

## **The Maternal and the Feminine: two primal areas of psychic development, object relations and identifications.**

**Florence Guignard**

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**Discussants: Majlis Waimberg Salomonsson and Christine Anzieu Premmereur**

### ***Introduction***

*"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy"*

*(Shakespeare, Hamlet 1.5., 167-8).*

To define, differentiate and link the Maternal and the Feminine means that we have to do the same with the Paternal and the Masculine, and to observe the four of them both in men and in women, whether analysts or analysands... i.e. in ourselves as well!

It takes a renewed interest nowadays with the large scope of the way babies are planned, conceived and brought up in "new families". The development of our civilisation invites us to consider human sex and gender qualities as *psychic* qualities, in the perspective proposed by Freud when he considers "psychic bisexuality" as one of the main paradigms of a good enough psychic development.

I owe to a dear friend of mine, the late Ophelia Avron, my first scientific interest, in 1987, for this topic. Since then, I stay convinced that mixing feminine and maternal is part of a "bedrock defence" and that we definitely have to disjoin the maternal from the feminine.

Starting from Klein's description of a "feminine phase common to baby-boys and baby-girls", my clinical experience brought me to observe and figure out not one, but *two* areas of development after birth:

### ***The primary maternal space***

I call *primary maternal space* the very first psychic space taking shape inside the infant. This space takes place progressively, through the constant movement of reciprocal projective identification between mother's "capacity of reverie" (Bion 1967) and child's first psychic activity of projection/introjection. Of course, the nature and the qualities of this activity of projective identification are not the same in the new-born and in the mother.

With the sexually and psychologically mature components of her projective identification, the adult mother proposes to her new-born an object with *unknown qualities* (Rosolato 1978). The new-born's nascent drives will thus contain and cathect an object that some authors have called "enigmatic" (Laplanche 1986) or "aesthetic" (Meltzer & Harris Williams 1988). Her *capacity to think* will appear by comparing the sensorial data coming from this new, mysterious object to the implicit sensorial memories<sup>1</sup> of her intra-uterine life.

The tendency to mix (*Mischung*, Freud 1895) is "the drives' own", and this tendency supports the continuous flow of projective/introjective movements that will give a first consistency to the baby's ego through the moving shapes and colours of her relations/identifications.

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<sup>1</sup> Mancia M. 2004 *Sentire le parole, trad. Engl. 2007 Feeling the words*, Routledge, *The New Library of Psychoanalysis*.

We know of the biological dimension of the innateness of certain masculine and feminine characteristics. But we also know how environment is playing a crucial role in the development and the qualifications of its characteristics.

In particular, the mother's mental activity is a fundamental element for developing thinking in the *infans*. The impact of the double influence of the mother's specific oedipal organization and of her own *basic assumption* group mentality (Bion, 1948) is of crucial importance, as it determines further on how she relates to the *socius* and imagines the place of her child in the environment.

The conjunction of all these elements feeds a *primary drive conflict* that will not be the same according to whether the *infans* is a boy or a girl.

In addition to this difference between boys and girls, in 2019 we cannot avoid a new reflexion about this "*primal maternal space*" in relation to the quick and deep changes that occur in our western civilisation, as we are going to observe new ways of experiencing such a space in the babies born and brought up in "*new families*". It might happen that another woman than the mother, or a man, would be in the place and the role of the "mother" of the "classical families". It could be interesting then to use the word of Freud, *the Nebenmensch*, instead of the word "mother".

### ***The primary feminine space***

Only once primary maternal space is well established, what I have called the "*primary feminine space*" can develop in the baby's internal life. Here, what Melanie Klein described as the *primary feminine phase common to children of both sexes* (Klein 1932) is quite pertinent. In this phase, she writes, sexual drives mature rapidly and the infant identifies with the mother's desire for the father and father's penis. Identification with the mother's feminine desire gives a tremendous boost to the infant's capacity for introjection.

It will be remembered that this phase corresponds to what Klein discovered later on, and called the "*threshold of the depressive position*" (Klein 1934).

The "*primary feminine space*", constitutes a way out of the exclusive mutual mother-baby projective identification. It is the space of identification with the desire *for*, and *of*, a third party, i.e. *for* the mother's partner, and *of* the mother's feminine sexual desire for this partner. It is also the *space* for experiencing *absence* and *loss* of the object, and for a diversification of defence mechanisms.

