



ELECTRA vs OEDIPUS

The Drama of the Mother-Daughter Relationship

HENDRIKA C. FREUD

Translated by Marjolijn de Jager

Electra vs Oedipus

Electra vs Oedipus explores the deeply complex and often turbulent relationship between mothers and daughters. In contrast to Sigmund Freud's conviction that the father is the central figure, the book puts forward the notion that women are in fact far more (pre)occupied with their mother.

Drawing on the author's extensive clinical experience, the book provides numerous case studies that shed light on women's emotional development. Topics include:

- love and hate between mothers and daughters
- the history of maternal love
- childbirth and depression
- rejected mothers.

Electra vs Oedipus will be a valuable resource for psychoanalysts, psychotherapists, and all those with an interest in the dynamics of the mother–daughter relationship.

Hendrika C. Freud is a Psychoanalyst and a Member of The International Psychoanalytic Association and Association for Child Psychoanalysis. She is a teacher, supervisor, and training analyst of the Dutch Psychoanalytic Society and The Dutch Psychoanalytic Association and has been in private practice for nearly fifty years.

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For my daughter,
Jutka Halberstadt

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Preface

This is a book about women, and I hope that it will lead to a better understanding of the relationship between mothers and daughters. As a psychoanalyst, over nearly fifty years I have spoken with many mothers and many daughters. It became increasingly more obvious to me that a re-orientation towards female development was inevitable. The result of my reflections is *Electra vs Oedipus: The Drama of the Mother–Daughter Relationship*.

I have described the distorted relationships that men are capable of having with their mothers in the book *Freud, Proust, Perversion and Love* (1991). Over the course of time it has struck me that actually women become entangled far more frequently with their mothers.

These distorted mother–daughter relationships led me to reflect upon existing psychoanalytic theories and the flaws they contained. The Oedipus complex, as it had been dealt with and popularized for more than a century, cannot automatically be applied to the woman. This old model argues that a little boy is in love with his mother, a little girl with her father, and that later on each of them will look for someone else able to actualize the continuation of this romance. According to this view, a woman searches for a man who resembles her father because as a little girl she was already in love with this first hero in her life.

However, it turns out to be more complicated than that. For boys the mother is the first person they encounter in this world, with all the fateful results thereof. What is all too often forgotten is that the same thing holds true for girls – for them, too, love relationships go back to their first love object, and that is the mother, not the father. (Subject and object are psychoanalytic terms that refer to the two individuals in a relationship.)

The past thirty years have produced much greater clarity in the vicissitudes of female development. Nevertheless, the Oedipus myth continued to be valid for men as well as women. Partly because of this, the secret of the woman remained a dark continent to which only a few were able to gain access.

The time has come to adapt the fundamental myth of psychoanalysis and expand it to make it more applicable to women. It is my hope that this book will contribute to this effort.

I would like to express my gratitude to my patients for the confidence they have had in me and for all that I have learned thanks to them. The names in the case descriptions have been changed, as have some of the characteristics, in order to ensure anonymity.

Love and hate between mothers and daughters

The character of Electra dates back to ancient Greek mythology. Various playwrights, such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, devoted tragedies to her, and, for the latter in particular, mother and daughter are at the heart of the play. Everything that could possibly go wrong between the two of them is described in these works.

It is not without reason that, through the centuries, even after the classical era, Electra has continued to be an inspiration for many authors. The legendary Electra was far more preoccupied with her mother, whom she hated, than with the father she adored. Agamemnon, her father, had left home ten years before the setting of the play, when he departed for Troy as military commander to fight for the liberation of the beautiful Helen who had been abducted – thereby triggering or actually causing the Trojan War. In the meantime, Electra's mother Clytemnestra had taken a new lover. Electra feels neglected and rejected by her. She is jealous of her mother but also of her mother's lover. Excluded from all intimacy, she wanders around the palace, moaning and cursing.

Electra dislikes her role as a woman. She rebuffs all thoughts of sexuality. She has no desire to marry, and, if that does have to happen, she certainly wants no children. Her histrionic personality inspires loathing from every corner. Electra has become the prototype of a woman with female problems.

