Jewish Masochism: 
Couvade, Castration, and Rabbis in Pain*

Introduction

Couvade and the Phallus

The cultural practices known collectively as couvade and their analogues in cultures that do not have formalized couvade rituals have been treated at various times in psychoanalytic literature. Couvade rituals are practices that involve the husband of a woman in labor acting out childbirth and undergoing the same performances, ritual segregations and the like, that the parturient undergoes in the culture (Newman 1942). Although various explanations of these phenomena have been offered in the literature, the one that seems most plausible is that these rites reflect an underlying male anxiety about and envy of the female body and its overwhelming plenitude vis-à-vis the miserably lacking male body, which cannot menstruate, become pregnant, give birth, or lactate.¹ The geographically

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widespread nature of couvade, along with other related practices, such as male imitation of menstruation (Bettelheim 1954), suggests the possibility that male envy of the female body is, in fact, a psychic universal, one, moreover, of enormous explanatory power. How would such a claim square with the age-old European representation of gender as male plenitude, the phallus and female lack, castration?

I theorize that the best explanation of the development of the phallus-myth is that it itself is a kind of couvade, manifested in this case through denial of male desire to be female and the production of a mythic opposite—that women desire to be male and thus that the phallus is the very representative of human perfection. I wish to suggest that far more primitive (synchronically!) than the phallus, a psychic structure of male plenitude and female lack, is a structure of female plenitude and male lack, a reversal of most prevailing psychoanalytic opinion (Lane 1986, 134 and literature cited there). This suggestion is by itself not at all new, of course. Notions such as womb-envy have already been advanced in the literature (Horney 1967, 60). However as Horney herself claimed, “We are familiar with this envy as such, but it has hardly received due consideration as a dynamic factor” (60). And it is still so. Even psychoanalysts who have discussed cases of male envy have marginalized the phenomenon. Thus Frederick Lane wrote in 1986, “In any event, male envy of the female, while it has been noted, appears to play a relatively minor part in male development compared to the female’s envy of the male” (Lane 1986, 134). Jessica Benjamin has also noted that “Male envy of women’s fecundity and ability to produce food is certainly not unknown, but little is made of it” (Benjamin 1988, 163). In recent work, the notion of couvade, understood broadly as the entire complex of male envy of femaleness and acting out of appropriations of female capacities, has been usefully mobilized in order to understand details of the creation of humanity myth of Genesis by Alan Dundes (1983) and more recently by Ilana Pardes (1992, 48–51).

I suggest—very tentatively—that the idea of couvade, understood as the entire complex of male envy of femaleness, is much more satisfactory than the phallus as a universal account
of sexual differentiation. The story of the phallus, from the Greeks to Freud—with the latter included—is itself a response to the crisis in male subjectivity, occasioned by male anxiety about the greater capacities of the female body. Aristotle's insistence, for example, that only the male has a role in generation and the mother is a mere enclosure for the embryo is easy to decode in this way. It is this move of denial that is carried into (and out in) the psychoanalytical accounts of sexual differentiation: the phallus, castration anxiety and penis envy.

Freud and after him Lacan were simply delighted at having found their privileged phallic signifier in "the Ancients" who erected statues of phalloi and worshipped the phallos in their mysteries etc., but neither seems to have paid attention to the fact that very symbolism of the Ancients is specific to one ancient culture, the one founded by the Greeks and continued by the Romans into European culture as a whole. Freud writes, "The remarkable phenomenon of erection around which the human imagination has constantly played, cannot fail to be impressive, involving as it does the apparent suspension of the laws of gravity" (Cf. in this connection the winged phalli of the ancients) (Freud 1965, 394), to which I respond: What about the even more remarkable phenomenon of birth? Freud's "ancients" are always Greeks and Romans, not Canaanites, Assyrians, or Israelites—not to mention Indians, Arawaks, or Bushmen! Jonathan Boyarin has recently remarked of Kant that he "apparently never spoke to anyone who denied the postulates of Euclidean geometry" (Boyarin 1994). I might similarly remark of Freud that he apparently had never spoken to anyone who denied that "it was the presence or absence of the phallus and nothing else that marked the distinction between the sexes" (Mitchell 1985, 6). The symbolic place of the phallus in Greece and its successors, however, had been taken perhaps in other archaic cultures—if we are to judge by artifacts—by images and representations of the fecund female body.9

