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TOVA ROSEN

A TRANSSEXUAL WISH

Our Father in Heaven! You who did miracles to our fathers by fire and water; you who turned [the furnace] in Ur of the Chaldees [cold] to stop it from burning [Abraham]; you who turned Dinah in her mother's womb [into a girl]; you who turned the rod [of Moses] into a serpent in front of tens of thousands; you who turned [Moses'] pure arm into a [leper's] white arm; you who turned the Red Sea into land, and the sea floor into solid and dried-up earth; you who turned the rock into a lake, the cliff into a fountain—*if only you would turn me from male to female!* If only I were worthy of this grace of yours, I could have now been the lady of the house, exempt from military service!

Why cry and be bitter if my Father in Heaven so decreed and crippled me with this immutable, irremovable defect? Worrying about the impossible is [indeed] an incurable pain for which no empty consolation will help. I keep telling myself, "I shall bear and suffer until I die." But since I have learned from oral tradition that "one should bless [God] for the good as well as for the bad," I bless Him meekly, with a faint voice: *Blessed art Thou who did not make me a woman!*

THIS UNUSUAL WISH OF A MALE to become female appears in a well-known medieval composition, *Even bohan*, written around 1322 by the Hebrew author and translator Qalonymos ben Qalonymos.¹ Such literary expression of a transsexual desire is unique in Jewish literature, and as far as could be ascertained, also in European and Islamic writings of the time. Its singularity has also been a source of puzzlement for the few scholars who dealt with it. Most critics labeled it as “satire,” “parody,” “amusing piece,” and so on, thus relieving themselves of the task of engaging in a serious analysis of the cultural implications, especially the treatment of gender, in this text.

As I will propose, it is precisely under this comic guise that the text ventures to explore the boundaries of Jewish masculinity, and to cross over them to the *terra incognita* of femininity. Through this transsexual travesty, Qalonymos investigates the assumptions of Jewish gender and produces a subversive critique of fundamental issues in Jewish life, the life of the man as well as the life of the woman. His inquiry touches upon social practices and religious rituals (such as prayer, circumcision, education, and marriage) that are vital to the cultural construction of Jewish gender.

A MAN – ACCORDING TO GOD’S WILL?

In medieval Jewish thought—and this is not much different in Christianity and in Islam—a man fulfilling his masculinity and a woman assuming her femininity are ways of realizing the divine harmony in Creation. The wish to cross over to the other sex is already a grave violation of divine order. The impudence of the speaker in our text lies not only, or not so much, in his wish to become a woman, but in requesting that God Himself will perform this sex change. It is God who designed the order of things as it is, and it is He who can invert it. To support his unusual request, the speaker supplies numerous precedents of miracles and supernatural transformations engendered by God in biblical history. God saved Abraham in Ur by turning the fire cold, and all His miracles to Moses have to do as well with supernatural changes and transformations.²

The most relevant precedent on this list, and perhaps the one for which the whole list was created, is inserted in an apparently incidental manner. This is not among the miracles done “for our Fathers” but rather for the mothers. According to

a talmudic legend, the expectant Leah prayed to God to transform the fetus in her womb to female. God paid heed to her prayer, and the fruit of this prenatal sex change was Dinah.³ The speaker, however, entirely ignores the heavy toll Dinah had to pay for being a woman. Not only was she deflowered (Genesis 34), but she was also to become the victim of patriarchal readings that put the blame on her shoulders.⁴

How can one plead to God to make him a woman and at the same time thank God daily for *not* making him a woman? I refer, of course, to the words “Blessed art Thou God, our King of the universe . . . who did not make me a woman,” which every Jewish male has to pronounce upon entering the synagogue for the morning prayers. This blessing is the third in a series of three, the other two being: “Blessed art Thou . . . who did not make me a Gentile” and “Blessed art Thou . . . who did not make me a slave.” This cluster of three mandatory blessings, reiterated daily, forms the declaration of identity of the Jewish male. Two speech acts constitute his identity: one of differentiation and one of hierarchization. As in other cultures in antiquity, the religious-ethnic other, the other by class (slave), and the sexual other (female) are all perceived as both different and inferior.⁵

By the use of verbal acrobatics, our ambivalent speaker tries to reconcile his unorthodox wish with the content of the obligatory blessing. Since, he says, “I have learned from oral tradition that ‘one should bless God for the good as well as for the bad,’⁶ I bless Him meekly, with a faint voice: ‘Blessed art Thou . . . who did not make me a woman.’” The blessing is now charged with a new meaning: God is not to be blessed for the good, i.e., for saving the man from being born a woman, but rather for the evil of creating the man as He pleased. It was indeed God’s wish to make the male spiritually sinful and biologically incomplete: hence, man has no other choice but to accept his ill fate.

In what would seem one of Qalomymos’s many ironies of gender, he makes his speaker utter the male formula *as* a man—but *like* a woman. While maleness is reasserted, the tone is that of submissive acceptance, similar to that intoned in the woman’s blessing when she abides with her unwanted predestined sex, saying: “Blessed art Thou . . . who hast made me according to His will.” Is this a consciously calculated irony? Did the author purposely allude to the formula of the woman’s blessing? Had this blessing been already in use in Qalomymos’s time and place?