She is a domineering victim who manages to conceal her insecurity and yearning for motherly love beneath a great deal of noise. She disparages her more feminine sister and uses her brother Orestes as a tool to avenge herself on her mother. Taking revenge on this detested mother is her only goal in life. Her youth, her beauty – she sacrifices them all for this one purpose. After many bitter and sorrowful years, filled with pain, she succeeds in her scheme: her mother is murdered as she pleads for mercy.

This is a brief outline of the image we see when we look at Electra from the outside. But how does Electra herself experience her dilemmas, what is her psychic reality, what are her unconscious conflicts?

Briefly told and magnified as only possible in a work of art, the mythical Electra figure shows many of the unconscious preoccupations with which

women with problems may be struggling. For instance, the fear of being swallowed up by the powerful mother figure is in conflict with a desperate longing for her love and affection. But masochistic complaints, depression, and sexual inhibitions are frequently manifested as well. All of them are problems that relate back to the very first love object, the mother – just as with Electra.

Culture has changed and is changeable, but certain situations are set in stone. Girls begin their life in a homosexual love relationship – in the sense of with a person of the same sex – with a woman: their mother. Not until later is the heterosexual love for their father added.

Paradoxical as that may sound, girls need their mother's cooperation in detaching themselves from her. Sometimes that opportunity for independence is lacking, and women have to find a way to sail between the Scylla of Electra's murderous hate and the Charybdis of total symbiosis. Both extremes lead to an unhealthy mother–daughter relationship. As always, it is only the happy medium that can progress to a healthy development.

The father is often idealized and, just as Electra's father, he is missed or lamented in his absence. Often fathers are absent or too little involved with their children, who therefore have to rely on their mother. The girl attempts to direct herself to her father when he is available. If not, she must make do with her fantasies. Sometimes she has a chance to receive the love for which she yearns from her father, the love that she may not have been given by her mother. Sometimes that attempt fails. A second disappointment is then the sad result. However, even if it does succeed, her mother remains the primary object of her desire, which is at best transferred to her father.

Subsequently, for a healthy development it is necessary for the image of the omnipotent mother, the goddess, or the queen of childhood fantasy to be abandoned. In psychoanalytic theory this figure is known as the phallic mother, because she is simultaneously both man and woman, as it were. After all, for small children the difference between the sexes is not very clear yet. The fantasy that an individual can be both man and woman is discarded with some difficulty. Even with regard to themselves, girls and women often continue to struggle with their bisexual identity.

The Electra complex is meant not to replace the Oedipus complex but to complement it.¹ The new discoveries around the cliffs that the woman must steer clear of in her development are, in my opinion, better suited to a model in which it is not the father but the mother who occupies centre stage.

Symbiosis, meaning the mutual dependency of two beings, is problematic if taken as a phase of development. Mother and child do, of course, have idyllic moments when they are completely wrapped up in each other. But when a mother feels constantly dependent on her child's endorsement, there is a disorder at play. This can express itself, for example, in the need for a child to cling to its mother when she is leaving because she would otherwise have the sense that she is not a good mother. I call this unhealthy mutual

dependency the *symbiotic illusion*. It is a disorder that impedes the normal maturation process. When such a bond between mother and daughter remains intact for life, there is not enough room for independence and other relationships.

The opposite of the *symbiotic illusion* – namely, total separation – is equally inauspicious. Under ideal circumstances the girl partially detaches herself from the mother. A girl needs to be able to shape her own identity but, at the same time, continues to need her mother throughout her life as model and counsellor.

Due to the open borders between mothers and daughters, styles of mothering and motherhood are transmitted from generation to generation. This can be fortunate or harmful. Transgenerational transmission of traumas is a well-known phenomenon and, obviously, not only along the female line, although it is especially visible, forceful, and inescapable there.

For a woman, the inner bond with the mother can be a source both of strength and of frustration. To a great extent, the child's first relationship is decisive for its identity and sense of self-worth, particularly among women. Subsequent love relationships can be damaged when a woman continues to see herself as the extension of her mother. Then mother and daughter keep mirroring themselves in each other, as in the fairy tale of Snow White: 'Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the loveliest of them all?' Involuntarily, such a daughter remains inside her mother's range of influence and will continue to be a part of her mother, body and soul. Instead of her own desires, she must fulfil her mother's wishes. The instinctive result of this is hostility towards her mother, often hidden even from herself.