I contend that, insofar as the second object of cathexis is not built up during the same psychic time as the first one, its psychic history in the infantile organisation can neither be superimposed on, nor reduced to that of the primary object. The second object is formed in the midst of a painful conflict experienced by the *infans*: the conflict between love and hate for a first object the baby can no longer control. As Braunschweig and Fain (1975) poetically put it, "the mother takes back her narcissism from the child to make up with it", in order to win back her partner. As a counterpart to the struggle the *infans* has to accomplish in order to mourn her first object, her new capacity to cathect *a new objet in a new way* proposes a different and alternative interest and satisfaction.

This whole process therefore suggests that the destiny of boys and girls will be more and more diversified. As the third party of the relationship is discovered, identification with the mother's

feminine dimension introduces a genital valency into the infant's mental world (Guignard 1999). Loss of omnipotence – which gave the *infans*, until then, the impression of being the mother's unique object – enhances the tendency of the child to identify to the persons of her surroundings.

**a) Mother and son: an oedipal relationship threatened by envy.**

In Melanie Klein's description (Klein 1928), the original oedipal triangulation derives directly from the primary feminine phase. In this new period of development, both the baby boy and the baby girl are confronted to the loss of their *primary maternal object*. They also have to deal with this newly discovered aspect of their maternal object: *femininity*.

For the baby boy, the conflict opposes his identifications to the primary maternal lost object, and his relation/identification to the Third party, the aggressor who stole his beloved object. However, it is through this relation/identification to the third party that he will get an access to this newly discovered mother, the *feminine mother*, object of his genital desire.

In “classical” families, where the first object of love is a woman and the second is a man, the latter is supposed to propose the boy an image of manhood to help him build up his masculine sexual identity through identification. In reality, in *all* situations, the boy will have to enhance his identification capacities, in order to grasp the masculine and the feminine trends of both parents to introject them and get good-enough identifications to them to feel happy with his sexual identity.

To make a long story short, the *maternal* and the *feminine* internal spaces should manage to live in good intelligence in boys while they are becoming men, as long as they meet proper models of male identifications and develop their interest for knowledge, sublimation (Bion's K+) and their feeling of self-esteem. In this perspective, adolescence will be of crucial importance.

At the culmination of a period of adolescence that, nowadays, begins earlier and ends later than it did in the past, we find the mythical character of Oedipus.

According to the myth, it is his mother who introduces Oedipus to life as an adult, husband and father; moreover, it is from her that he derives his royal power. However, we are not speaking here of his nurturing mother, but of his sexual mother, a reality that is always dealt with by means of splitting and denial by all children – splitting and denial that are inevitably accompanied by idealisation as well as by intense projective identification, whose nature and qualities need to be understood and qualified.

Still, being a myth saves the hero a great deal of earlier psychic conflicts, particularly those linked to the loss of the primary maternal mother, and those linked to the discovery of the femininity of the sexual mother. If we consider Klein's hypothesis about a fixation point for male homosexuality in the primal feminine space, we might add to it the existence of an earlier point of fixation in the primal maternal space: a very painful envious feelings toward the mother's capacities for nurturing.

**b) Mother and daughter: a relationship oscillating between sharing and splitting.**

The baby girl is also losing her first object, the maternal mother – or *Nebenmensch*? She is altogether discovering the object of mother's love – the third party – *and* another face of the mother: the sexual mother.

From the standpoint of object relations, the girl has to find a second love object in order to access to a triangular basis of relations/identifications, required for mental health. With the upheaval caused by the discovery of her love for the third party, the girl will find herself in a cruel and dangerous conflict with her original love object: The wish to be “in Mummy's shoes” threatens the girl to lose her first object of love-and-identification.

In order to internalise her *primal feminine space*, the baby girl has to identify successively with her lost object – the *maternal* mother –, with her feminine rival in her nascent love for the third party – the *sexual* mother, and to the mother's partner, who is *not for her*. Three losses happening in a row require a serious and long-lasting mourning process.

More specifically, the fact that it is the sexual-mother who is also the one that deprives the baby-girl from her maternal mother raises a specific problem in the constitution of the girl's basic identity.

In my opinion, due to the specific situation of the baby-girl, such a fixation point has a serious impact on the depressive pathologies of women, whatever their age. Given the very primitive psychic tools of the baby at that phase of her development – three to four months of life – the process of mourning of the primary maternal phase will need several re-examinations later on, and is probably never totally accomplished. It is the root, or the threshold, of the depressive position (Klein), and one of the classical fixation points in every human being.

