



ORIGINAL ARTICLE ON THEORY

## The role of the feminine in the Oedipus complex: rescuing the mother-woman in the triangular structuring of the mind

O papel do feminino no complexo de Édipo: Resgatando a mãe-mulher na estruturação triangular da mente

El papel de lo femenino en el complejo de Edipo: Rescatando la madre-mujer en la estructuración triangular de la mente

Marina Bento Gastaud <sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Contemporâneo-Instituto de Psicanálise e Transdisciplinaridade (CIPT). Porto Alegre/RS, Brasil. <sup>b</sup> Instituto da Sociedade Psicanalítica de Porto Alegre (Instituto SPPA). Porto Alegre/RS, Brasil.

DOI 10.5935/2318-0404.20210054

### Abstract

Much has been written about the woman in the context of the mother-infant relationship. However, the role of the woman in the Oedipus complex has not received much attention. The aim of the present paper is to review the theories regarding the double feminine role – sexual object and object of identification – in the Oedipal triangle, making the mother a protagonist (as much as the father). For that, the article situates the “feminine” in the contemporary family and synthetically reviews the articulation between the phallic mother, castration, power/potency, and misogyny, with a focus on Freud, Chodorow, Ogden, and Fiorini. The arguments are illustrated with the Oedipal scenario in the case of Dora and the postulations of Bleichmar and Balsam. Finally, a case is made for the importance of strengthening both identity poles (feminine and masculine) to enable better object relations in adult life.

**Keywords:** Oedipus complex; Mother-child relations; Women

### Resumo

Muito se escreveu sobre a mulher no contexto da relação mãe-bebê. No entanto, o papel da mulher no complexo de Édipo não recebeu muita atenção. O objetivo do presente artigo é revisar as teorias a respeito do duplo papel feminino – objeto sexual e objeto de identificação – no triângulo edipiano, tornando a mãe protagonista

(tanto quanto o pai). Para tanto, o artigo situa o “feminino” na família contemporânea e revê sinteticamente a articulação entre mãe fálica, castração, poder / potência e misoginia, com foco em Freud, Chodorow, Ogden e Fiorini. Os argumentos são ilustrados com o cenário edipiano no caso de Dora e as postulações de Bleichmar e Balsam. Por fim, defende-se a importância de fortalecer os dois pólos identitários (feminino e masculino) para possibilitar melhores relações objetais na vida adulta.

**Palavras-chaves:** Complexo de Édipo; Relações mãe-filho; Mulheres

## Resumen

Mucho se ha escrito sobre la mujer en el contexto de la relación madre-hijo. Sin embargo, el papel de la mujer en el complejo de Edipo no ha recibido mucha atención. El objetivo del presente trabajo es revisar las teorías sobre el doble rol femenino – objeto sexual y objeto de identificación- en el triángulo edípico, haciendo de la madre protagonista (tanto como del padre). Para eso, el artículo sitúa lo “femenino” en la familia contemporánea y revisa sintéticamente la articulación entre la madre fálica, la castración, el poder / potencia y la misoginia, con un enfoque en Freud, Chodorow, Ogden y Fiorini. Los argumentos se ilustran con el escenario edípico en el caso de Dora y las postulaciones de Bleichmar y Balsam. Finalmente, se defiende la importancia de fortalecer ambos polos de identidad (femenino y masculino) para permitir mejores relaciones de objeto en la vida adulta.

**Palabras clave:** Complejo de Edipo; Relaciones madre-hijo; Mujeres

## Introduction

The Oedipus complex plays a fundamental part in the structuring of the personality and in the orientation of human desire<sup>1</sup>. It has been described as the “nuclear complex of the neuroses”<sup>2</sup> and as a pivotal aspect of human sexuality. The Oedipus complex reveals the unyielding presence of the other in the subject’s constitution – since Oedipus, the subject has been principally structured around the differentiation between sexes and the positioning of the sexes regarding castration anxiety<sup>3</sup>. It is also the main reference axis of psychopathology<sup>1</sup>.

Initially described in 1897, in letters to Fliess (letters 64, 69, and 71)<sup>4</sup>, the notion of the Oedipus complex was further developed by Freud in the period of the metapsychological writings in 1910 (when the term “complex” appears in reference to more than Greek tragedy). Freud, however, dedicated only one specific text to this theme, “The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex”<sup>5</sup>.