As far back as it can be traced, there is no direct documentation regarding the earliest origins of the woman's blessing, nor is there a mention of it prior to the first decades of the fourteenth century. Surprisingly enough, it is first attested to around the same time of *Even boḥan* (1322). The first report comes from the Toledan authority R. Jacob ben Asher (1270?–1340). In his commentary on liturgy, he writes, "It is the custom of women to bless 'who made me according to His will,' and they do so as someone who advocates an evil done to him by God."⁷ (Note how Qalonymos employs this explanation but inverts it: for him, it is the man, not the woman, who upholds ill fate.) By the time Jacob ben Asher reported about it, the "woman's custom" was probably relatively widespread. The proximity of dates, hitherto unnoticed, between his report and our piece supports the conclusion that Qalonymos responded to the spreading phenomenon of the woman's blessing. The nature of his reaction—whether sincere or satirical—is yet to be discussed. Moreover, if our text is a response to the blessing, it is one of the first historical evidences to it.

MALENESS AS LACK

The evil and disadvantage of being a male are indicated in more than one way in the course of the passage. Maleness and more precisely, the penis, are marked as imperfection, defect, deformity, loss, and lack.

At the beginning of the section, the speaker exclaims, "Woe to me, my mother, that you ever gave birth to a male child! It is a great *loss* and no gain." His complaint is amplified by three allusions: one is Jeremiah's cursing the day of his birth;⁸ the two others are mishnaic. In one, a male is protesting to the Rabbis, "Just because I am male, should I *lose* out?"⁹ The other one is Rabbi's assertion, "Lucky is he whose children are males, and woe to him whose children are females," which Qalonymos turns upside-down.¹⁰ Typical of his style is this manipulation and decontextualization of texts; the male as loser and maleness as loss become one of the central axes of his own text. Qalonymos's protagonist goes on grumbling, "How badly was he stricken by the finger [במזה לִקְדָּה בְּאֶצְבַּע], how much shame must he put up with, he who was coined in the coin of males!" The allusion to the Passover Haggadah

insinuates that maleness is seen as a kind of plague or blow.¹¹ The Sages engage in intricate calculations about the exact numbers of plagues that God dealt the Egyptians. How many blows did He strike with His hand and how many with His finger? Yet Qalonymos's witty use of language does not end here. In talmudic jargon, the word "finger" also stands for "penis." Hence, the finger is of double signification: it stands both for God's phallic finger and for the penile "finger" of mortal males—it is the punishing organ as well as the punished one.

Following on a talmudic metaphor, all human beings are said to be minted like coins. But alas, the "male coin" is flawed! (Does it follow that the "female coin" is perfect?)¹² No complaints and protests will do now, after the wrong was done and God "crippled me with this immutable, *irremovable defect*."¹³

Qalonymos makes a surprising and bold step here, one that inverts and subverts accepted images and established concepts of patriarchal thought. The male organ and consequently maleness have always been recognized as *being*, while the female genitals and consequently femaleness have been identified as *absence*. Two commonplace examples are, of course, Aristotle's definition of the female as a "defective male" and the girl's "penis envy" in Freud. For Jacques Lacan, the process of the penis-becoming-phallus is the very condition of signification and the paradigm of language itself. The penis/phallus constitutes sexual binarization: the male is defined as having the phallus, the female as lacking it and thus desiring it. He is complete, she is deficient. Elizabeth Grosz shows how this can be reversed, i.e., how patriarchal gender division is based not on the phallus but on the lack:

Patriarchy requires that female sexual organs be regarded as the absence or lack (or castration) of male organs . . . [but in fact] the condition under which patriarchy is psychically produced is the constitution of women's bodies as lacking. If women do not lack in any ontological sense . . . men cannot be said to have. In this sense, patriarchy requires that female bodies and sexualities be socially produced as a lack.¹⁴

Qalonymos inverts this binary hierarchy in quite a different way. For him, "lack" signifies the male, not the female. In the dialectic that governs the following passage, the penis is a surplus that is a loss; the foreskin is a surplus that is a lack:

Woe to me, my mother, that you ever gave birth to a male child! It is a great loss and no gain. . . . I was created closed-eyed and hardhearted. Uncircumcised of heart and flesh was I born. At three days, they cut my umbilical cord, and at eight days my foreskin. However, my ears, heart, and mind [remained uncircumcised and] were not ready to join God's covenant. . . . Their foreskin is indeed their inherent lack.

Circumcision interests Qalonymos in two ways: as the first initiation ceremony of the Jewish male; and as an act of signification. The uncircumcised flesh is the *tabula rasa* upon which the covenant is to be written. The incision transforms the unmarked, unidentified flesh into a body having a particular identity—the body of a Jewish male. Circumcision is an inscription. The inscribed body becomes a collective, cultural text, a social category, a mode of inclusion of some and exclusion of others. As shown by Grosz, the body is coded by affiliations that not only make real the subject's social, sexual, and familial position or identity within a social hierarchy, but also engender it. Grosz leans on Alphonso Lingis's distinction between “the savage mode of body inscriptions” (tattoos, scarifications) and

the civilized production of the body, not as surface pattern but as depth, latency. . . . What differentiates savage from civilized systems of inscription is the sign-ladenness of the latter, the creation of bodies as sign systems, texts, narratives, rendered meaningful and integrated into forms capable of being read in terms of personality, psychology, or submerged subjectivity.¹⁵

Lingis's distinction is of relevance to Qalonymos's position. In agreement with the confessional-penitential parts of *Even bohan*, the author presents himself here as a moral and spiritual failure. Following Deut. 10:16: “Cut away, therefore, the thickening about your hearts,” he confesses that it was merely his flesh that had been circumcised, yet his “ears, heart, and mind,” namely, his subjectivity, remained unmarked, unaltered. Circumcision, then, is not just another mode of body scarification, similar to a savage tattoo that marks belonging to the collective. It must also have a dimension of depth; it must be read as a sign on the surface of a

change in one's personality or psychology. Qalonymos does not go as far as the Christian attitude in altogether abolishing the circumcision of the flesh, and replacing it with the circumcision of the heart. Yet he strongly emphasizes that the "conversion of the flesh" alone is of no significance if it does not symbolize the "conversion of the heart."

