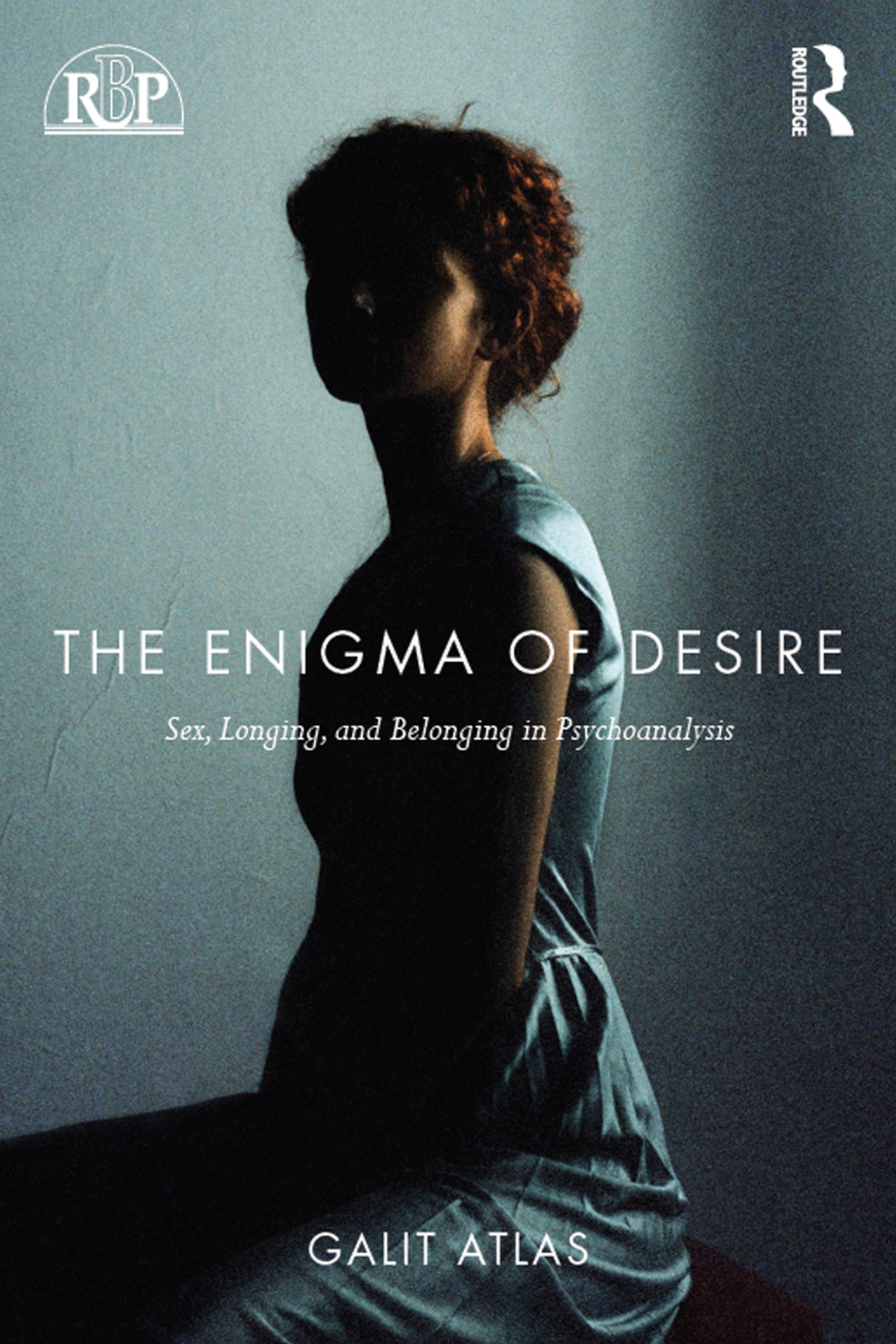


A woman with curly hair is shown in profile, facing left. She is wearing a light blue, sleeveless dress. The lighting is dramatic, with her face and hair in shadow against a dark, textured background.

THE ENIGMA OF DESIRE

Sex, Longing, and Belonging in Psychoanalysis

GALIT ATLAS

The Enigma of Desire

The Enigma of Desire: Sex, Longing, and Belonging in Psychoanalysis introduces new perspectives on desire and longing, in and outside of the analytic relationship. This exciting volume explores the known and unknown, ghosts and demons, sexuality and lust. Galit Atlas discusses the subjects of sex and desire and investigates what she terms the Enigmatic and the Pragmatic aspects of sexuality, longing, female desire, sexual inhibition, pregnancy, parenthood, and creativity.

