

Siegfried Zepf & Dietmar Seel

## PENIS ENVY AND THE FEMALE OEDIPUS COMPLEX\*

A PLEA TO REAWAKEN AN INEFFECTUAL DEBATE

We know less about the sexual life of little girls than of boys. But we need not feel ashamed of this distinction; after all, the sexual life of adult women is a “dark continent” for psychology.

Sigmund Freud (1926e, p. 212)

Freud introduced the term “penis envy” in the following statement:

The assumption that all human beings have the same (male) form of genital is the first of the many remarkable and momentous sexual theories of children. It is of little use to a child that the science of biology justifies his prejudice and has been obliged to recognize the female clitoris as a true substitute for the penis.

Little girls do not resort to denial of this kind when they see that boys' genitals are formed differently from their own. They are ready to recognize them immediately and are over-come by envy for the penis—an envy culminating in the wish, which is so important in its consequences, to be boys themselves (Freud, 1905d, p. 195).

After attributing three years later an “ignorance of the vagina” (1908c, p. 219) to children, he added a footnote in 1920 to this notion, stating that the little girl believes that she has lost the penis “by castration” (1905d, p. 195).

The significance of being castrated and of the resulting penis envy for female development was emphasised in 1933, with the statements that “[t]he discovery that she is castrated is a turning-point in a girl's growth” (1933a, p. 126), and that girls “fall a victim to ‘envy for the penis’, which will leave in-eradicable traces on their development and the formation of their character” (ibid., p. 125).

Chasseguet-Smirgel (1976) aptly remarks that, on this view, females are characterised by multiple shortcomings. They lack of a vagina, of a penis, of a specific sexuality, of an adequate erotic object and are devoid of any intrinsic feminine qualities. As Freud (1925j, p. 257f.) related, moreover, compared to the male super-ego the female super-ego also exhibits certain deficiencies.

It is astonishing that Freud's concept, although widely criticised (for an overview, see Lax 1995; 2007; Moulton 1970), is nowadays predominantly retained in its original version (e.g. Holmes, 2007; Ross, 2007; Silver, 2007). Since such criticism has left but few traces in the common understanding, we intend to reawaken the former debate in asking what is tenable in both Freud's concept of penis envy and its critique. Going along with Laplanche's assumption that there is no endogenous sexuality and with his concept of en-

---

\* Erschienen in: Zepf, S. & Seel, D. (2016) Penis envy and the female Oedipus complex – A plea to reawaken an ineffectual debate. *Psychoanal Rev* 103: 397–421.

igmatic parental messages, we will then offer a concept of the female Oedipus complex and of penis envy, which traces their origin back to the parents' unconscious in their handling of the daughter.

## FREUD'S CONCEPTS OF PENIS ENVY AND THE FEMALE OEDIPUS COMPLEX

Freud (1900a, p. 264; see also 1905e, p. 56; 1907a, p. 33) was initially convinced that "a girl's first affection is for her father" and that the "sexual interest of children begins by turning ... to the problem of where babies come from" (e.g. 1916-17a, p. 318). These views were corrected in 1925. Now, he states that "[i]n both cases the mother is the original object" (1925j, p. 251) and that the sexual interest of children resides with "the difference between the sexes" (*ibid.*, p. 252).

With this change, the situation becomes different. Although Freud maintained in 1931 that he had "long given up any expectation of a neat parallelism between male and female sexual development" (1931b, p. 226), he was quite certain by 1933 that "[b]oth sexes seem to pass through the early phases of libidinal development in the same manner" (1933a, p. 117). In the developmental phase he calls "phallic", there would thus be no difference between boys and girls. In both cases the mother would be the love object, such that we "are ... obliged to recognize that the little girl is a little man" (*ibid.*, p. 118). As already mentioned in 1908, Freud believes that he is "justified in assuming that for many years the vagina is virtually non-existent and possibly does not produce sensations until puberty" (1931b, p. 228). In the case of girls, rather, the "clitoris is the leading erotogenic zone" and "all their masturbatory acts are carried out on this penis-equivalent" (1933a, p. 118).

After the girl has discovered that she does not have what the boy has, she experiences herself as being castrated, develops penis envy, and turns away from her mother for two reasons. First, she believes that the mother is responsible for her lack of a penis (*ibid.*, p. 124). Second, the girl discovers that her mother is also castrated and, since her love was initially directed toward her phallic mother, with this discovery it becomes possible to relinquish her as an object and to turn to her father with "the wish for the penis which her mother has refused her" (*ibid.*, p. 136). Later on "along the line ... of the equation 'penis-child'" (1925j, p. 256), the "wish for a penis is replaced by one for a baby" (1933a, p. 128) and "with that purpose in view she takes her father as a love-object" (1925j, p. 256). In this way, the girl enters into the Oedipal drama.

With the transference of the wish for a penis-baby on to her father, the girl has entered the situation of the Oedipus complex. Her hostility to her mother, which did not need to be freshly created, is now greatly intensified, for she becomes the girl's rival, who receives from her father everything that she desires from him (*ibid.*, p. 129).

## DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF PENIS ENVY

Before presenting different views on penis envy, we want to point out that, in his reasoning regarding the daughter's turn to the father, Freud argues in psychological terms, although he conceptualises the Oedipus complex as a part of the archaic heritage of mankind (e.g. 1912-13a, p. 132; p. 141), thus implying, as Ogden (1987, p. 485) notices, "biologically determined heterosexual strivings" in the daughter. It is also striking that Freud, in his psychological approach, ignores his former statements in which he argued that the girl's affection for her father is solidified with his active complicity, i.e. that the father turns to his daughter in a specific manner. For example,

[w]e must not omit to add that the parents themselves often exercise a determining influence on the awakening of a child's Oedipus attitude by themselves obeying the pull of sexual attraction, and ... the father will give the plainest evidence of his greater affection for his little daughter and the mother for her son (Freud, 1916-17a, p. 333)

This and other formulations (1916-17a, p. 207; 1900a, p. 258; 1908d, p. 202; 1910a, p. 47; 1919e, p. 186) seem to indicate that Freud was convinced that the seductive trends of the parents play a decisive role in the development of the child's Oedipus complex. However, contrary to these statements, he maintains that a child "has its sexual instincts and activities from the first; it comes into the world with them" (1910a, p. 42) and that "the spontaneous nature of the Oedipus complex in children cannot be seriously shaken" by the parents' behaviour (1916-1917a, p. 333). In his view, "the sexual instinct is in the first instance independent of its object; nor is its origin likely to be due to its object's attractions" (1905d, p. 148), and he reduces the parents' behaviour to "some sort of impetus in the life of the individual" which the inherited "psychical dispositions" have need of "before they can be roused into actual operation" (1912-13a, p. 158).

The inconsistencies in Freud's reflections go hand in hand with his confession—presented on various occasions—that he is not very familiar with the sexual development of girls. As early as 1905, he had noted that the "erotic life ... of women ... is still veiled in an impenetrable obscurity" (1905d, p. 151) and this impenetrable obscurity lasted throughout his works. Referring to the infant's genital organisation, he admitted in 1923: "Unfortunately we can describe this state of things only as it affects the male child; the corresponding processes of development in the little girl are not known to us" (1923e, p. 142). In 1924, responding to Abraham's proposal of an "early vaginal blossoming of the female libido" he commented: "I do not know anything about it. As I gladly admit, the female part of the problem is extraordinarily obscure to me" (letter to Abraham, 3 December 1924, 1965a, p. 379). Again, two years later, he confessed that "in general our insight into these developmental processes in girls is unsatisfactory, incomplete and vague" (Freud, 1926e, p.179).

Given the inconsistencies in Freud's considerations and his self-critical as-

essment, it seems not astonishing that Freud's ideas about the development of female sexuality have been continuously questioned. Mayer (1985), for instance, challenges Freud's assumption that girls, like boys, would assume from the beginning that all human beings are equipped with a penis. She cites a 20 month old girl who speaks about the sexual difference of man and woman:

"Mummy", she began, "*Mummy* has a bottom ... and Mummy, *Daddy* has a bottom ... and Mummy, *Emily* has a bottom". Emily's mother assented to each of these observations and Emily thoughtfully continued, "and *Mummy* has a vulva ... and *Emily* has a vulva ... but Mummy, Daddy has something *funny* in his vulva!" (ibid., p. 331).

Mayer (1985) notices that Emily, like Freud's little Hans, has made a simple assumption about the nature of genitals, namely that everyone is and must be like me. But, unlike Freud's little Hans, this assumption has led Emily to believe that everyone has and must have a vulva as she has.

Freud's assumption that the vagina remained unrecognised to girls before puberty was also questioned. In a letter to Freud previously cited, Abraham (letter from Abraham to Freud, 3 December 1924, Freud, 1965a, p. 527) had already referred to early vaginal sensations before clitoral excitation in girls' early infancy, underlined in a second letter "the tendency to vaginal masturbation ... in particular, the introduction of foreign bodies" (letter to Freud, 26 December 1924, 1965a, p. 531), and, being convinced "that the psycho-sexual processes of puberty are repetitions", proposed a "pre-stage" that "would have to have as a sexual aim the reception of the penis" (ibid., p. 530). Since then, female psychoanalysts in particular have held the view that, since in early childhood girls do experience pleasurable vaginal sensations, the vagina would be represented long before puberty (e.g. Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1976; Frenkel, 1996; Horney, 1926; Jones, 1927, 1935; Kestenberg, 1982; Melanie Klein, 1927; Laufer, 1986; Mayer, 1995).

Freud's thesis that, for a girl, "Anatomy is Destiny" (1924d, p. 178) and that "the wish for a penis" plays "the part of the underlying bedrock" in treatment where analytical activities "are at an end" (1937d, p. 98) was also cast into doubt. Before, for example, Grossman & Stewart (1976) and Mayer (1995) argued that the wish for a penis in women is analysable, Ferenczi (1927, p. 84) was convinced that "every female patient, if her neurosis is to be regarded as fully disposed of, must have got rid of her masculinity complex and must emotionally accept without a trace of resentment the implications of her female role".

The same holds true for Freud's hypothesis that the girl turns to her father with the wish to be equipped with the penis which her mother has refused to give to her. Melanie Klein (1927), Horney (1926; 1933), and Jones (1927; 1935) argued that the girl would know about her vagina at an early age and desires the father's penis in her vagina. Likewise, Heimann (1952), Lorand (1939) and Melanie Klein (1945) emphasised that penis envy refers to the father's penis of