MALENESS AS AN ORDEAL

The speaker not only views himself as a moral failure but also as an intellectual flop. From his birth, the Jewish male is trapped in a web of cultural expectations and obligations. Hence, he curses the man who informed his father about his birth. While his actual father represents patriarchal authority and tradition, the harbinger of birth stands for the cultural predestination of the Jewish male.¹⁶ The damned harbinger was mistaken when he foresaw for him a brilliant intellectual future:

Cursed be the man who informed my father: "A male son was born to you! He will be intelligent and superior to a prophet. . . . He will erect the hall of science on its mound. The candle will shine from his head and those who walk in darkness will follow his radiant halo." This messenger shall be held guilty of bloodshed; cursed be he. How could he twist the course of the stars so much? How could he have erred so in his astrology?

The image of the candle shining from the head of the spiritual leader alludes to the talmudic description of the fetus having a candle burning on his head to illuminate for him the darkness when emerging from his mother's womb (Niddah 30b). Interestingly enough, in the same context, the yet unborn embryo is said to be a diligent student of the Torah. Already in the womb, "it is taught all the Torah, from beginning to end," only to forget it all at the moment of birth. The phallic candle of knowledge and enlightenment captures the notion that the logos and the phallus are one. It emblematically epitomizes the Derridian concept of phallogocentrism. Qalonymos goes on lamenting the fate of the males:

Woe to them whose offspring are male! What a heavy burden lies on them! Restrictions and prohibitions . . . severe laws and awesome injunctions, six hundred and thirteen of them.

This heavy list of duties casts severe dread on the speaker, and, on the brink of collapse, he exclaims:

And who is the man who is capable of fulfilling them all to the letter?
How will he escape—be he diligent or lazy—failure and fear? How
will he not stumble? And even if he observed all these, he is not yet
done with his list of duties.

In addition to the observing of the Law, he has to engage himself in the study of the Torah and its commentaries, in the Mishnah and its supplements, and in talmudic *pilpul*. The logocentric project of the Jewish student demands expertise in every book found on the Jewish bookshelf. But if he also aspires to acquire universal knowledge, he must immerse himself in yet another curriculum. Qalonymos lists here seven subjects of study that overlap in part with the seven liberal arts constituting the medieval *paideia*.¹⁷ The study of kabbalah, ending the list, is the peak:

Seven are the pillars of wisdom. Up they soar from the top of the mountain and hill. Here is logic; [here are] the valley of philosophy, and the vale of vision, and the secrets of arithmetic . . . and geometry . . . by which the seeker can measure the heights of heaven and the depth of abyss . . . and astronomy and natural science. [Those are] the seven steps of the ladder. And who will praise the prowess [needed for] the study of the divine and the pure forms, which are ten, namely the Ten Sefirot [of the kabbalah].

Maleness is shown to be a competitive life track, an unwearied race after summits of intellectual fulfillment, a phallic arrow launched into the expanse of knowledge, an enormous intellectual odyssey. The vertical dimension of the

topography of the intellect is emphasized. The mental adventurer goes up mountains and down valleys, and aspires to reach the heights and depths of the universe. The images of the “steps of the ladder” and the “pillars of wisdom” depict knowledge as an edifice of monumental proportions and hierarchical structure.

That the biographical Qalonymos was closely acquainted with this loaded and arduous trail of the Jewish student might be learned from what is known about his own life. Schirmann writes, “He succeeded in the path he chose without digressing from it. He was one of the most prolific Hebrew translators of all time and contributed much to the dissemination of sciences among Hebrew audiences. His Hebrew erudition—especially his expertise in the language of the Sages—was extensive and profound. He translated non-Jewish books in philosophy, natural sciences, astronomy, mathematics, and medicine. We currently know of more than thirty of his translations from Hebrew to Arabic . . . and one from Arabic to Latin.”¹⁸ Jewish and non-Jewish patrons invited him to Catalonia (where *Even bohan* was written). Around 1324, he was invited to Naples by Robert d’Anjou, earl of Provence and king of Naples, to join a group of translators to translate a (now lost) book from Arabic to Latin. In Rome, he met his famous contemporary Emmanuel of Rome. Among the Christians, he earned the name Maestro Calo.

THE FEMALE SPHERE

That the journey ends with coming back home is of no wonder. And coming back home is coming back to femininity. Exhausted by the male project, the intellectual voyager iterates now his wish to become a woman:

If only the craftsman who created me would have made me a decent woman! I might today have been a woman, wise and smart, spinning with her hands. I and my women friends [would sit together], holding the spindle, spinning in the moonlight, chatting with one another, in light and in darkness, talking of the daily events and gossiping some, too. And perhaps when I would be skilled enough in spinning, I would say, “How lucky am I” to know how to make linen, how to comb [wool], and weave lace; [to design] cup-like buds, open flowers,

cherubim, palm trees, and all sorts of other fine things, colorful embroideries and furrow-like stitches. And frequently, as is the custom of women, I would lie on the cinders, by the hearth, among the pots, between furnace and stove, chopping wood, stirring the coals, and tasting from this or that dish.