The way in which unconscious feelings of hatred can colour and decide the emotional life of a daughter is the principal theme of this book. Separation is related to autonomy. Women often interpret their detachment as a form of aggression that might harm the mother. Thus they tend to conceal their anger and turn it against themselves in the form of headaches, feelings of guilt, or masochism. The purpose of this book is to use the fateful struggle of Electra as a paradigm for conflicts in female development.

We shall see that the Oedipus paradigm in girls frequently ends in an Electra complex – that is to say: rage with the mother and idealization of the father. The other extreme, the 'symbiotic illusion' with the mother, appears frequently as well. This prevents the girl from growing into an independent person. Consequently, she is basically unable to enter into an adult heterosexual relationship. In her intimate relationships she will tend to claim the other, to cling to or fuse with that person. The symbiotic illusion as quasi-intimacy makes the other invisible as a separate individual.

A sound theory is indispensable in confronting reality, but everyday practice is still the most fascinating. Recently, Tessa, a beautiful and well-educated young woman, came into my consultation room with a mysteriously amused look on her face. This shy woman with a soft voice smiled at me with a

mixture of 'glad to see you', with alarm in her gaze, and with unambiguous triumph, almost a note of pity. When questioned, she burst into uncontrollable laughter that at the same time she was ashamed of, as if she were betraying something about herself that would have been better left concealed. Then an elaborate panorama unfolded around her and her parents, who had divorced early on.

Tessa's mother had trouble listening to and being interested in her, while her father, a childlike and egocentric man who was more seductive than interested, always praised her to the sky to others. This habitually led to scenes that were embarrassing to her, whereby she was pushed forward as her father's showpiece. A contrasting scenario was played out with her mother. Being small and helpless without a trace of hostility produced at least a bit of attention in this distant and overburdened mother. Stepping more into the limelight would only have elicited rejection, Tessa feared.

Upon closer examination it turned out that Tessa had always been afraid of her mother's jealousy. She was quite astonished when I first articulated that possibility. Her mother, who had not had much education, never quite knew what her daughter was studying. During therapy it became clear quite quickly what a taboo existed for her in competing with me as a woman. This ambitious, highly competitive young woman had learned to live with a hidden identity. She was terrified of the murderous envy that in her fantasy she might incite if she were to be successful, and she had therefore learned to conceal her triumphs beneath a great show of modesty.

This example illustrates how the Oedipus story about patricide and the little boy's love for the mother is not automatically applicable to a girl.² Of course, there is a vital attraction between the sexes and being different continues to be the most exciting thing there is. But the gratification of a girl's desires often has a great deal more to do with her mother than with her father.

The symbiotic illusion

In families of today the mother is the most influential person and is therefore held responsible for everything that might go wrong in the rearing of the child. Because ideal mothers are just as rare as model children, the two can easily become disappointed with each other.

Mothers may pay too little or too much attention, and as a result children may feel neglected or burdened. However, parenthood does not consist merely of conscious interaction with children. Even more important are the messages that are unconsciously transmitted. Moreover, the ‘repetition compulsion’ – patterns repeating themselves in successive generations – plays a large role as well. A mother who is disappointed in her own mother will be more than likely to have an unusually ambivalent relationship with her daughter. An anxious mother will be less able to keep the fears of her child within bounds.

Depending on the experiences in their own childhood, parents will reflect or distort reality and have a coloured view of that reality. In that sense, grandparents may be rediscovered as an important influence two generations later. Many experiences of the parents are projected automatically onto the next generation, on the children. A father who feels rejected by his father may have a tendency to reject his son, even if only occasionally, or – vice versa – may feel rejected by his son. The stamp that parents imprint on the child will induce similar patterns in subsequent generations. This is particularly true when a family endured experiences that are traumatic in nature. As the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy expressed it in *Anna Karenina*: ‘All happy families are alike, but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.’

Aïda

Aïda is a vastly overweight student who suffers from severe headaches and always feels on edge. She explains that her mother calls her every day and always wants to see her more than once a week. They then have long discussions about how to live, a topic on which her mother has all kinds of theories and ideas. During these conversations Aïda asks for advice and help with her

problems. This way she provokes her mother to give advice that she can reject in an adolescent way, thereby staying over-involved.