The author focuses on the levels of communication that take place in the most intimate settings: between mothers and their babies; between lovers; in the unconscious bond of two people—in the consulting room, where two individuals sit alone in one room, looking and listening, breathing and dreaming. Atlas examines the ways in which different languages, translations, and integrations focus on birth, death, sexuality, and human bonds.

In *The Enigma of Desire* each chapter opens with a narrative, a therapeutic story which illustrates both the analyst's and patient's desires and the ways these emerge and interact in the consulting room. This book will be of interest to anyone who is curious about the intricacies of sex and desire, and will be of great appeal to psychoanalysts, therapists, and mental health professionals.

Dr. Galit Atlas is a psychoanalyst and clinical supervisor in private practice in Manhattan. She is on the faculty of the New York University Postdoctoral Program for Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis and NIP and lectures throughout the United States and internationally. She is the author of numerous articles and book chapters on gender and sexuality. Dr. Atlas is on the board of directors of the Division of Psychoanalysis of the American Psychological Association.

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1 Greenberg, J. & Mitchell, S. (1983). *Object relations in psychoanalytic theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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The Enigma of Desire

Sex, longing, and belonging
in psychoanalysis

Galit Atlas

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To Emma, Yali, and Mia Koch

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Contents

Acknowledgments xv

1 Introduction: desires, mothers, and others 1

PART I
Enigmatic and Pragmatic **13**

2 Ella: the enigma of desire 15

3 Ben and Leo: excited idiot 32

4 Danny: ghosts and the maternal skin 46

PART II
Enigmatic Knowing **59**

5 Celine: Breaks In Unity 61

6 Tomaz and Ron: the enigmatic language 76

7 Karen: words and silences 91

8 Galit: sex, lies, and psychoanalysis 107

PART III
The Unknown **119**

9 Sex and the kitchen: the mystery of female desire 121

10 Jo, Simone, and those we don't yet know: three
pregnancies and psychoanalysis 131

11	Sophie and Sarah: dreams, enactments, and the enigmatic future	143
	Epilogue: death	157
	<i>References</i>	159
	<i>Index</i>	173

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Introduction

Desires, mothers, and others

I would like to start with a confession: My first mother was a Kleinian. I guess that means that, at least genetically, I am a Kleinian as well. Following her, I had other professional parents, too—relational clinicians and thinkers who raised me, inspired me, and taught me Enigmatic and Pragmatic knowledge.¹ Foreign accents and multiple languages silently held affect and desire.

Sexuality, desire, the Enigmatic and the Pragmatic Mother and her body, are the main focus of this book. *The Enigma of Desire* is also the name of an evocative 1929 artwork by Salvador Dali subtitled *My Mother, My Mother, My Mother*. In 1929, the same year he created this work, Dali joined a group of artists who were interested in psychoanalysis and in the unconscious, and who asserted that Freud and his theory were the inspiration for their movement. Dali was haunted by family secrets and ghosts² and, among other themes in his work, addressed both the sexual and longing for the maternal body, exploring the spectrum of rational and irrational. In this book, I dive into zones of known and unknown, ghosts and demons, and introduce many levels of desire and longing, inside and outside of the analytic relationship. I keep searching, and asking: *My Mother? My Mother? My Mother?*

Meltzer, in his theory of the *esthetic conflict* (Meltzer & Williams, 1988), wrote about the emotional tensions generated in the infant by the enigmatic qualities of the mother, a primary conflict between “the beautiful mother,” which is tangible, and her unknown aspects, her invisible insides. I believe that, for Freud, the relation to the mother was the ultimate enigma. “There is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable—a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown,” writes Freud (1900, p. 111), in analyzing the dream of Irma. His rational method studied the father–son relationship and the Oedipal scene, creating a hierarchy between the more mature phase that is related to the father and son and the more primitive phase that is about the mother (woman) and the baby. Freud emphasized the ways we develop to a point where

rationality dominates and replaces the irrational (Where Id was, Ego shall be). Language and logical structure were meant to replace what Freud identified as primitive but at the same time recognized as the core of the enigma. The ties to the mother, to the umbilical cord, are representations of the unknown and of the mysterious aspects of our existence, including birth and death.