Female existence and female space invoke the male speaker's envy. In contrast to the infinite and threatening male universe, the female space is delimited and warm, kind, and protected. The woman is situated here "by the hearth,"¹⁹ which is the heart, or rather the uterus, of the house, and she is encircled by items metonymic of the female anatomy: stove and cooking pots. Among the many archetypal images of the Great Mother, Erich Neumann records stoves and cooking vessels (which he calls "belly-vessels"). In the male's mind, woman is identified with "the fireplace, the seat of warmth and food preparation," and her duty is "the guarding and tending of the fire."²⁰

The female sphere is also characterized by material plasticity and concrete sensuality: the tastes of cooked foods, the warmth of the fire, the many colors of embroideries and jewels, the hubbub of kitchen sounds, the abundance of utensils, foods, fabrics, and designs. This sensual-material dimension contrasts to the universalness, abstractness, and monotone of the male's universe. The vertical-phallic quest after the logos takes place in an arid landscape, whereas woman's material sphere is horizontal and plentiful.

Women, according to this passage, do their work in an uncompetitive atmosphere. Their pretensions are humble, and thus, a sense of fulfillment is readily attainable. ("And perhaps when I would be skilled enough in spinning, I would say, 'How lucky am I!'") Women are restful, but not inactive. Textile work is most often placed, as it is in our text, in a communal setting. The women's sisterhood stands in contrast to male individualism. This is picturesquely depicted in the romantic scene of young women weaving and chatting in the moonlight. The female bond is not constructed around lofty pursuits, but around the trivial matters of day-to-day domestic life.

The centrality of textile work in our text reflects its significance to the construction of femininity in patriarchal societies. Miriam Peskowitz, in her study

of spinning in talmudic culture, shows how wool work, associated with sexuality and femininity, “becomes an icon of matronly domesticity.”²¹ And Helen Solterer writes, “Because it is a time-consuming labor associated increasingly with the domestic sphere, sewing comes to be recognized as woman’s work. To embroider is to be identified as a discreet and obedient woman, occupied without being independently active. This activity is most often placed in a communal setting. Women are depicted sewing together, thereby amplifying the image of serene feminine harmony.”²² Freud, in one of his most misogynistic utterances, associates textiles with woman’s “natural” shame in her “genital deficiency” and views it as woman’s most significant contribution to human culture.²³

Textile is for femininity what *texts* are for masculinity. The index of textile work (linen making, wool combing, lace weaving, floral embroideries, etc.) sums up the proper feminine knowledge and parallels it to the male catalog of canonical texts. The allusions to the art of Bezal’eel, the designer of the Tabernacle, and to Solomon’s Temple highlight the elegance of feminine craft.²⁴ The aesthetization and idealization of the feminine reaches a peak in the analogy between the “craft” of the Creator and the craft of woman. (“If only the craftsman who created me would have made me a decent woman . . . spinning, etc.”)

WHOSE DAYDREAM IS IT?

Let us return to the point in the text where the feminine voice is heard for the first time. How does the transition from the male to the female monologue occur? Where exactly does the change from the frustrated male to the satisfied female—a change in both grammatical gender and in sexual identity—take place?

The transformation occurs in the iteration of the conditional, “If only the craftsman who created me would have made me a decent woman! I might today have been a woman, wise and smart, spinning with her hands. I and my women friends [would sit together], holding the spindle.” Within a single sentence, and by the use of “indirect free style,”²⁵ the male’s voice gives way to a female’s in a nearly seamless manner.²⁶

The fantasy of the man who dreams of being a woman grows into another fantasy, that of a woman who, like Cinderella, lies on the cinders in the kitchen and

dreams of the coming of the appointed prince. “And at the end of days, when I’m ready, fortune will bring me a good man,” she says. Carried on the wings of her dream, she imagines her elaborate wedding, the elegance of clothes and splendor of jewelry that her husband will purchase for her. After marriage, her husband will sit her upon a *kathedra* (a chair of leisure), which, alluding to the Mishnah, means that she will be free from household chores.²⁷ She is carried even further to the day of her first son’s circumcision, and the ideal life waiting for her and her husband forever after. Married life is depicted here as reciprocal and harmonious. The “righteous” husband would feed and clothe the wife, as well as satisfy her sexual needs (according to Exod. 21:10), while the dutiful wife will observe her three duties, “blood, fire, and bread.”²⁸

Whose dream is this, the man’s or the woman’s? Who is describing whom here? From whose perspective are we viewing the ideal marriage? Is this the voice of a Jewish woman describing the ideal husband, or the voice of a Jewish male describing the ideal woman? A consideration of the intertexts with which our text is intermeshed may lead to a better understanding of the questions of voice and perspective.

WHOSE INTERTEXTS ARE THESE?

Our Cinderella also adds a list of foods that the husband will feed her with. She says: “When I hunger, he’ll feed me with well-kneaded bread, and when I thirst he’ll give me white wine [*gurdali*] or dark-colored wine [*hardali*].” What are these exotic foods? Unknowingly, the woman’s words here allude to the Talmud (Shabbat 62b–63a), where the Rabbis had in mind to illustrate the sexual impudence of the people of Jerusalem:

The Jerusalemites were quite obscene. One would ask another: What have you feasted on today? On well-kneaded bread or unkneaded bread? On dark wine or on white? On a bed narrow or wide? . . . And Rav H̄isda interpreted all these as pornography.

What these Jerusalemites were curious to know was whether one slept with a sexually experienced woman (“well-kneaded bread”) or a virgin, a brunette or a blonde. Thin or fat? Women are dealt with in this anecdote as goods for consumption; as objects to satisfy men’s cravings, tastes, comforts—and as subject matter for their juicy jokes.