Initially, Freud’s description of the Oedipus complex was centered in the boy, and for a long time he argued that the Complex was just as applicable to the girl<sup>1</sup>. Later Freud proposed a distinction between the Oedipus complex in boys and girls. In his article of 1923 about the infantile genital organization of the libido<sup>6</sup>, Freud postulated that in the phallic phase, the Oedipal climax, only one organ matters for both sexes: the phallus. Also, the emphasis on the preoedipal attachment to the mother provided an additional contribution to the distinction between the sexes regarding the Oedipus complex – since for the girl, the complex entails a change in the love object, from the mother to the father.

Nevertheless, in the work of Freud, the role of mother and woman in the Oedipus complex (in both its positive and negative forms) was not given as much weight as the rivalry with and admiration for the father. Consider Dora and Hans, for example – despite their sex difference, in both cases Freud centers the oedipal psychodynamics around the relationship with the father, with the mother getting only a supporting role in the triangle. Even in later articles, in which Freud addresses the relationship of the subject with the mother<sup>7-9</sup>, the impression remains that Freud favors the preoedipal, rather than the Oedipal, mother (perceived as castrated) as identification model.

Post-Freudian theorists have also focused on the relevance of the mother figure in the formation of the individual's psychic structure. Melanie Klein (a woman!) pushes the complex to an earlier developmental stage, supersizing the role of the mother in this organization. As a post-Kleinian scholar, Winnicott dedicated his entire work to this theme, linking the psychic constitution to the infant-mother relationship. Similarly, Meltzer empowers the woman by describing the aesthetic conflict experienced by the infant, who captures the beauty and the mystery of the mother, and by assigning the woman a role of aesthetic reciprocity in this conflict. Even so, it should be noted that these (and many other) authors still mainly discuss the preoedipal, non-sexualized mother of the mother-infant relationship; and neglect the sexualized woman, in her relationship with the father (or another object of her interest), of the Oedipal phase – the mother in the triangle. The entry into the Oedipus complex clearly entails the introduction of a new form of otherness in the mother-infant dyad, requiring radical interpersonal psychological reorganization; the mother object in the Oedipus complex is much more external<sup>10</sup>.

For either girls or boys, in the positive or negative Oedipus complex, the mother-woman plays a double role in this structuring triangle: it is a sexual object – an object of love and desire for the father, an object of desire and possession for the subject – while at the same time it constitutes an object of identification – be like the mother/different than the mother. “To be/not to be the mother and the father” and “to have/not to have the mother and the father” is the central paradox of the Oedipal resolution. My intention in this article is to review the theories regarding this double role of the mother in the Oedipal triangle, making her as much a protagonist as the father, a vertex in the triangle. Finally, the case of Dora is used to illustrate the arguments presented.

Few scholars in the past century were capable of seeing the mother and her subjectivity as separate from the commonly studied “mother-infant” unity. Bulgarian-French philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva may help explain the difficulty of speaking about an Oedipal mother. By replacing maternal “function” with maternal “passion,” Kristeva<sup>11</sup> combines maternal and erotic and drives our attention to the taboo surrounding the notion of an eroticized mother, a taboo that is as strong as once was the taboo of infantile sexuality. At the origins of infantile sexuality, the long maturation of human beings exposes the child to the intrusion of adults, specifically to maternal intrusion, since the mother is usually the main caretaker<sup>12</sup>. Kristeva<sup>13</sup> uses the term “abject” to designate a universal human fascination with states of terror and disgusting things, leading her to place this interest in the maternal body. The body of pregnancy, of birth, of maternity, with all its erotic

bonds with the child, is vital. However, it is at the same time problematic for its evocation of powerful elements of the abject. We must abject the maternal, says Kristeva<sup>11</sup>, the object which created us, to build an identity.

Balsam<sup>14</sup> mentions a series of authors who understand the feminine as a central part of the mind work: Jung, Klein, Rank, Helene Deutsch, and Marie Langer (a pioneer in placing “sexuality” next to “maternity”). For didactic and spatial limitations, however, I chose to emphasize contemporary authors Chodorow, Ogden, Fiorini, Bleichmar, and Balsam. I will therefore not address the contributions of the French psychoanalytic school, including Lacan, Green, and Laplanche, and their important theories on castration and seduction – a useful summary of the contributions of Lacan and Laplanche to this theme can be found in Fiorini<sup>15</sup>. My major motivation to write about this theme derives from my “place of utterance” (women, mother, daughter), which I hope will help me overcome the limitations produced by my theoretical focus.

### **From the Victorian to the contemporary family**

The role of women in society is being reconsidered and undergoing change. It is only logical that these changes should impact family organization, while at the same time being affected by social organization.