Too often we think about the mother–baby relationship as based only on nurturing and sensuality. In treatment, adopting the role of a nurturing mother can function as the therapist’s way to avoid the erotic material that emerges between her and the patient. Among other things, female therapists perpetuate the mother–infant merger with male patients in order to deny threatening sexual feelings (Lester, 1985; Welles & Wrye, 1991). I will challenge the assumption that the mother and baby are merely sensual and explore the sexual component that also belongs to that dyad, revisiting the theory of sexuality. My attempt is to maintain the dialectic tension between two separate but *non-hierarchical modes* (Oedipal and pre-Oedipal). I focus on the mother and baby tie not as a primitive, less developed phase that then leads to the more developed Oedipal phase, but rather as a separate realm that holds its own complexities and includes many levels of sexualities, desires, Enigmatic and Pragmatic Knowing. Recounting psychoanalytic tales, I illustrate both analyst’s and patient’s desires and the ways these play out in the consulting room.

What is Enigmatic and Pragmatic?

This book will present new thinking about the integration of what I term Enigmatic and Pragmatic notions and question the binary between known and unknown, internal and external, seen and unseen, as well as masculine and feminine. Pragmatic aspects of subjectivity and intersubjectivity are sensible, logical, operational, definable, practical, hardheaded, and sober. In infant observation, for example, we can see a dyad in dialogue and indicate how the baby’s world of action sequences is procedural. It includes spatial orientation toward and away from the partner, facial and vocal emotion (such as prosody, intensity, pitch), attention processes, and touch (see more in Beebe, 2005; Beebe & Lachmann, 2013; Beebe et al., 2010). Pragmatic elements are complex, verbal and nonverbal, and they can be observed, measured, and assessed.

In comparison, the Enigmatic aspects of subjectivity and intersubjectivity are complex and ambiguous, but much harder to put one’s finger on at all and even more difficult to identify or specify. They are opaque to observation, puzzling, riddled, polysemous, and often leave us with more questions than answers. But if psychoanalysis is the study of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, conscious and unconscious, intrapsychic and

interpersonal, then it must also deal with dimensions of the intra- and inter-human that are both Pragmatic and Enigmatic without reducing one to the other. This perspective emphasizes the tension between darkness and light, between what we are able to see and measure and what we can only feel or listen to. From that viewpoint, the Enigmatic and the Pragmatic are not only opposites, but necessary for one another and complementary to each other. Some aspects of our existence we can see and formulate, and others we can only feel or experience through listening to that which is not said, to the silence between the notes, or, as I describe in [chapter 2](#), to the emptiness that holds everything.

Enigmatic Knowing

This book focuses on the levels of communication that take place in the most intimate setting: between mothers and their babies; between lovers; in the unconscious bond of two people—as in the consulting room, where two people sit alone in one room, looking and listening, breathing and dreaming. I challenge the hierarchal order of Oedipal and pre-Oedipal, questioning the psychoanalytic assumption that the Oedipal is a more developed phase and the first basis for sexuality. My point of view emphasizes the mother–infant dyad not as disorganized or primitive, but as complex and sophisticated, one that has its own dynamics, languages, and desires. Its language is different from the structured verbal language that we know from the Oedipal phase—the language of prose. It is a tongue where statements are not as important as pauses and breaths; it is a language of music and of gaps, Enigmatic and Pragmatic. The Pragmatic elements are based on the mother–baby multi-model sensory interaction that includes patterns of arousal, regulation, touch, gaze, facial, vocal and rhythm, and so on; the Enigmatic, like poetry, is never fully exposed, and every attempt to describe it will distort its essence. As Heschel notes when talking about the enigmatic in religion, “Religious words are pointers to that which is beyond expression; they are gestures toward the ineffable. And since it is the ineffable toward which they are gesturing, they must remain always only that—gestures, rather than accurate or adequate portrayals” (Held, 2013, p. 106).

In exploring the expressive and that which is beyond expression, I am drawing from different psychoanalytic traditions and models of the mind: one a more rational tradition, rooted in Freud’s energetic hydraulic model, and the other based on a more hermeneutic model. As I examine different languages, translations, and integrations, focusing on birth, death, sexuality, and human bonds, I travel with theory and with my multicultural patients from West to East and back, from Europe and America to “East of Freud” (Atlas-Koch, 2011), Iran, Israel, and the Arab world, and examine sexuality