The mother thus remains for her daughter, during the latter's development and all through her life as a woman and a mother:

1. her original object of love and identification,
2. her oedipal rival;
3. but also, the very basis on which the girl's identity is established.

### ***The primal fantasies***

Evoking psychosexuality involves thinking about the transformations that turn instincts into drives. On this way, we shall meet the primary means of expression used by drives: the fantasies, and more precisely in the present case, the primal fantasy.

Freud described four aspects of the primal fantasy: intra-uterine life, castration, seduction and the primal scene. It is worth noting that, in the form of seduction and the primal scene, Freud established the primacy of a genital fantasy from the very beginning of mental life, perhaps even as a phylogenetic inheritance – we could also think of an inter-generational transmission (Faimberg 1993).

I have proposed elsewhere (Guignard 1996) that these four aspects of the primal fantasy could be taken in pairs, in a reciprocally-inclusive relationship:

- the fantasy of going back to the womb with the fantasy of castration; and
- the fantasy of seduction with that of the primal scene.

In clinical material, these fantasy aspects appear as defensive formations against the four components of the destiny of mankind: birth, biologically-determined sex affiliation, constant thrust of drive impulses, and difference between generations.

Consequently:

- the fantasy of going back to the womb is used to deny the reality of being born; the castration fantasy, considered as a denial of biologically-based sex affiliation, is a complementary version of it.
- the fantasy of seduction is an attempt to deny the constant thrust of inside drive impulses, in a reciprocally-inclusive relationship with the primal scene fantasy, expressing a denial of the difference between generations.

My hypothesis is that the first of these two associations of defensive fantasies – going back to the womb as a denial of being born, + castration, as a denial of biologically-determined sexual affiliation – is a part of the functioning during the *primal maternal space*.

The second – the seduction fantasy as a denial of the constant thrust of drive impulses, and the primal scene as a denial of the difference between generations – is part of the functioning in the *primal feminine space*.

### ***More about mother/daughter relationship***

Considering that in the years to come, women are still going to be in charge of the foetus gestation in a way or another, and that girls are still supposed to become women – thus, potentially, mothers –, I propose to examine more closely the destiny, in the mother/daughter relationship, of the first defensive fantasy association – going back to the womb as a denial of being born, + castration as a denial of biologically-determined sexual affiliation:

Mothers and daughters belonging to the same sex, the fantasy of going back to the womb as a denial of the expulsion implied by birth, + the castration fantasy, cannot, as it is the case for the boys, focus on the denial of *femininity*, the classic unisex expression of which is the image of the phallic mother (Guignard 1993).

For the girl, mutual projective identification that gives shape to the *primal maternal space* is played out in an infinity of mirrors: since mother's unconscious Infantile (Guignard 1996) includes the representation of herself as a little girl, mother and daughter are experienced as being interchangeable.

While the boy feels supported by his masculine drives in his desire to penetrate the mother, the girl might oscillate endlessly between individuation – giving rise to anxiety of losing the very ground of her identity feeling, accompanied by an envious greed for the resources contained in the mother's body – *and* regression to a quasi-mimetic mirroring identification, particularly if the mother's oedipal organisation is deficient – especially her paternal identification and cathexis of masculinity.

### ***The hidden fates of maternal and feminine psychic qualities.***

Maternal and feminine are two psychic qualities that are hidden twice. First, because of the female anatomy, and second, because of the girl's constant oscillation as regards individuation.

On three different occasions, Freud (1905, 1919, 1924) based his description and exploration of *masochism* on what he called *feminine masochism*. To do so, he might have been influenced by the typical oscillation of girls on their way to individuation. I constantly mentioned (Guignard 1985-2015) how puzzled I was by such a "positivist" view of femininity.

As an alternative representation of the link between *masochism* and *femininity*, I proposed the image of the *Möbius strip* (Guignard 1985), and I tried to conceptualize the links between masochism, mourning and trauma (Guignard 1997-2015/2019).

In women, the organs of *sexual pleasure* share the same anatomical destiny as the *reproductive organs*: they stay hidden from view. Nowhere in Freud's classic texts is there any attempt to differentiate between representations of these two types of female organs; they are more or less considered to be non-existent, in accordance with the infantile phallic sexual theory that organizes the *masculine* castration complex. However, if we look at them from the point of view of drive cathexis and their representation in the mind of the woman and of the girl from puberty onwards, some differentiation as to their respective destinies emerges.