According to Roudinesco<sup>16</sup>, men have always had to accept the need to resort to women to “produce” their children and pass on their names. Therefore, they were careful to regulate and dominate the body of their female partners. However, soon after World War II, contraceptive techniques evolved, allowing women to take control. Thus, through birth control and family planning, and preventing fecundation, women conquered, not without struggle, rights and powers that decreased the grip of male dominance. In the passage from father sovereignty to the irruption of the feminine, Roudinesco considers that the contemporary family resembles a fraternal network, strives to avoid hierarchy and authority, with each member feeling autonomous and functioning. In this contemporary family, marriage has become merely a type of union, lasting more or less, working to protect the couple from eventual worldly disruptions. Instead of divinization, the contemporary family hopes to be fragile, neurotic, aware of its disorder, but concerned with establishing bonds that are not provided by social life.

This said disordered family seems to be more open to other possibilities of triangulation, overcoming the mother-father-infant model. It is often said that these transformations in the family order depart from the heteronormative model of the Oedipus complex described by Freud. In addition, queer theory scholars (for example, Butler<sup>18</sup>) question the binary nature of gender in our society and criticize the dominance of anatomic genitals in gender performance. Currently, Ehrensaft<sup>17</sup> also discusses the existence of other geometric shapes (circles, containing squares, pentagons, etc.) that could represent the Oedipal matrix initially proposed as a triangle. However, for the present article, I chose to focus on the symbolic conception originating in the triangle: all human beings are conceived from the union between an egg (representing the female) and sperm (representing the male), with these three components (subject – female – male) being the universal heteronormative vertices of the Oedipus complex.

## The phallic woman – castration, power, and misogyny

Considering the equation “phallus=penis=power,” the empowerment of the female vertex in the Oedipal triangle presupposes the notion of a phallic mother. Freud<sup>19</sup> states, in 1910, about the boy’s Oedipus:

“Before the child comes under the dominance of the castration-complex – at a time when he still holds women at full value – he begins to display an intense desire to look, as an erotic instinctual activity. He wants to see other people’s genitals, at first in all probability to compare them with his own. The erotic attraction that comes from his mother soon culminates in a longing for her genital organ, which he takes to be a penis. With the discovery, which is not made till later, that women do not have a penis, this longing often turns into its opposite and gives place to a feeling of disgust which in the years of puberty *can become the cause of psychical impotence, misogyny and permanent homosexuality*. But the fixation on the object that was once strongly desired, the woman’s penis, leaves indelible traces on the mental life of the child, who has pursued that portion of his infantile sexual researches with particular thoroughness.” (pp. 88-89; emphasis added).

Freud links homosexuality with the attraction of boys for a strong mother (parallel to a weakened father) in yet another section of the same text:

“In all our male homosexual cases, the subjects had had a very intense erotic attachment to a female person, as a rule their mother, during the first period of childhood, which is afterwards forgotten; this attachment was evoked or encouraged by too much tenderness on the part of the mother herself, and further reinforced by the small part played by the father during their childhood. (...) Indeed it almost seems as though the presence of a strong father would ensure that the son made the correct decision in his choice of object, namely someone of the opposite sex.” (p. 91)

I am curious to know which would be the risks associated with the opposite context – a strong identification with the father and the mother taking on a secondary role in the Oedipal scenario. Would that not produce misogyny, neurosis, suffering? The equalization of the feminine and masculine poles seems to be the only healthy way out. For Ogden<sup>10</sup>, the development of a healthy gender identity reflects the establishment of a dialectic interaction between the male and female identities. This takes place when the subject does not have to choose between loving the mother (and identifying with her) or loving the father (and identifying with him)<sup>10</sup>. But is it possible to love (and identify with) a “castrated” mother?

The primacy of the penis in human sexuality (phallocentrism) is at the core of Freudian theory. American psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow<sup>20</sup> questions this female castration premise as “fact” or universal fantasy. For

her, in psychoanalytic theory, traumas require individualized explanations; psychoanalysis always examines the development of something conflicting and powerful in the individual's history, except in the case of penis envy. Penis envy is given in Freudian theory as self-evident, not something requiring an individual explanation. The penis as a symbol of male supremacy in the culture and the family becomes the actual genital organ. There is no judgement in stating that men and women have different ways of constituting their superegos, or different choices of objects, or different formation of body images. However, Freud insisted on introducing value judgment by affirming that male superego formation, choice of object, and body images were better or more desirable. Psychoanalysis "is an interpretive theory of mental processes, and with an interpretive theory, we can only say that an interpretation makes better or worse sense, not that it is true or false, right or wrong"<sup>20</sup> (p. 175).