But what does this vulgar joke have to do with the modest and virtuous wife who is so proud of her ideal marriage? Does she say it tongue-in-cheek? Can she be aware of the talmudic intertext she invokes? The sexist humor betrays the identity of the real speaker and the nature of the speech situation. We are reminded that it is a man’s voice imitating a woman’s voice; and it is a man’s voice speaking to (or rather, joking with) an exclusively male audience. As observed by Freud, the dirty joke (“smut”) is always a rhetorical contract between the recounting male and his male accomplices, at the expense of an innocent and absent female victim: “Through the first person’s smutty speech,” says Freud, “the woman is exposed before a third, who, as listener, has now been bribed by the effortless satisfaction of his own libido.”²⁹ Shoshana Felman remarks, regarding this:

Women do not occupy the place from which the joke is funny. If the joke is the exchange of laughter or of pleasure between two men at the expense of women, women are completely justified to put themselves in a position to miss the joke.³⁰

The contract between author and audience depends not only on common humor but also on common erudition. The community of educated males communicates over the head of the probably illiterate woman who parrots male texts. The saucy allusions are meant to be sevenfold funnier when they are hinted at by the object/victim of the joke.

Dramatic irony continues when the woman stumbles time and again on talmudic texts, of whose implications she is not supposed to be aware. This is the case, for example, when she speaks of matrimonial harmony and illustrates it with numerical symmetry: husband and wife, each has to observe three duties. The

husband is obliged to provide her food, clothing, and sexual rights (according to Exod. 21:10). And she proclaims her loyalty by observing her three:

Parallel to [his] three [conjugal duties], I, too, will keep three [commandments] . . . : blood and fire and dough. Sweeter than honey are these three, and one is not allowed to add to their number, or to inquire about them: “Whereby do women earn merit?”

Several intertexts are brought into play in this innocent and complacent proclamation. The prophetic triad “blood and fire and pillars of smoke” (Joel 3:3) is playfully used here as the pattern for “blood, fire, and dough,” the three commandments women have to observe. These three commandments are: the separation during the menstrual period, the lighting of the Sabbath candles, and the setting aside of the first portion of the dough when baking, as an offering to the priests. Women who are not careful in observing them are prone to die at labor. The mishnah (Shabbat 2:6) that specifies them is not an esoteric text; it is recited on Sabbath eve at candle lighting and is probably aimed at disciplining women. But this does not deter the woman speaker here from seeing these lethal three as “sweet” gifts for which she is grateful. Additionally, the woman exploits the Aramaic expression “Whereby do women earn merit?” for which the answer in the Talmud is: “By making their children . . . and their husbands study” (Berakhot 17:1). Women, however ignorant they themselves are, are promised reward for enabling males to study.

Another intertext evoked here by the woman speaker, but one with which she would certainly not be familiar, is R. Yehoshua’s incriminating midrash on these commandments:

Why was she given the commandment of menstrual separation?
Because she spilled the blood of the first Adam, therefore she was given the commandment of menstrual separation. And why was she given the commandment to sacrifice the first portion of the dough? Because she spoiled the first Adam, who was the first portion of the world; therefore, she was given the commandment to sacrifice the first portion of

the dough. And why was she given the commandment of lighting the Sabbath candle? Because she extinguished the soul of the first Adam; therefore, she was given the commandment of lighting the Sabbath candle.³¹

Daniel Boyarin views it as one of the most extreme (and, in his opinion, quite rare) pinnacles of misogyny in the whole of talmudic literature.³² The naive woman speaker hints at this source light-heartedly and is unaware of the heavy weight of blame this text casts upon women.

According to R. Yehoshua's explanation, these commandments are collective punishments by which the daughters of Eve expiate for their mother's crime. Hence, "blood, fire, and dough" stand for Adam's blood, soul, and body, which were spoiled by Eve. Eve, then, is the mother of humanity and its murderess; she is the mother of all living people and the mother of death! Each of the three "sweet" commandments that constitute a woman's religious life is, as a matter of fact, a constant reminder of Eve's original sin. This implies that timeless feelings of sinfulness and guilt are basic to the constitution of Jewish femininity. And this implication stands in sharp dissonance to the explicit idealization of a woman's life on the surface of the text. Beneath the surface of ideal marriage lurks a destructive innuendo—to the first coupling that was spoiled.

BETWEEN THE SEXES: GENDER TROUBLE

The few and quite meager extant comments on this text revolve mostly around the questions of how sincere is the protagonist's wish, and how comic is the passage. One critic opines that "it is the author's humorous grievance at being born male and not female."³³ Another critic sees it as merely a rhetorical trick of sophistry. The author's statement (that the fate of the Jewish man is much worse than that of the Jewish woman) appears to be sincere, but in rejoicing the supremacy of the male, it discloses its intention to ridicule women.³⁴ The envy of femininity is said to be fake, and to be satirically exploited in order to reaffirm Jewish masculinity. Since the text is expected to be either sincere or funny, other possibilities are not even taken into account.

For the critics who probed this text, only femininity was perceived as problematic, while masculinity was seen as nonproblematic, i.e., genderless. My suggestion is to read this text as an indication of the *male's* "gender trouble." The man who desires to be a woman illustrates, in my view, the instability of gender division and of social order. The text shows masculinity and femininity to be not dichotomous poles but a range between opposites. It explores the space between the sexes and shows them in their mutual specular relations. This perspective widens the range of possible readings of the text.

That the ideal marriage is viewed from a male perspective is quite obvious. Yet there is more than one mirror here and more than two reflections. There is the man who dreams about the woman he wants to become, and, in turn, this imagined woman dreams about the man that she wants to marry. Femininity serves here as an idealizing mirror. In the eyes of the dreaming Jewish Cinderella, the man meets an improved version of himself. Instead of his self-image as the harassed and unsatisfied man, he sees himself now as the perfect prince and the potent husband who feeds and satisfies his wife. But can we not also read this double fantasy as a homoerotic wish? By imagining himself to be a woman who is loved by a man, the male speaker can fanaticize about this other man and be loved by him.