The analytic treatment of women who are also mothers led me to discover and to explore an unexpected difference in the way women unconsciously cathect their reproductive organs on the one hand – the uterus and its internal subsidiaries, Fallopian tubes and ovaries – and their organs of sexual pleasure on the other – the vagina and its semi-external subsidiaries, clitoris, *labia minora* and *majora*. I have observed that the unconscious drive cathexis as regards the uterus follows an entirely different path from that of the vagina. There are also significant differences in the way these two different parts of the body make their path towards representation.

In various clinical patterns, the analytical material of young women patients who have no children and no plans to have any in the near future shows that they unconsciously experience their uterus as totally undifferentiated from that of their mother. The unexpected consequence of such an undifferentiation is that they cathect their mother's womb in a very intense and ambivalent way, as if it were the *place* of an eternally-forbidden desire. This experience is usually expressed through hypochondriac anxieties, for example about menstruation. In a way both complementary and antagonistic, they envy and attack altogether the creative capacities of the maternal womb. Any gynaecological misadventure that may befall the mother – hysterectomy in particular – is not only experienced as a personal attack involving a fear of retaliation, but also as the destruction of a *place* that, in fantasy, still belongs to them.

To my mind, the little girl's wish to steal the contents of the mother's body (Klein 1932) also involves denial of the loss of the containing womb, coveted as a *container* just as much as for its *contents*. This pattern plays a significant role in the functional prevalence of identificatory mechanisms – projective and hysterical as well as introjective – at the heart of the mother/daughter relationship.

It is only when things turn out well (Guignard 1984) that a young woman's first pregnancy might enable her to give up her wish to possess the maternal womb and bring her to at last re-appropriate – and perhaps even to represent – her own.

It is worth noting in passing that this helps to explain why Freud intuitively said that motherhood constitutes the final stage in a woman's psychic development. However – and this is the significant point – this new cathexis takes place precisely when the womb no longer

belongs to her as a potentially auto-erotic organ relating to her feeling of identity, since it is now occupied by a foetus of the next generation. It might also be a significant reason for surrogate mothers to accept so easily to lend their body to help fabricate a baby she will never enjoy to take care of.

When female patients talk of their bodies, this generational time-lag, a typical feature of the drive cathexis pattern with respect to the reproductive organs, plays a crucial role in maintaining economic equilibrium, caught as they are between genital and maternal cathexes of their sex drives.

This unexpected clinical observation might also be of some use to better understand certain aspects of female homosexuality: such a sexual configuration can be thought of as the most obvious way of expressing the primal fantasy of going back inside the maternal womb. The homosexual woman's sexual enjoyment might derive from her fantasied possession of the maternal womb, from which she could exert her omnipotent power of giving sexual pleasure to the mother.

### ***The "cervix" and the anatomical destiny of female guilt***

Maternal and feminine dimensions are anatomically linked to each other by a "frontier pass": the "cervix" or "neck" of the womb.

In Tibet, when a hiker pauses at the summit of a pass in the Himalayan mountains, and makes ready to go down into the next valley, he joyfully shouts out a somewhat violent aphorism that, roughly translated, means: "The hell with this place of the past! let's fly towards the future with no regrets".

This Tibetan "proverb" is a metaphor particularly fit to express the repression of the primal fantasy of returning to the maternal womb; it derives from the inevitable reality of the fact that, once expelled at birth, there is no turning back.

Maternal womb is the inescapable sign of the difference between generations; our unconscious sexual drives cathex it to a very high degree. This cathexis, distinct from that of the vagina, mobilizes in all human beings, whatever their sex or age, not only the desire to make babies with the mother or with any woman who represents her, but also the unconscious denial of the loss of this first container.

In women, guilt related to sexual desire does not have the same roots as guilt linked to the desire to have a child. The former has to do with feminine sensual enjoyment and is related to the importance of the introjective response that such enjoyment sets free. This response momentarily abolishes all kinds of limitation: individual, through narcissistic elation; sexual, through projective identification; and generational, through the short-lived fusion between drive cathexes towards womb and vagina respectively. This, in my view, is the setting for the fantasy – conscious or unconscious – of procreation connected to sexual intercourse.

As to the latter, the guilt related to the wish for a child, it derives, in my view, from the repression of the primal fantasy of going back inside the maternal womb. This repression is sustained with the help of splitting and denial of birth expulsion. There exists, obviously, a return of this repressed cathexis. In psychoanalytic theorizations, we talk of *protective shield*, *container*, the *holding* qualities of the *good-enough mother*, the analyst's *evenly-suspended*

*attention, and, last not least, the mother's capacity for reverie.* I shall develop this aspect in the Panel I participate to, on Saturday, 15.15 to 16.45.