In the Freudian Oedipal narrative, the girl finds herself without a penis and turns to the father in shame and disappointment. She despises the castrated mother, and, as a result, parts with her in anger and disappointment, seeking the father as replacement love object. According to Freud, in the girl's mind, the mother's refusal to grant the daughter a penis reflects lack of love for the daughter. In the boy, the resolution of the Oedipus complex, according to Freud, involves the fear of being castrated like the mother. For Ogden<sup>10</sup>, however, the shame and the feelings of fear, failure, and imperfection are not the ingredients that drive the individual to a healthy love relationship. For that author, the Freudian narrative of the female Oedipus complex is based on the assumption that the discovery by the girl of not having a penis is, for her, a disappointing and traumatic step in her development\*. Ogden<sup>10</sup> however states that, in normal development, the girl perceives the female genitals as the norm, perhaps believing that the boys have a defective equipment, "overly closed" and "too unreceptive" (according to the ideas of Mayer<sup>21</sup>). The envy of the other's genitals may or not occur in any subject, men or women, with castration fantasies not being limited to girls<sup>10</sup>.

Is then any other way of understanding the devaluation of women, except as a product of culture? Chodorow<sup>20</sup> bases her assumptions on the notion that women are the primary caretakers of children. Freud had already stated that "the attachment to the mother is destined to perish, precisely for having been the first one and so intense" (Freud<sup>8</sup>, p. 269). For Chodorow, this leads to a series of differences in terms of identity structuring between boys and girls, because the first identifications and experiences of self-object are lived by the child in relation to the mother, a female subject. For that author, despite considering her children of both sexes originally as a part of herself, a mother unconsciously (and sometimes consciously) experiences her male child more like an "other" than her female child. Reciprocally, the gender identity of the male child develops far and apart from the mother. On the contrary, daughters grow with a sense of continuity and similarity in relation to their mothers. Therefore, a girl's gender identity is not problematic in and of itself. The difficulties

---

\* Even though this is not the focus of the present article, it is interesting to note that Ogden (2012) proposed that the feminine Oedipal experience should ideally go through an initial stage, called "Oedipal transitional relationship." In this primary phase of Oedipal development, the girl falls in love with the mother-as-father and with the father-as-mother, that is, she falls in love with the mother in the unconscious identification of the mother with her own father. Thus, paradoxically, the first relation of the triangular object is lived through a relationship between two people; the first heterosexual relationship develops in a bond involving two women; the father as libidinous object is discovered in the mother. This transitional relation serves to allow the girl to discover in a non-traumatic manner the father as external object, within the safety of a dyadic relationship with the mother. Through this process of triangulation, facilitated by the mother, the girl learns to appreciate otherness – a person different from herself.

faced by girls in establishing a female identity are a product of culture, resulting from the identification with a gender category that is negatively valued and with a maternal figure that is felt in an ambivalent manner (whose femininity or maternity is constantly put down)<sup>20</sup>. This leads to a perpetual cycle of suffering, which revolves around the central axis of devaluation of the feminine. Identifying with the female pole is difficult for both males and females as they grow up, and they end up not fully developing their identities and establishing partial relationships with each other.

In addition to complicating the identification with the feminine for both men and women, the Freudian Oedipal narrative is especially problematic for the psychosocial development of the girl: for Freud<sup>7-9</sup>, the change in object represents an additional difficulty for the resolution of the Oedipus complex in girls – the girl needs to reach for an object whose sex is different than that of the mother. This propels her into a long psycho-libidinal journey, led by the penis envy that emerges when she discovers herself to be anatomically different from the father and interprets that as proof of her own castration<sup>15</sup>. Freud<sup>9</sup> states that:

“The discovery that she is castrated is a turning point in a girl’s growth. Three possible lines of development start from it: one leads to sexual inhibition or to neurosis, the second to change of character in the sense of the masculinity complex, the third, finally, to normal femininity” (p. 126).

In 1925, Freud<sup>7</sup> wrote that the girl “gives up her wish for a penis and puts in place of it a wish for a child: and with that purpose in view she takes her father as a love-object. Her mother becomes the object of her jealousy. The girl has turned into a little woman” (p. 318). For Argentinean psychoanalyst Letícia Fiorini<sup>15,22</sup> these Freudian claims may result in deleterious consequences for the development of women, because they leave no healthy place for the development of female sexuality in an autonomous manner and separate from maternity (and heterosexuality). As interpreted by Fiorini<sup>15</sup>, Freud indicates that the desire for maternity would be the *princeps* resolution of the girl’s libidinal development – the girl would shift from penis envy to the desire for a child, first by the father, then by another man; the child would be interpreted as a replacement for an essential deficiency. Clinically, such a replacement is sometimes observed, especially in women with hysterical functioning. However, this dynamic cannot be generalized, since this reasoning renders it impossible for the woman to consider the baby as “other”, apart from herself. If this narrative were truly universal, there would be no way out of the misogynistic cycle. If the subject is born strictly to fulfill a castrated mother, to be the woman’s infant-phallus, the derogation of the feminine object during the individual’s development becomes pressing, fostering gender difficulties in the family and society and upsetting the identification with the feminine, so important for men and women.

