



ELECTRA vs OEDIPUS

The Drama of the Mother–Daughter Relationship

HENDRIKA C. FREUD

Translated by Marjolijn de Jager

**SAMPLE
CHAPTER**

First published in Amsterdam in 1997
by Uitgeverij Van Gennep BV as
*Electra versus Oedipus, Psychoanalytische Visies op de Moeder-Dochter
Relatie*

First published in the UK in 2011
by Routledge
27 Church Road, Hove, East Sussex BN3 2FA

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,
an Informa business*

© C Van Gennep Amsterdam
Translation © 2010 Marjolijn de Jager

The right of Hendrika C. Freud to be identified as author of this
work has been asserted by her in accordance with sections
77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Typeset in Times by
RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall
Paperback cover design by Andrew Ward

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or
reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic,
mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter
invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any
information storage or retrieval system, without permission in
writing from the publishers.

This publication has been produced with paper manufactured to
strict environmental standards and with pulp derived from
sustainable forests.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Halberstadt-Freud, Hendrika C., 1937–

[*Electra versus Oedipus*. English]
*Electra vs Oedipus : the drama of the mother–daughter
relationship* / Hendrika C. Freud
p. cm.

I. *Electra complex*. I. Title.

BF175.5.E45H3513 2010

155.6'463—dc22

2010005928

ISBN: 978-0-415-54796-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-54797-0 (pbk)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	viii
1 Love and hate between mothers and daughters	1
2 The symbiotic illusion	5
3 History of maternal love	27
4 Nina: Daughter of a single mother	49
5 Electra versus Oedipus	63
6 What does woman want?	83
7 Childbirth and depression	109
8 Martha: A woman in her middle years	125
9 On rejected mothers	140
10 History and hysteria	154
<i>Notes</i>	176
<i>Bibliography</i>	188
<i>Index</i>	199

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.