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Female Sexuality

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In that phase of children's libidinal development which is characterized by the normal Oedipus complex we find that they are tenderly attached to the parent of the opposite sex, while their relation to the other parent is predominantly hostile. In the case of boys the explanation is simple. A boy's mother was his first love-object; she remains so, and, as his feelings for her become more passionate and he understands more of the relation between father and mother, she sooner or later inevitably appears as a rival. With little girls it is otherwise. For them, too, the mother was the first love object; how then does a little girl find her way to her father? How, when and why does she detach herself from her mother? We have long realized that in women the development of sexuality is complicated by the task of renouncing that genital zone which was originally the principal one, namely, the clitoris, in favour of a new zone - the vagina. But there is a second change which appears to us no less characteristic and important for feminine development: the original mother-object has to be exchanged for the father. We cannot as yet see clearly how these two tasks are linked up.

We know that women with a strong father-attachment are numerous and need not by any means be neurotic. In studying this type I have made some observations which I propose to communicate here and which have led me to a certain view of female sexuality. I have been struck, above all, by two facts. First, analysis has shown that where

The attachment to the father was peculiarly strong it had been preceded by a phase of equally strong and passionate attachment exclusively to the mother. Except for the change in the object, the love-life had acquired hardly a single new feature in the second phase. The primary mother-relation had developed in a very rich and many-sided way.

Secondly, I count that the duration of this attachment to the mother had been greatly underestimated. In a number of cases it persisted well into the fourth and, in one, into the fifth year, so that it comprised by far the longer period of the early sexual efflorescence. Indeed, one had to give due weight to the possibility that many a woman may remain arrested at the original mother-attachment and never properly achieve the change-over to men.

These facts show that the pre-Oedipus phase in women is more important than we have hitherto supposed.

Since there is time during this phase for all the fixations and repressions which we regard as the source of the neuroses, it seems that we shall have to retract the universality of the dictum that the Oedipus complex is the nucleus of neurosis. But if anyone feels reluctant to adopt this correction, he need not do so. For, on the one hand, we can extend the content of the Oedipus complex to include all the child's relations to both parents or, on the other, we can give due recognition to our new findings by saying that women reach the normal, positive

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Oedipus situation only after surmounting a first phase dominated by the negative complex. Actually, during this phase, to a little girl, her father is not very different from a troublesome rival even though her hostility towards him never reaches such a pitch as does the boy's. We have, after all, long given up any expectation of a neat parallelism between male and female sexual development.

Our insight into this early, pre-Oedipus phase in the little girl's development comes to us as a surprise, comparable in another field with the effect of the discovery of the Minoan-Mycenaean civilization behind that of Greece.

Everything connected with this first mother-attachment has in analysis seemed to me so elusive, lost in a past so dim and shadowy, so hard to resuscitate, that it seemed as if it had undergone some specially inexorable regression. But possibly I have received this impression because, when I have analysed women, they have been able to cling on to that very father-attachment in which they took refuge from the early phase of which I am speaking. It would in fact appear that women-analysts - for instance, Jeanne Lampl-de Groot and Helene Kretsch - had been able to apprehend the facts with greater ease and clearness because they had the advantage of being suitable mother-substitutes in the transference-situation with the patients whom they were studying. I have not indeed succeeded in completely unravelling any of the cases in print

and will therefore confine myself to communicating my most general conclusions and giving only a few examples of the new ideas which have suggested themselves to me. Amongst these is my conjecture that this phase of mother-attachment is specially closely connected with the aetiology of hysteria (this is indeed by no means surprising when we reflect that both the phase and the neurosis in question are characteristically feminine); further, that in this dependence on the mother we have the germ of later paranoia in women. In the well known case [of delusional jealousy] reported by Ruth Mack Brunswick (1928a) the direct source of the disorder was the patient's pre-Oedipal fixation (to her sister).

It appears that this germ is the surprising, yet regular, dread of being killed (? devoured) by the mother. It would seem plausible to conjecture that this anxiety corresponds to the hostility which the child develops towards her mother because of the manifold restrictions imposed by the latter in the process of training and physical care and that the immaturity of the child's psychical organization favours the mechanism of projection.

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