Fiorini<sup>15</sup> thus asks herself: is the Freudian Oedipal narrative a convincing explanation for the sexual development of a girl? Or is that narrative an explanation given by a boy, from the point of view of his infantile sexual theories? Fiorini emphasizes that castration anxiety in men and boys leads to the assumption of castration in the opposite sex. This theory is accepted by the girl and proposed as a universal notion in Freudian theory.



For the author, the Oedipus complex proposed by Freud is a myth or a narrative to explain the passage into symbolic legality; that is, it is susceptible to historization.

The mature identification with feminine and masculine objects is marked by the Oedipus complex, which plays a structuring role in the development of the mind. However, while the Oedipus complex plays a central role in psychoanalytic theory, other theories (such as those related to sexual difference, the place of women and the feminine in psychoanalytic theory, and sexual and gender diversity) reveal some limitations in the explanations regarding sexual subjectivity linked to the Oedipal narrative<sup>15</sup>. We must avoid falling back into unquestioned and dogmatic repetitions<sup>15</sup>; we should constantly review the theories and try to update them in the light of the current culture and emerging clinical facts.

### **Dora's Oedipus**

Dora's treatment with Freud began on October 14<sup>th</sup> 1900 and her analysis lasted 11 weeks. At the time, she was 17 years of age (despite Freud's mention of 18 years in his clinical notes). She was brought for treatment by her father for presenting conversive (chronic dyspnea, headaches, cough, aphonia) and depressive symptoms (melancholy, dissatisfaction, unsociability, had written a suicide letter). From that point on, a family dynamic was unfolded, including extramarital affairs, romantic assaults, jealousy, and desire, and involving a couple of family friends (Mr. and Mrs. K). The case is well-known and I will here focus on Dora's identity models. Freud had treated or been with various members of the patient's family – father, brother, aunt, Mr. K. The aunt was described in the report as a "severe psychoneurotic without any of the symptoms that are typically hysterical"<sup>23</sup> (p. 27); she had a "humble" life and an unhappy marriage; "she died of de apathy". About Dora, Freud<sup>23</sup> writes:

The sympathies of the girl herself (...) had always been with the father's side of the family, and ever since she had fallen ill she had taken as her model the aunt who has just been mentioned. (...) I never made her mother's acquaintance. From the accounts given me by the girl and her father I was led to imagine her as an uncultivated woman and above all as a foolish one, who had concentrated all her interests upon domestic affairs (...) [and thus] presented the picture, in fact, of what might be called the 'housewife's psychosis'. (...) The daughter looked down on her mother and used to criticize her mercilessly, and she had withdrawn completely from her influence (pp. 27-28).

Freud describes the father as an intelligent, talented man, a great industrialist. Dora accused her father of being insincere and false, concerned only with his own satisfaction, with a knack for manipulating things for his own convenience. After telling the father about her seduction by Mr. K. in the lake scene, Dora was disappointed with the father's position of keeping the K. couple as friends. She felt she had been handed to Mr. K. by her father as a prize for Mr. K's tolerance for the affair between Mrs. K. and Dora's father; behind Dora's tenderness for the father, one could sense her fury for being used in this manner.



In Dora's household, one person had early on tried to open her eyes to the affair between Dora's father and Mrs. K. This was a governess, a single woman who was older than Dora, "well-read and of advanced views". The governess read books to Dora about sexual life and discussed the books with the girl. Later on, Dora found in Mrs. K another educated woman, with whom she read books and learned about the world.

Along this analysis, interrupted by Dora, Freud helped her patient come into contact with her sexual desires for Mr. and Mrs. K, taken as sexual objects by Dora. Mrs. K. was seen as a woman capable of sparking desire in Dora's father, thus becoming an object of desire for Dora herself. In later writings, Freud regrets not having analyzed in more depth the homosexual attraction felt by Dora towards Mrs. K.; however, he failed to link this feeling to a transference experience<sup>24</sup>. Even if only after the end of treatment, Freud seems to perceive his male role in the transference (analyst as Dora's father, Mr. K.) more easily than his female role (analyst as mother, aunt, governess, Mrs. K.). In that experience, he viewed himself as only male, missing the switch to the feminine roles of the educated, admired figure who openly discussed sex (Mrs. K.), and of the despised figure who needed to be left behind (mother).