For Freud, sexuality (and sexualities) are almost arbitrary and normative, not normal, but "the sexuality of the patriarchal male is curiously resistant to investigation" (Bowie 1991,
157). As Bowie remarks, “Lacan repeats without comment Freud’s non sequitur: if desire is one it must also be masculine,” and calls this an “obliging discipleship” (Bowie 1991, 142). I wish to suggest much more than fealty to the master here. This is Lacan’s (and Freud’s) couvade. The supervalent thought is precisely that non sequitur, which reveals that “another unconscious thought lies concealed behind it.” And here, as usual, “the concealed thought is . . . the direct contrary of the supervalent one” (Freud 1963, 47), namely that there is only one libido, and it is feminine. Bowie also notes Lacan’s “monomaniacal refusal to grant signifying power to the female body,” and that “the drama of possession and privation, of absence and presence, of promise and threat, could be retained and perhaps even enhanced if the principals were breast, clitoris, vagina, and uterus.” But Lacan himself, Bowie continues, “tirelessly suggests that any such transfer of symbolic power to the female would be heresy, and bring the Symbolic order itself to the verge of ruin” (Bowie 1991, 147).

In short we have another (actually the same) supervalent thought, and once more, I suggest it conceals its opposite. Another way of saying this would be: If “the ego evolves a gradually built-up imaginary order system of myths and fictions that function to ‘suture,’ or close off, any knowledge of unconscious effects” (Ragland-Sullivan 1989, 40), then it is the phallus that belongs to this imaginary order! This is Lacan’s couvade, the latest way-station in an “Ancient” European cultural history of the phallus—myth as couvade. 4 Some male people act out ritually or individually their desire to have babies; others symbolize it in different ways, and still others deny it by producing the fiction of the phallus. In particular, in this essay I wish to focus on the possibility that one significant explanatory paradigm for masochism in men, defined simply here as the seeking of pain, is that it is yet another acting out of male envy of and desire for femaleness.

A Talmudic Story

And even so, Rabbi El’azar the son of Shim’on did not trust himself, perhaps God forbid, such an incident
would befall him again. He solicited painful disease upon himself. In the evening, they used to fold under him sixty felt mats, and in the morning they would find under him sixty vessels full of blood and pus. His wife made him sixty kinds of relishes and he ate them. His wife would not let him go to the study-house, in order that the Rabbis would not reject him. In the evening, he said, “My brothers and lovers, come!” In the morning, he said, “My brothers and lovers depart!”

One day his wife heard him saying this. She said, “You bring them upon you. You have decimated the inheritance of my father’s house.” She rebelled and went to her family home. Sixty sailors came up from the sea and came to him carrying sixty purses and they made him sixty relishes, and he ate them. One day she [the wife] said to her daughter, “Go see what your father is doing.” He [Rabbi El’azar] said to her [the daughter], “Ours is greater than yours.” He applied to himself the verse, ‘From afar she will bring her bread’ (Proverbs 31:14).

One day he [Rabbi El’azar] went to the study-house. They brought before him sixty kinds of blood, and he declared all of them pure. The Rabbis murmured about him, saying is it possible that there is not even one doubtful case among those? He said, “If I am right, let all of the children be boys, and if not, let there be one girl among them.” All of them were boys. They were all named after Rabbi El’azar. Our Rabbi [Yehuda] said, “How much procreation did that wicked woman prevent from Israel [by keeping her husband from going to the House of Study where he took the lenient position]!”

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[After Rabbi El’azar’s death] Our Rabbi [Yehuda] sent to her [Rabbi El’azar’s widow] to propose to her. She said, “A vessel which has functioned for the holy, shall it function for the profane?!” There [i.e. in Palestine] they say, “In the place where the master hangs his battle-ax, shall the shepherd hang his stick?!” He sent to her, “Indeed in Torah
he was greater than me, but was he greater than me in deeds?” She sent to him, “As for Torah, I know nothing; you have told me, but as for deeds, I know, for he accepted pain upon himself.”

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Rabbi [Yehuda] said: “Sufferings are desirable!” He solicited on himself thirteen years of suffering; six of kidney stones and seven of toothache. The stable-master of the House of Rabbi was richer than King Shapur.5 When he used to throw hay to the animals, the sound would be heard for three miles. He used to devise that he would throw [the food to the animals] when Rabbi went into the toilet, and even so his voice was louder than theirs, and the sailors in the sea would hear it.

And even so, the pains of Rabbi El’azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on are preferable to those of Rabbi [Yehuda], for those of Rabbi El’azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on came because of love and departed because of love, whereas those of Rabbi [Yehuda] came because of an incident and departed because of an incident.