### ***Maternal <-> feminine: a see-saw***

If both boys and girls are to have balanced psychic bisexuality, introjective identification with both maternal and feminine dimensions is obviously necessary. It is, however, still more crucial for girls, at the level of their bodily ego, given their destiny as women and mothers. I would suggest that cathexis of both maternal and feminine dimensions in adult women who are also mothers operates much in the way of a see-saw and is marked by feelings of guilt, as long as there is no recourse to a perverse solution. In external reality, actual motherhood and femininity may therefore only be an illusory integration of psychic maternal and feminine dimensions.

In addition, the obscure object of cathexis comprising womb, vagina – that other disputed *place* in the list of erogenous zones – and anus – a pregenital *place* that is easy to invoke because of its unisex features – all in such a geographical proximity, means that the issues are unclear and the representations of the way these organs are cathected by sexual drives are condensed.

Boys and men will more easily adopt a defensive system relying on anality, given their perspective of the infantile unisex sexual theory at the root of the masculine castration complex. Girls and women will be more inclined to rely on hypochondriac and depressive defences because their primary identification with the maternal reproductive organs tends to set the seal on the original castration represented by birth expulsion.

Acknowledgement of sex difference implies both recognition of the fact that each of us belongs to a specific biological sex and the consequent renunciation of being born as belonging to the opposite sex. In order to accomplish this, we have to give up our infantile sexual theories – in other words, our omnipotent magic thinking. This is also true for the *transsexual persons*, who have to use technical and medical tools to realise their dream.

In his “*Analysis Terminable and Interminable*”, Freud [1937] considers the repudiation of femininity as the “underlying bedrock” that acceptance of biologically-determined sex affiliation comes up against; such acceptance implies, by definition, the acknowledgement that another sex does exist. In accordance with the infantile “unisex” theory of sexuality – the organizer of the castration complex in men – this refusal, says Freud, is expressed by both sexes as the wish to possess a penis.

I think there is an economic reason for “clinging” in this way to a theory based solely on the penis. I would suggest that it is due to the generation gap linked to the problem of fantasy cathexis as regards the womb. In the unconscious representation of the female body – by women themselves as well as by the Third party in the *infant's* life – this cathexis brings indissolubly together the primal fantasy of going back inside the womb, as a denial of birth, and the primal fantasy of castration, as a denial of biologically-determined sex affiliation.

This is why I would define more precisely the *repudiation of femininity* as the *refusal of the mother's sexuality*. This is indeed a “bedrock”, operating as the biological foundation for the

Oedipus complex and the prohibition of incest. This refusal follows a different pattern in boys as opposed to girls.

In boys and, subsequently, men, the repudiation of femininity plays a primary structuring role under the guise of the castration complex as a defence against the “too much” stirred up by the discovery that mother experiences sexual desire for father-and-his-penis; this discovery threatens to destabilize the boy’s basic male identity, given the vicissitudes of his oedipal rivalry with the father. In girls and, subsequently, women, the repudiation of femininity plays a secondary structuring role as a demand for a penis, metamorphosis of the girl’s desire to have a baby with her father<sup>2</sup>. The demand for a penis in girls and, later, in women therefore constitutes a defence against the “too much” stirred up by the discovery that father experiences sexual desire for mother-and-her-vagina; this discovery threatens to destabilize the girl’s basic female identity, given the vicissitudes of her oedipal rivalry with the mother.

From this same perspective, the “see-saw” in women’s cathexis between maternal and feminine constitutes another solution for sustaining the opposing thrusts of wish for a penis and repudiation of femininity split off into active neutrality.

We could picture this by saying that when the maternal dimension takes precedence over the feminine, “closure” prevails over “openness”, “control” over “defeat” (as conceptualized by Jacqueline Schaeffer), unconscious cathexis of the womb over that of the vagina. When the feminine dimension takes precedence over the maternal, these postulates are reversed.

A daughter’s identity is a subtle mix of sharing and splitting with respect to her mother. Since the mother is also a daughter, and the daughter will one day herself be a mother, this mixture constantly has to be reshaped. According to me, these adjustments can only take place in a see-saw fashion between feminine and maternal dimensions. That is why, so sudden and so fragile, they carry such a high risk of explosion.

Chandolin, June 12 2019.

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<sup>2</sup> On this point, I agree with Klein when she says that, chronologically and developmentally, the wish for a baby is primary and that for a penis secondary.