This notion is taken by Bleichmar<sup>25</sup> in "The Spontaneous Feminism of Hysteria," as she places Dora's hysteria as a narcissistic gender disorder. For the author, Dora was in fact more interested in the woman than in the man, not in her sex, but rather in her femininity, in search of an ideal feminine Ego that was confused. Dora was unable to view her mother as ideal because she was, for her, a dull woman, depreciated by the father, who ruled only over objects of the domestic world. Freud describes Dora as a mature young woman who exercised independent judgement and refused household tasks, preferring serious studies, courses, and conferences for ladies. Mrs. K. seemed more adequate for being and representing an admired feminine model, constituting a more valued prototype. Dora's complaint was the she, Dora, was merely an object at the service of the players' narcissism: transaction object for the father, sexual whim for Mr. K., cover-up object for Mrs. K. (whose friendship with Dora facilitated her being close to the father), and useful object for her governess (who used the girl to seduce the father and drive away Mrs. K.). Dora was dominated by indignation, narcissistic anger, and humiliation.

"The hysterical woman refuses the man because she does not see any other way of valuing the woman in her, with the price to pay being that of a sexist fight between herself and the man she loves. (...) The more she desires to equal the man, the more competitive, "castrating," she becomes, and the more difficult it will be for her to accept herself as an "object producing desire," since she will be reduced to a body of pleasure, and this is not the goal imposed by her Ideal Ego" (Bleichmar<sup>25</sup>, p. 184-185, free translation).

Dora hated the female model provided by the mother, who was refused and despised by the household men, with whom Dora identified herself in her ideals and ambitions. Mrs. K. personified another ideal – desired and appreciated by Dora's father, tolerated in her double life by the husband, devout to the man she loved,

owner of a knowledge shared with Dora, whom she made confidant and friend. Thus, Mrs. K. introduced Dora to the world of adults and women.

Balsam<sup>26</sup> theorizes about the importance of the relationship between the girl and her mother for the development, in adult sexuality, of a satisfactory relationship with her own body. The author relates a weakened image of the mother with a lack of courage, in girls, of developing or strengthening a mutually satisfactory relationship that includes sex. This is because a mutually satisfactory relationship that includes sex is confronted in a very vivid manner with all the unfinished internal work necessary between mother and daughter that leads the girl to want to possess and to appropriate her femininity as she becomes a woman. The report following the analysis with Freud, made by Helen Deutsch, describes Dora as deeply unsatisfied and disappointed with the female body, and enraged against the male figures in her life. Freud seemed to wish Dora to be capable of obtaining feminine pleasure; but he tried to achieve this imagining that she needed a potent and idealized father to reach maturity<sup>26</sup>. The author argues that, in Freud's mind, mothers are much less important as compared to fathers; thus, he was not able to understand the "secret" of a girl in need of her mother, which was quite visible in the patient's report. Dora's mother is constantly diminished in the text, be it by the husband, by Dora, or by Freud himself. Even though Freud states in the text that the girl takes her mother's love story as a model for life, he does not seem to have recognized the dimension and seriousness of this statement along the treatment<sup>26</sup>. Freud focused on the treatment of the men in Dora's life, and in no way questioned Dora's dislike for her mother, neither worrying about developing satisfactory substitutes to occupy the feminine vertex in the patient's triangle.

Dora ended her treatment abruptly, leaving Freud without news. Fortunately, the biographers of Freud's patients<sup>27,28</sup> did not leave us uninformed... Ida Bauer (Dora) was married at 21 years of age with an engineer and composer who had courted her for some years (he is briefly mentioned in one of the dreams analyzed in Freud's report); a year and a half later, she had a son, Kurt. Twenty-two years after her analysis with Freud, she sought another psychoanalyst (Félix Deutsch), complaining of unbearable noise in her right ear (possibly a consequence of Ménière's disease). In a letter to his wife (psychoanalyst Helen Deutsch), Felix writes that he had found the "Professor's Dora" and that she had nothing good to say about the analysis. Throughout her life, Dora accused her husband of being unfaithful and men of being selfish and petty. She feared her son would not prosper (on the contrary, he had a brilliant musical career). She greatly admired her brother, who always came to her aid when she needed help. The brother, Otto Bauer, became a prominent Marxist theorist, a minister of Foreign Affairs in the Austrian republic and one of the main leaders of the Austrian Socialist Party. Ida spent most of her time involved in the mundane doings of high society; a bridge player, she had as partner Peppina Zellenka (the famous Mrs. K.), who became Dora's friend for life. In World War II, Ida and her husband fled to the United States. She died of colon cancer in New York, and her husband died of coronary artery disease.