What is this [incident]? A certain calf was being taken out to be slaughtered. It went and hid its head in the hem of Rabbi [Yehuda]’s garment [a gesture of supplication], and it was crying. He said, “Go, for this you have been created!” They said, “Because he was not merciful, let pains come upon him.” And by means of an incident they departed. One day, the servant woman of the house of Rabbi was sweeping the house. There were baby rats there, and she was sweeping them. He said to her, “Let them be. It is written ‘His mercy extends to all of His creatures’ [Psalms 145].” They said, “Since he is merciful, let us be merciful to him.” [Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metsia 84a–b]

I wish to pursue here a reading of a bit of talmudic “magic realism”6 as a text about Jewish maleness in late antiquity. In order to read such a text, I pursue a strategy not entirely unlike the analytic reading of a dream; on the one hand an encounter
with the overall thematic unity of the text, suggesting that its concern is with one central psycho-social structure; on the other a particular and contextualized reading of its individual moments.\(^7\)

The overall theme of the passage itself as well as of its surrounding context is maleness. In previous essays I have read the larger context as having to do with enormous anxiety about the paternal function in the rabbinic culture (Boyarin 1991b; Boyarin 1992). In the present one I am concerned with the function of pain in that same discourse of masculinity. It is clear that one of the most significant moments in this text has to do with the intersection between pain and eroticism. As I shall argue below, the construct of masochism provides a useful rubric within which to analyze this material, particularly insofar as it is directly associated with desire. In Theodor Reik’s classic study of masochism, however, what we might call cultural masochism is explicitly associated with celibacy, with renunciation of sexuality (see below). But here we find an explicit collaboration between male asceticism and male sexuality and even paternity. This is going to suggest as well the necessity for a more nuanced account of practices of self-mortification than a mere binary opposition of ascetic versus anti-ascetic practice, particularly insofar as asceticism has come, through Christianity, to be associated with celibacy. We have in this text an account of extreme self-mortification that is not only compliant with sexual life and procreation but understood as somehow a promotion of them.

Let us begin with the most obvious marker of the relay between suffering and sex here. Rabbi Yehuda, after the death of his rival,\(^8\) Rabbi El’azar, the son of Rabbi Shim’on, comes to seek the hand of his widow who rejects him using sexualized imagery that is almost shocking in its directness. She says to him, “Shall a vessel that served for the holy now serve for the profane?” referring to her own body or, “In the place where the master hung his battle-ax, shall the shepherd hang his stick?” referring to the body of the male.

The narrative does not leave us long in suspense as to what made Rabbi El’azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on such a superior erotic object that his penis is to Rabbi Yehuda’s as
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battle-ax to shepherd's stick. Indeed Rabbi Yehuda himself lets us know part of the story, namely that his rival was greater than he in the study of Torah. The widow immediately discounts knowledge of this realm—as a good rabbinic wife would be expected to do—but cites her husband's greater performance of "deeds" as the reason for finding Rabbi Yehuda an unsuitable successor to him. There is very little doubt in my mind that the use of the term "deeds" involves a kind of cultural irony. In the Greco-Roman world, the deeds that would render a man a suitable erotic object would have been phallic deeds par excellence, deeds of valor of one sort of another, while for the Rabbi these deeds are precisely anti-phallic, masochistic challenges to the coherence and impermeability of the male body. Paradoxically, it is the penetrated, violated, bleeding body that constructs the penile ideal. Where the "Roman" had to show that he had a phallus to win a woman, the Rabbi has to show he has none!  

Rabbi, according to the story, "gets the message." Desiring that his penis will be compared to a battle-ax and not to a shepherd's stick, he also prays for and invites upon himself extremely painful disease. This male subject, at any rate, is called upon and learns to recognize himself through female desire, but not through an image of "unimpaired masculinity," rather through an image of masculinity as impairment, as what would be interpreted in another culture as castration!

The details of the account of Rabbi El'azar's disease are exceedingly revealing as well. They repeatedly reconfigure his body as "female." The first hint of such a configuration is in the precise description of his symptoms: "In the evening, they used to fold under him sixty felt mats, and in the morning they would find under him sixty vessels full of blood and pus." As if this depiction were not graphic enough, the text provides us with other clues for reading its significance. The number "sixty" provides one such, for at another juncture in the larger narrative of which this is a part we are told, "One day he went to the study-house. They brought before him sixty kinds of blood, and he declared all of them pure." According to rabbinic practice, when a woman has a discharge, if it is certainly menstrual blood, then she and her husband are
forbidden to have sex until after the period and a purification ritual. However, if it is doubtful as to whether the discharge is menstrual or not, a stain is shown to a rabbi who makes a judgment based on his expertise. I will come back to this episode below and here wish merely to emphasize that wherever the number sixty appears in our narrative it functions as a kind of leit-motif signalling a movement of gendered instability. In this case the reference to precisely sixty specimens of female blood strongly amplifies the association that the placing of felt mats under a body and their filling with blood would have with femaleness in any case.