This, however, is not a symmetrical play in reflections. It is the male, tired of his maleness and desiring some rest that has the privilege to encroach upon the realm of femininity and situate himself there. If only as an imaginary exercise, the man chooses here to abandon his central hegemonic position and to *pass*, as it were, to the female margins. Whether seen as a passion to become a woman or as a fascination with the feminine sphere, there is no escape from the text's androcentricity. The notions of feminine passivity and safety, serenity and beauty, are all stereotypes of male conceptualization and idealization of femininity. The dominant male allows himself the desire to retreat to the margin. Masculinity is not loathed or rejected, but momentarily deserted. The active male wishes to respite for a while from his demanding pursuits and dissolve into woman's coziness and inertia. The longing for the feminine can be also explained as the yearning of the exhausted male "to return home." In patriarchal thinking, woman and home are one; woman is the womb, the lap, the shelter, the nest, the provider of food, warmth, and cover. This androcentric position sees woman/home as an imperative condition for man's

independent existence. A man's life outside the house is made possible by the option of a later homecoming.

This homecoming can further be explained as man's return to his own repressed femininity. In the process of constituting himself as male, of individuation from the mother, the male has to distance himself not only from the feminine extraneous to him, but also has to exclude or repress his own recollections of primeval maternal femininity. Hence, the longing to the feminine is not for something dichotomous or extraneous, but for an expelled or repressed aspect of the self. He wants to be the man that he is and, at the same time, the woman, the feminine-maternal, which was part of him before he excluded it from his constitution. The wish to become a woman is the desire to reconquer a territory that was once his. The invasion of the female's body and into the woman's sphere enables the invader to see his male self with the eyes of the occupied female, and through her knowledge. Being there, he discovers the sources of woman's power. The male body, threatened by symbolic castration, is jealous of the already castrated woman, who is free of that anxiety. Paradoxically, woman's passivity and dependence appear to the speaker as inviting and enticing. They are experienced as potentially liberating from anxieties of impotence and failure.

The male's constitution is maximized to include the man that he is and the woman that he once was and still wants to be. The excursion taken by Qalonymos to femininity and back to masculinity is a widening of the scope of the male subjectivity so that it can include some feminine aspects. The circumcised prince has finally found the Jewish Cinderella inside himself.³⁵

TRANSSEXUALITY AND TRANS-TEXTUALITY

The puzzlement of scholars in the face of the transsexual theme matches only their confusion over the generic problem—the genre of our passage, in particular, and the generic definition of *Even bohan* as a whole. It is the instability and hybridity of genres that seem to be so problematic for extant criticism. The book is described as “not [being] cut of one cloth” (Habermann, p. 177). For the most part, it is obsessed with sin and punishment, death, rotting corpses and the Last Judgment. “It mixes laughter and tears . . . ‘jumps’ from . . . penitential and confessional pieces to witty

satires and even jokes” (Schirmann, p. 501); “a jumble of dismal and droll sections” (Pagis, p. 232); “a strange melange of wild humor, caustic satire, and despairing resignation” (Schirmann, in Schirmann-Fleischer, p. 532). Our passage is seen as “comic relief” amid a “gloomy sequence” of “caustic exhortations” (ibid., p. 535). Fleischer explained this “unapt” insertion by the author’s eagerness to retain what was in his eyes “a most successful passage in its own right,” even at the cost of breaching the “continuity of the composition” (ibid., n. 81). The thematic hybridity is accompanied also by shifts from a quasi-personal tone to sociohistorical descriptions; the language is a blend of biblical and talmudic Hebrew; the rhymed prose in the first part of the book changes into unrhymed prose in the second.³⁶

Instead of seeing *Even bohan* as a disordered mess, an aesthetic failure, I suggest considering it as a legitimate offspring of medieval literature. As shown by Mikhail Bakhtin, medieval literature was rife with “seriocomic” genres that have “intensified comic elements, scandal scenes,” and “inserted or mixed genres.”³⁷ Unlike some of Bakhtin’s examples, *Even bohan* is admittedly not a full-fledged carnivalesque work; nevertheless, it surely includes nearly carnivalesque elements. Such are Qalonymos’s picturesque, at times grotesque, descriptions of the Jewish festivals, and the series of caricatures of Jewish social types. The customs of the Jewish communities in Provence at the time are depicted and criticized.³⁸ The narrator combines the detached view of an anthropologist, the angry preacher’s tone admonishing against gluttony, debauchery, gambling, and fascination with clothes,³⁹ and the satirist’s joy in the human body, its needs, and laughter.

Gender trouble, which is the subject of our piece, seems to be analogous to the genre trouble of the book as a whole. Both genre and gender are crossed here. Trans-textuality becomes the sign of transsexuality.⁴⁰