It is easy to examine the past, in the light of so many posterior theories, and propose new readings. This does not detract in any manner from the geniality of the case study published by Freud in 1905. According to the perspective presented here, another analysis of this same situation, conducted by another analyst,

could focus on Dora's dislike for the mother and on valuing Mrs. K. as a potent object of identification (and not only as an object of desire for Dora). However, some questions remain obviously unanswered: Would the equalization of both identity poles in the Oedipal scenario (the feminine – via admiration for Mrs. K., the aunt, the governess; and the masculine – via admiration for the father, the brother, and Freud himself) have made it possible for Dora to have more harmonious relationships? Or would her prognosis remain unchanged regardless of the analyst's approach?

### Final remarks

Moving through society and establishing reasonably healthy relationships with the other (and oneself) requires a relatively tranquil inner transit between the feminine and the masculine poles that inhabit all subjects, independently of their sexual orientation or gender identity. It is only possible to identify with the feminine (for both women and men) if the mother presenting as the object of identification is also a potent subject.

This potent mother is not equal to the phallic mother (who envies the penis and therefore denies its absence), and neither to the mother who competes with the father and places him second. It is the woman who enters the relationship as a desiring being (and not only as an object of desire), who presents herself to the Oedipal infant as whole, in all her power, who values her vagina and her clitoris as sources of pleasure and satisfaction, who recognizes the importance of her role in society and in the family. It is, however, a woman who, as a whole being, also recognizes her limitations – castrations with which all of us have to deal and elaborate, both women and men.

The feminine and masculine identity poles must be equally constructed, in a strong and healthy manner, in the Oedipal phase to allow the emergence of a subject that is capable of a mature relationship with the world and other people. However, creating two isolated poles is not enough. It is also vital to learn about the relationship between these poles (the bridge that is created between two objects of identification). The recognition of a relationship between the parents reunites the child's psychic world and provides a delimitating border for the internal world. This creates the "triangular space," a space delimited by the three people in the Oedipal situation and their potential relationships<sup>29</sup>. Ideally, in the direction of health, this relationship between the feminine and the masculine is seen as loving, fertile, constructive, creative<sup>30</sup>. And that would be a topic for another article...

In the presence of the patient, the psychoanalyst may help recover the mother (or any other feminine pole) as a desiring being, as a strong vertex in the Oedipal triangle. In exploring the fantasies regarding men and women that are relevant in the patient's history, the analyst has the privileged opportunity of rescuing identity models and objects of desire that can render the subject's inner world more complex and plural. If the healthy mind is structured upon a triangular matrix, it is not sufficient to strengthen only one vertex. Perhaps as a result of this individual effort, taking one case at a time, we will be able to build a more just society and establish healthier relationships between ourselves and the world.

Note: This paper was originally presented on July 2019 at the IPSO 25th Congress in London. It has also been previously presented at the XII Integrated Internal Symposium of the Candidates Association at the Psychoanalysis Institute of the Psychoanalytical Society of Porto Alegre (SPPA), on March 2018, and composes the annals of this event.