Aïda tries to build a similar relationship with me as her therapist. She always sits on the edge of her chair, cannot relax for a minute, and constantly picks at her lips. At the same time she tries to provoke a discussion in response to every remark I make. She impresses me as someone who is in need of excessive interaction: something has to keep flying back and forth between us, as if she cannot be left to her own devices for a second when she is around me. I have to offer my opinion on everything, and when I occasionally do so, I have to prove that I am right – and so on, *ad infinitum*.

Any time I say anything, Aïda interrupts with a ‘but’. This is followed by an argument that expresses doubt about what I had just said, which in turn is followed by a plea to remove her doubts. Or else she starts to argue for the opposite to my suggestion. It produces a sense that nothing is ever right, is ever sufficient, and that there is never room for a pause or a moment of contentment. Everything continues to be one long line of pure frustration. It is as if she can never be fully satisfied.

Her role within the family was, and still is, that of meeting the needs of the others. She was always the obedient daughter who, in contrast to her three brothers, never caused her parents any problems. In addition, Aïda has always taken care of her paternal grandmother as well. Her studies are going well, while her brothers are neither working nor studying – they are living on welfare with their wives and children. Rather than independence and self-reliance, dependency seems to be the life theme of the children in this family. If Aïda is not constantly in touch with her mother, she feels guilty, just like her mother, who always feels she is remiss in her duties towards her daughter. Neither of them is able to loosen the reins and let the other be.

Aïda’s father had been in hiding during the Second World War, and he had lost his own father at an early age. Her grandfather was killed in Auschwitz, making her a second-generation victim of war trauma. Her father was raised by his mother and grandmother. His mother is a true survivor, who leans heavily on Aïda while urging her on to ever greater accomplishments. Aïda feels responsible for this grandmother, who is by now very old and rather difficult, especially because her own parents do not want to bother with her too much and leave most of the care to Aïda.

Aïda’s father keeps a safe distance from the family by burying himself in his work. He has married a woman who tries to patch up her own unhappy childhood by overprotecting her husband and children. However, only with Aïda does she completely succeed in this. She wants to know everything about her daughter and to meddle in all her affairs. Aïda involuntarily fuels this attitude. These two, mother and daughter, behave as if they were married to one another instead of to their male partners. The symbiotic illusion that binds them is detrimental to Aïda’s development as an independent woman

and creates problems that contribute to her compulsive brooding and to the headaches from which she suffers.

Emma

Another example is Emma, a woman in her fifties, widowed, with two children, and now happily remarried. Her children are grown and she lives an extremely comfortable life, and yet she complains that she cannot find any peace. She has to achieve, study, work, travel. She has to improve herself constantly, worry whether she is handling her children, her stepchildren, and her husband properly. She is tired and wants to be rid of this attitude to life but is unable to let go of it all.

At the age of 3 Emma had lost her mother and was raised by a detached father and a hostile stepmother, both of them extremely demanding strict Calvinists. At least, that is how Emma experienced it. She escaped from the parental home when she was 18, went to work, married, and had children. However, she soon had the feeling that she and her husband were not well matched. She felt as if she was imprisoned in a cage, she seemed to be suffocating. She was never able to show any true emotions to her husband, so that sexuality became problematic as well. Her husband had become the replacement for her cold and distant stepmother. She never realized that it might all have to do with the lack of a loving mother – a lack from which she had suffered deeply.

During one summer vacation Emma suddenly fell madly in love with another man who, according to her, was the love of her life. Coincidentally or not, her husband became severely depressed soon thereafter and committed suicide. Emma felt incredibly guilty and ashamed, a feeling that has remained until today. Not long afterwards her secret friend died as well. For the second time she lost the most beloved person in her life.

In her own eyes, Emma's first husband resembled her stepmother, while the bond she had with her lover was more of a representation of the primal emotion she must at one time have had with her mother. Her present husband is a survivor of World War II, and, as happens quite often in marriages, through a mechanism called projective identification, his losses come to represent her own loss of a mother. Being with him, she experiences what she has never dared to admit to herself – that she has always missed her mother enormously. This way she can identify with her husband and need not dwell on the great loss in her life.

What struck me most in Emma was that she never really emphasized the fact that her mother had died so young. Her grief about that was so much a part of her prehistory that she was incapable of dealing with it until we were able to bring it to light during her treatment sessions. I surmised that the main cause of her discomfort was to be found in this, her unprocessed sorrow. She had spent her entire childhood among strangers, as it were, without any sense

of intimacy. With me, by contrast, she felt at ease with remarkable and surprising speed. After a few sessions she began to weep, saying that she was deeply moved by her visits to me although she did not quite understand why. In fact, though she was always trying to be as distant and as rational as possible, I felt that she radiated great affection.