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NOTES

- This paper is a chapter from my forthcoming book on representations of gender in medieval Hebrew literature. I would like to thank the Israel Science Foundation for enabling me to carry on this research. I am grateful to Daniel Boyarin for reading my paper and for his helpful comments.
- 1 *Even bohan*, ed. A. M. Habermann (Tel Aviv: Maḥbarot Iesifrut, 1956). The passage discussed here appears on pp. 17–21. It was also partly printed in Ḥayyim Schirmann's anthology *Hashbirah ha'ivrit bisfarad uvprovans* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, and Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1960–61), 4:503–4. Translation is mine. Qalonymos was born in 1286 in Arles, Provence, and died after 1328. *Even bohan* was completed in 1322, during his stay in Catalonia. For his life and work, see Ḥayyim Schirmann, *Toldot hashbirah ha'ivrit bisfarad hanotsrit woidrom tsarfat*, edited, supplemented, and annotated by Ezra Fleischer (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1977); henceforth, Schirmann-Fleischer, pp. 514–41.
 - 2 The miracle to Abraham alludes to Bereshit Raba 38, where Nimrod almost threw him to the furnace. For God's miracles to Moses, see: Exod. 4:3, 6, 7; 14:16; also Ps. 66:6; 114:8.
 - 3 In Berakhot 60a and Tanḥuma 19:5, Leah offered to God to change her fetus to female so that her barren sister, Rachel, could give birth to a son.
 - 4 Midrash Tanḥuma 7:5 indicates that she was a prostitute.
 - 5 The earliest sources for the Jewish blessings are: Tosefta Berakhot 6:16; PT Berakhot 9:1, 63b, and BT Menaḥot 43a–44b. Similar formulations existed in other cultures in antiquity. Diogenes Laertius (3:11) quotes Socrates as being “grateful to Fortune for being born a human and not an animal; a man and not a woman; a Greek and not a barbarian.” For Christian parallels, see Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11.
 - 6 Mishnah, Berakhot 9:3.
 - 7 Jacob ben Asher, *Arba'at haturim* (Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayyim, 1993), vol. 1, *Orah Ḥayyim*, p. 208. His younger contemporary David Abudarham, in his commentary on prayer (written in Seville circa 1340), repeats this report. He reiterates the common explanation for the male blessing, i.e., that women are not obligated to bless God since they were not given the mitzvot. Sometimes, he adds, she is “not able to fulfill even those mitzvot that she was commanded to because of fear of her husband.” In his view, a woman is entitled to be rewarded for mitzvot even though she is not expected to fulfill them. *Abudarham hashbalem* (Jerusalem: Even Israel, 1985), p. 49. I am grateful to Haym Soloveitchik for referring me to relevant sources. My thanks to Joseph Tabory, who permitted me to quote his article

“The Benedictions of Self-Identity and the Changing Status of Women and of Orthodoxy,” to be published in the first issue of *Kenishta*. As shown by Tabory, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were a period of great innovations concerning the prayer customs of women. Manuscript evidence shows that siddurim copied for women in various Romance languages (in Hebrew letters) employ the formula “according to His will.” Some mss. introduce changes in gender: “female-slave” and “gentile woman” instead of “slave” and “Gentile.” A fifteenth-century Judeo-Provençal translation has the unusual version “Blessed art Thou . . . who hast made me a woman.” A fifteenth-century Hebrew-Italian siddur (ms. JTS 8255, fol. 5b) reads: “who made me woman and not man.” Tabory follows the fate(s) of the woman’s blessing in various Jewish traditions to our day. (It is perhaps ironic that despite the Spanish origin of the blessing, the highest Sephardi halakhic authority in present Israel, R. Ovadia Yosef, issued a responsa stating that women should not recite the blessing in its full liturgical formula, since this is a mention of God’s name in vain. Information is based on Bar Ilan responsa.)

- 8 Jer. 15:10, with the exchanging of “a man of strife” for “a male child.”
- 9 Mishnah Ketubbot 13:3. He protests against the ruling that in the case of a small estate, the daughters receive their maintenance first, and if nothing is left, the sons must go begging. The Gemara (Ketubbot 108b) discusses the question of whether it is just that the male loses because he is engaged in Torah study.
- 10 Kiddushin 82b. See also n. 24 below.
- 11 The root לקה bears these two meanings. Additionally, it means to be defective, lacking, and deficient.
- 12 In Sanhedrin 38a, God coined all human beings “in the coin of the first Adam.” Note that מטבע (coin) and טבע (nature) derive from a common root. Thus, the “male coin” is synonymous with “male nature.” Qalonymos (who knew Latin) could have also intended here a wordplay on the Latin word *natura* in the sense of “genitalia” (see *Oxford Latin Dictionary*).
- 13 The Hebrew is *mum kavua*, a talmudic legal term (Sanhedrin 5b) for an irremediable, irreversible physical injury or defect. We should also note that *mum* (defect) is close to *me’um* (nothing, nil). In Yehuda Alharizi’s 41st Gate, “Debate between the Man and the Woman,” *mum* stands for the female organ.
- 14 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 57–59; quotation from p. 59. For a critical survey of the status of penis and phallus in Freud and Lacan, and on the identification of the phallus with signification, see Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 115–26.

- 15 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, pp. 140–41.
- 16 A similar theme occurs in the passage that immediately follows ours, where the author engages in a stinging social criticism of the exaggerated importance parents relate to the birth of a son and their grief over the birth of a daughter. “Woe to them who . . . rejoice the birth of every male baby and bemoan the birth of female babies. It is as if every newborn boy is a Rabbi Yehudah . . . or a Rabbi Eli’ezer . . . and every girl is source of grief and fury. . . . We have often found the opposite. The birth of so many dishonest [and blasphemous] sons . . . was celebrated in feast and banquet, music and light. And conversely, so many virtuous women, when they emerged out of the womb to this world of havoc, met with parents’ faces thundered with rage, [as if that day was] a day of calamity. The family moaned and sighed as if they were plague-stricken, and the house was filled with smoke from floor to ceiling” (*Even bohan*, p. 20). This passage might be an indication that Qalonymos is serious in his sympathy to the female sex.
- 17 The medieval educational curriculum included the *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy). Like other Jewish Provençal scholars, Qalonymos inherited this model from Andalusian culture. For the parallel course of learning in Islam, see Joel L. Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), pp. 9, 231, and nn.
- 18 Schirrmann-Fleischer, p. 514.
- 19 A translation cannot convey the subtle play of words in the last sentence of the last quotation: the Hebrew for “custom” is *mishpat* (law, from ט-פ-ש) and for “hearth” *shefatayim* (from ט-פ-ש). It is patriarchal *mishpat* that assigns woman her proper place, near the cooking fire. Another possible wordplay is between *shefatayim*, the woman’s locus, and the homonymous *sefatayim*, i.e., labia, the woman’s organ.
- 20 Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), pp. 132, 284–85. Similarly, in her study of Greek cultural history, Page DuBois writes: “The analogy between the female body or, more particularly, the uterus, and the oven is a commonplace of Greek thought.” Page DuBois, *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 110ff.
- 21 Miriam B. Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies: Rabbis, Gender and History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 130–39. Her analysis shows that the scene of women spinning thread beneath the moonlight is not at all idyllic. Nor is Qalonymos’s allusion to it innocent. In the Mishnah (Sotah 6:1), the gossip of the women spinners is used by men as incriminating testimony against their wives in divorce cases.