## References

1. Laplanche, J. & Pontalis, J-B.. *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. London: Hogarth Press; 1980.
2. Freud, S.. *Sobre as teorias sexuais das crianças* (pp. 213-230). In Edição standard Brasileira das Obras Psicológicas Completas de Sigmund Freud, v. IX. Rio de Janeiro: Imago; 1908/1989.
3. Moreira, J.O.. Édipo em Freud: o movimento de uma teoria. *Psicologia em Estudo, Maringá*. 2004; 9 (2), 219-227.
4. Freud, S.. *A correspondência completa de Sigmund Freud para Wilhelm Fliess 1887/1904*. Rio de Janeiro: Imago; 1986.
5. Freud, S.. *A dissolução do complexo de Édipo*. (pp. 217-226). Edição Standard Brasileira das Obras Psicológicas Completas de Sigmund Freud, v. XIX. Rio de Janeiro: Imago; 1924/1976.
6. Freud, S.. *Organização genital infantil: uma interpolação na teoria da sexualidade* (pp. 179-186). In. Edição Standard Brasileira das Obras Psicológicas Completas de Sigmund Freud, v. XIX. Rio de Janeiro: Imago; 1923/1976.
7. Freud, S.. *Algumas consequências psíquicas da distinção anatômica entre os sexos* (pp. 309-320). Edição Standard Brasileira das Obras Psicológicas Completas de Sigmund Freud, v. XIX. Rio de Janeiro: Imago; 1925/1976.
8. Freud, S.. *Sexualidade feminina*. (pp; 257-279). Edição Standard Brasileira das Obras Psicológicas Completas de Sigmund Freud, v. XXI. Rio de Janeiro: Imago; 1931/1976.
9. Freud, S.. *Conferência XXXIII – Feminilidade*. (pp. 113-134). Edição Standard Brasileira das Obras Psicológicas Completas de Sigmund Freud, v. XXII. Rio de Janeiro: Imago; 1933/1976.
10. Ogden, T.. La relación edípica transicional en el desarrollo femenino / The transitional oedipal relationship in female development. *Revista de Psicoanálisis de la Asoc. Psic. de Madrid*, 66, 37-60; 2012.
11. Kristeva, J.. *Motherhood today*. 2005, available at: <http://www.kristeva.fr/motherhood.html> (Accessed on February 11th 2021).
12. Kristeva, J.. *Some observations on female sexuality* (pp. 41-52). In. Matthis, Iréne (Ed.) *Dialogues on sexuality, gender, and psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac; 2004.
13. Kristeva, J.. *Powers of Horror: An Essay of Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press; 1982. Available at: <http://users.clas.ufl.edu/burt/touchyfeelingsmaliciousobjects/Kristevapowersofhorrorabjection.pdf> (Accessed on February 11th 2021)
14. Balsam, R.H. The Embodied Mother: Commentary on Kristeva. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 62 (1), 87-100; 2014.
15. Fiorini, L.G.. *The Oedipus-castration complex and sexual difference* (pp. 35-47). *Sexual difference in debate – Bodies, desires, and fictions*. London: Karnac; 2017.
16. Roudinesco, E.. *A família em desordem*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar; 2003.
17. Ehrensaft, D.. *Family complexes and Oedipal circles: mothers, fathers, babies, donors, and surrogates*.

- (pp.19-43). In: M. Mann (ed.) *Psychoanalytic Aspects of Assisted Reproductive Technology*. London: Karnac; 2014.
18. Butler, J.. *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall; 1990.
  19. Freud, S.. *Leonardo da Vinci e uma lembrança de sua infância* (pp. 53-124). In: Edição standard brasileira das obras completas de Sigmund Freud, v. XI. Rio de Janeiro: Imago; 1910/1970.
  20. Chodorow, N.. *Feminism and psychoanalytic theory*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press; 1989.
  21. Mayer E. "Everybody must be like me": observations on female castration anxiety. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 66, 331-348; 1985.
  22. Fiorini, L.G.. As mulheres no contexto e no texto freudianos. *Jornal de Psicanálise*, 42 (76), 121-135; 2009.
  23. Freud, S.. *Fragmentos da análise de um caso de histeria* (pp. 12-117). In: Edição Standard Brasileira das Obras Psicológicas Completas de Sigmund Freud, v. VII. Rio de Janeiro: Imago; 1905/1989.
  24. Quinodoz, J.M.. *Ler Freud – Guia de leitura da obra de S. Freud*. Porto Alegre: Artmed; 2007.
  25. Bleichmar, E.. *O feminismo espontâneo da histeria: estudo dos transtornos narcisistas da feminilidade*. Porto Alegre: Artes Médicas; 1988.
  26. Balsam, R.H.. Freud, The Birthing Body, and Modern Life. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 65 (1), 61-90; 2017.
  27. Borch-Jacobsen, M.. *Os pacientes de Freud – Destinos*. Lisboa: Texto & Grafia; 2016.
  28. Flem, L.. *A vida cotidiana de Freud e seus pacientes*. São Paulo: LPM; 1986.
  29. Britton, R.. *The missing link: parental sexuality in the Oedipus complex* (pp. 83-102). In: R. Britton, M. Feldman & E. O'Shaughnessy (Eds). *The Oedipus Complex Today: Clinical Implications*. London: Karnac; 1989.
  30. Meltzer, D.. *Estados sexuais da mente*. Rio de Janeiro: Imago; 1979.

Contribuições: Marina Bento Gastaud – Conceitualização, Gerenciamento do Projeto, Investigação, Metodologia, Redação – Preparação do original, Redação – Revisão e Edição, Supervisão, Visualização.

### **Corresponding author**

*Marina Bento Gastaud*

mbgastaud@gmail.com

Submitted in: 12/02/2021

Accepted in: 18/08/2021