After we continued to work through her mourning and made connections with her current life, her emotions grew more recognizable to Emma, and she became calmer, less driven. It was no longer so urgent that she seek intense activity in the outside world just so she would not notice what was really going on inside her. I felt very strongly that via her transference to me in treatment she had retrieved an old emotion that originally belonged with her little-girl's feeling for her mother. That bond, which had been severed before she was old enough to be aware of what was happening, was found again in the present moment; the wish for symbiosis was thereby resolved, and she could leave me with a feeling of satisfaction.

In love with the therapist

The baby's first relationship is with the mother. This bond is very different for boys than it is for girls. Mothers have a tendency – an obviously very subtle one – to eroticize the bond with boys more, while with girls they actually try to curb that aspect. In part because of this, girls are generally more restrained sexually. In addition, they keep yearning for their first love object more than boys do. The unfulfilled symbiotic need of women can become a source of suffering and depression, and not infrequently this is what makes them seek out a psychotherapist.

In my experience, women have a tendency to fall in love with their female therapist, often without being aware of it. The idealizing symbiotic atmosphere of unspoken mutual understanding, of together being one, of solidarity through thick and thin, of admiration, is generated remarkably more often during the treatment of women than that of men. In my experience men may well fall in love with their female therapist and even make some clumsy attempts at seduction, but only so they will not have to talk about what they actually came for. Women, on the other hand, are often not at all aware of how strongly they express their – usually not sexually tinged – feelings of being in love to their female therapist. It is as if in the therapeutic situation they fall in love in a very different and special way – that is to say, as if they have found their first love object, their mother, again, or the mother they never had, the mother who did not love them or loved them insufficiently, the one for whom they had always longed. In the transference relationship, women often have idyllic unconscious fantasies around their female therapist.

Most women manage to transfer the love for their mother only partially to a man. After all, love for the father was added quite early on to the love for the mother. Even women who have passed through these stages and are crazy

about their father, and later their husband, often still foster a secret, deeply concealed wish for a loving mother.

Men have to suppress their desire to be dependent and are able to satisfy it later on. Many a man can find maternal care with his beloved, and the contact with this wife or female partner can often be more satisfying than it ever was with the mother.

Women, on the other hand, seem less capable of finding complete satisfaction in a man, whether that relationship is successful or not. They continue to nurture a nameless longing for the affection of women and find that in friendships with women.

Mary

The example of Mary illustrates that the symbiotic yearnings for motherly love can conceal much hate. She came to see me because of depression following the birth of her first child. To her great anger and grief, her hypochondriac mother had died just before Mary delivered her baby. Moreover, throughout her childhood and youth she had been heavily burdened by the fact that she has a severely handicapped younger sister.

Her mother suffered from all sorts of ailments, imaginary or not, and was often in bed, either at home or in hospital. She would then constantly call on her daughter, who had to be present, had to pay attention, could never wander far from home, and was not allowed to do anything without first discussing it extensively with her mother. Mary was crazy about her father, a peaceful man who did not say much but did not intervene either when mother and daughter went too far in their mutual clinging. Whenever her father did take her side, Mary would feel guilty towards her mother.

The postnatal depression followed much more longstanding problems but expressed itself only after the birth of her first child. Mary cried a lot and was desperately unhappy because, in her own eyes, she was never good or good enough in what she did. She had always been trying to accommodate everyone else, and that was not getting any better at this point. Because she was unable to say 'no' to anyone at work either, she became utterly exhausted.

Mary had the feeling that her mother had abandoned her at the very moment she needed her most, and she missed her continually. At the same time, she gradually began to realize that her mother had never been able to give her any support but actually had relied more on her. The warm symbiotic relationship she thought she remembered and for which she so yearned turned out to have been more of an excessive mutual claiming. She had never been aware that she was angry with her mother: she had always repressed her irritation in order to experience the quasi-intimate atmosphere they both loved so much.

To be sure, mother and daughter chatted much and often, but their conversation was inane and innocuous, although Mary is an intelligent woman.