- 22 Helen Solterer, "At the Bottom of Mirage," in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p. 221. And see Rozsicka Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Woman's Press, 1986), pp. 10–11.
- 23 "It seems that women have made few contributions to . . . civilization; there is, however, one technique which they may have invented—that of plaiting and weaving. If that is so, we should be tempted to guess the unconscious motive of the achievement. Nature herself would seem to have given the model which this achievement imitates by causing the growth at maturity of the pubic hair that conceals the genitals." Sigmund Freud, "Femininity," *The Standard Edition*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press 1964), 22:132. See also Luce Irigaray's retort to Freud, in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 115–17.
- 24 Exod. 35:25, 1 Kings, 6:29, 7:26. See also Isa. 19:9. The rare expression "furrow-like stitches" refers to a list of fortunate and less fortunate occupations in Kiddushin 82b. It seems that Qalonymos intended also to allude here to Rabbi's interpolation amidst this list: "Lucky is he whose children are males, and woe to him whose children are females" (see also n. 10 above).
- 25 An interim type of speech between direct and indirect speech, usually merging two voices, that of the narrator and that of a character. See, for instance, Ann Banfield, "The Formal Coherence of the Represented Speech and Thought," *Poetics and Theory of Literature* 3 (1978): 289–314.
- 26 There is, though, a slight ungrammaticality in the transitory sentence, which can be easily straightened out. The man, who speaks now as woman, switches from first person ("I might") to third ("her hands") and back to first person ("I and my"). This can be explained by the *shibbutz* from Exod. 35:25 (describing women's contribution to the art of the Tabernacle): "And each skilled woman *spun with her own hands*, and brought what they had spun, in blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and in fine linen." Yet the grammatical instability might indicate that the male speaker finds it still awkward to refer to himself in the first-person feminine.
- 27 Ketubbot 5:5 lists the "labors that the wife does for her husband: grinding, baking, laundering, cooking, nursing children, tending the beds, and working in wool." She is exempt and "may sit upon a chair of leisure" only if she brought with her no fewer than four slaves. Rabbi Eli'ezer insists that the husband forces her working in wool "because leisure brings about sexual temptations." And the Gemara adds that "even when she sits upon a chair of leisure," she has to pour his wine and tend his bed and wash his hands and feet" (Ketubbot 61a).

- 28 See discussion below.
- 29 Sigmund Freud, "Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious," *The Standard Edition*, 8:100.
- 30 Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 95–96.
- 31 Genesis Rabbah 17, Jehuda Theodor and Hanokh Albeck edition (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1965), pp. 158–59.
- 32 Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel, Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 90.
- 33 Habermann, p. 177. Pagis labeled it "a facetious grumbling against being born male and not female," Dan Pagis, *Ḥidush umasoret beshirat baḥol: sefarad ve'italia* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1976), p. 232.
- 34 Fleischer's n. 81 (in Schirmann–Fleischer, 1997, p. 535) is the most detailed treatment of the passage. In his opinion, "although a true feat of humor, the passage is a failure in terms of its satirical effect."
- 35 For the problematics of medieval masculinity, and about the dialectics of men's studies as an offshoot of feminist criticism, see Clare A. Lees, ed., *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
- 36 Here is the book's content: (a) introduction: the author's lament over the tribulations of Jews in his time and his apology for choosing a preacher's position; (b) exhortations against the temptations of the flesh; confessions of being tempted by attire, passion, and riches; (c) the wish to become a female; an exhortation to parents who prefer male to female babies (see n. 16 above); (d) satirical pictures of Jewish festivals as celebrated in contemporary communities in Provence; a series of caricatures on professions (the grammarian, the physician, the scholar, the rich man, the poet). The second, unrhymed, part of the book consists of praises to God, prayers, and confessions.
- 37 See his discussion of the *manipea* genre: Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 114–18.
- 38 In Rome, Qalonymos also wrote *Tractate Purim*, a description of the Jewish carnival as celebrated by the Jews of Rome, as a parody on a talmudic tractate. For more, see Schirmann–Fleischer, p. 524.
- 39 In a passage prior to ours (p. 13), the speaker confesses an uncontrollable passion for elegant clothes, among his other weaknesses. The fetishistic list includes official

attire and leisure apparel, nightgowns and embroidered bedcovers, linens, silks, laces, gauzes, crimsons, purples, turquoises, etc. Not only does this vestmentary catalog betray “feminine” (or effeminate) obsession with elegant clothes, but includes also a reference to women’s clothes in particular (and perhaps also an anxiety about transvestism): “O my heart, you seduced me [to desire . . .] precious attire . . . and . . . fine linen of the kind that virgin princesses wear.”

- 40 Froma Zeitlin’s terms “intersexuality” and “intertextuality” were modified here to suit my context. She uses them for the analogy between transvestism and mimetic parody of texts. See Froma I. Zeitlin, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 377.