulfillment, and — above all — completeness. Moreover, when the baby is a boy, Freud suggests the child occupies an even more privileged place in the woman-mother's desire. He draws a sharp distinction between a son and a daughter: the mother does not react in the same way to their births, and motherhood is "particularly" happy with a boy, who bears the coveted organ that the mother lacks. At this point, one glimpses in Freud a certain idealization of the woman's encounter with motherhood, as if the mother-son relation were marked by a *full* and *unlimited* satisfaction — "perfect" and free of ambivalence.

Freud also notes that many men do not separate from the mother, and their love choices are “impregnated with maternal characteristics; all of them become easily recognizable substitutes for the mother” (Freud, 1910/2018b, p. 126). Thus, even where the son’s relation to the mother involves abandonment, disappointment, jealousy, seduction, and prohibition, these are often insufficient to dislodge her as the primordial object — unlike the girl’s relation to the mother (Freud, 1933/2018g, p. 328). Are women-mothers content to be loved exclusively by their sons?

By contrast, Freud’s account of the mother–daughter relation shows that motherhood is hardly “perfect” from the mother’s standpoint, nor is it free of ambivalence. He repeatedly underscores the daughter’s manifold demands and claims upon the mother — along with jealousy, resentment, guilt, hatred, and rivalry focused on the maternal figure. In the female Oedipus complex, does the father really become a love object, or is he merely a pathway to the object of desire? What might narcissistic women teach us here?

As Kehl (1996) observes, when Freud posited motherhood as destiny, he could not foresee the transformation of the nuclear family structure or that motherhood would gradually become an option for women. For the author, children have been losing their phallic status for mothers. In contemporary life, having a child can often be experienced by some women as a limitation that restricts access to other phallic attributes. Birman (1999) likewise argues that, today, a woman’s desire may or may not converge on motherhood. Femininity understood as the result of Oedipal renunciations that culminate in motherhood can no longer be taken as the sole, ideal Oedipal resolution. That motherhood is still overvalued culturally — and that many women find in it a sense of completeness in the face of phallic lack — is undeniable. Yet with women’s presence in the public sphere and the recognition of their right to desire beyond the private sphere, home, and motherhood, contemporary women encounter numerous phallic possibilities. Where once much pleasure had to be renounced to fulfill a maternal “destiny,” this is no longer obligatory (Coelho & Wollmann, 2017, p. 22-23). The entry of women into the labor market, along with technological and medical advances, has expanded interests beyond the domestic sphere. From this perspective, motherhood becomes one among several possible libidinal investments rather than, as in the past, a natural destiny.

Final Considerations

From the outset of his work, Freud does not assign the baby just any place in the desire of the woman–mother. As we have seen, Freud (1905/2016) teaches that, for the mother, the baby occupies the place of a substitute for a complete sexual object. He also notes that, in typical cases, a woman almost never fails to show sexual overvaluation of her baby. Ultimately, Freud proposes an equation of equivalence — penis = phallus = baby — as a possible way to resolve penis envy in women. In this logic, the baby holds a privileged place in the woman–mother’s desire, insofar as the child stands in for the longed-for penis/phallus.

Alongside this, Freud’s many theoretical elaborations on the complexity of sexual constitution allow us to glimpse the mother’s primordial function — and her specifically feminine sexuality — in the earliest phases of subject formation. It is she who both offers herself to the baby as a sexual object and grants the child a privileged place in her desire. In this trajectory, Freud underscores the importance of shared pleasure in the mother–infant tie: through maternal care the baby’s body is erogenized, marked by sexuality and thus by the desire of those who care for it. Having been — ideally — loved and desired, the baby learns to love and desire. We therefore emphasize the human infant’s radical dependence on caregivers and, with it, the substantial investments required for psychic constitution.

It seems necessary, then, for psychic constitution that, to some extent, a woman may find satisfaction in motherhood and in her relationship with her baby — as Freud suggests — so that something of her femininity, of her specifically female desire, can find pleasure and fulfillment in maternity, even when she remains under the aegis of a supposed masculinity. However, based on this study’s findings, it is essential to stress that, although motherhood does not resolve the question of female desire, it is desirable — ideally — that there be some encounter between femininity and motherhood, that is, between woman and mother. Only then can the baby find a place in the woman–mother’s desire from which the child may emerge as a subject. Whether that baby is a boy or a girl may also have consequences for the role taken up by whoever occupies the paternal function — together with the mother — in shaping the child’s sexuality. Freud thus suggests that the Oedipus complex in girls and in boys are only ideal models. They depend not on a single agent but on two functions and are never followed linearly by any subject.

If we draw from Freud’s texts the conclusion that the wish for a child is a destiny of penis envy — such that a woman’s desire is equivalent to a mother’s desire — we must also recognize that Freud reaches this conclusion by reading woman, mother, motherhood, and the wish for a child strictly through phallic logic. In this sense, Marcos (2017) cautions that psychoanalytic clinical work bears witness to the fact that motherhood cannot be fully encompassed by phallic logic. As Marcos further notes, if a woman seeks in the figure of the mother a way out of castration in an attempt to inscribe something of the feminine, her encounter with motherhood can become a stage for intense psychic suffering. In the same vein, André (1998, p. 179) writes that “the child constitutes, for lack of the penis, the sign of feminine identity only as a hope, even a denegation”; in effect, motherhood is often accompanied by depression or by a facade of contentment.

Remaining within phallic logic, Freud (1914/2010) also entertains the possibility that a child may serve as a treatment for a woman's narcissism — provided she actually desires the child, which is by no means guaranteed. A child may become one more object a woman wants to have in order to be loved, without her love truly being at stake. Or a child may be one more substitute for the phallus, among many already obtained. Multiple other possibilities thus arise. In every case, we conclude that a child does not solve “the woman's question”; rather, motherhood entails a subjective repositioning that is not lived without anxiety. After all, the promise of completeness is the end of desire. And even at the level of the demand for love—can we really say that a woman's desire is “to be loved,” in the sense that the demand for love cannot be fully satisfied? In this respect, what legacy do hysterics — “inhibited,” in Freud's terms — leave to psychoanalysis?

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