However, an even more outlandish moment in this text provides a striking symptom of this thematic motive as well as the means to a tentative interpretation thereof. At one point in the narrative Rabbi El'azar is abandoned by his wife, because upon understanding that his suffering is voluntary, she becomes angry, realizing that the expensive delicacies that she feeds him to keep him healthy, thinking that he is “naturally” sick—or at any rate, so against his will—are in effect wasting her inheritance to feed his guilt/ego:

She said, ‘You bring them upon you. You have decimated the inheritance of my father’s house.’ She rebelled and went to her family home. Sixty sailors came up from the sea and came to him carrying sixty purses and they made him sixty relishes, and he ate them. One day she said to her daughter, ‘Go see what you father is doing.’ He said to her, ‘Ours is greater than yours.’ He applied to himself the verse, ‘[She is like the ships of Tarshish;] from afar she will bring her bread’ (Proverbs 31:4).

In accordance with the generalization that I have made above about the number sixty in this text, here also we have a marked moment of gender-crossing. Beginning at the end, as I have emphasized in my citation, the verse that he applies to himself is a verse that refers to women. There is more, for the verse comes from the very passage of Proverbs that describes the “woman of valor,” the ideal wife. It is as if Rabbi El’azar is
insisting that he is a better wife (to himself?) than the woman is. If we move upward in the text then from this clue, we will find further detail to support and further “flesh out” this reading. First of all, let us note that the sailors provide Rabbi El’azar with precisely the same food (both type and amount, sixty kinds of relish) that his wife had formerly provided, thus suggesting, it would seem, that the homosocial group of males is sufficient to fulfill both male and female roles. Secondly, there is the very curious reply that the rabbi gives to his daughter when she comes to inquire after his situation. He responds by claiming that “Ours is greater than yours,” a seemingly opaque, even meaningless, statement. This occult remark is rendered further obscure when it is compared with a seeming echo from earlier in the same narrative, in a passage not quoted in this essay. There the bodies of Rabbi El’azar (and a compatriot) and those of their wives—either the genitals or the abdomens—are being compared, and the rabbis claim: “Theirs are greater than ours” (Boyarin 1991b). Since that passage is clearly dealing with sexual (and procreative) matters—whether it is genitals or abdomens being referred to, it is explicitly about sex—the use of the identical phrase here strongly suggests a sexual meaning as well. It is as if the rabbi (the text) is saying that men have no reason to be jealous of the greater sexual, procreative, nutritive capacities of women; men can appropriate those capacities for themselves, even through appropriating bleeding and corporeal pain, the pain of childbirth, as well. If before, the rabbi conceded that his wife’s was greater than his, now he commands his daughter: Tell her, ours is greater than hers. If the first represents the anxiety, the second represents a way of reducing that anxiety.

This interpretation is supported as well by another moment in the text already referred to above:

One day he went to the study-house. They brought before him sixty kinds of blood, and he declared all of them pure. The rabbis murmured about him, saying is it possible that there is not even one doubtful case among those? He said, “If I am right, let all of the children be
boys, and if not, let there be one girl among them.” All of them were boys. They were all named after Rabbi El’azar. Our Rabbi said, “How much procreation did that wicked woman prevent from Israel!”

It seems to me that this passage also provides significant clues to the concern of the text as a whole. In the arrogation of the procreative function indicated by the Name-of-the-Father (here transferred from the biological father to males in general), the text is once again repeating its underlying paradigm of male-ness as lack. There is an extraordinary reversal here. On the one hand, the “blame” for the prevention of procreation is displaced onto the poor wife of Rabbi El’azar because she kept her husband from going to the Study House, where he would have disagreed with the other rabbis who were, after all, the ones preventing the wives from having sex, not she. On the other hand, Rabbi El’azar himself symbolically takes the credit for the bearing of these children by having them all end up named after him. The paternal function here simply absorbs into itself the maternal one—signified as well by a fantasy of a generation without women, a fantasy that would necessitate parthenogenesis or male pregnancies—suggesting that one of the motivations for this text is to “restore” the lack occasioned in the male psyche by inability to bear children: “Ours are greater than theirs” (cf. Pardes 1992: 48, where naming and female powers are thematized). This suggestion will give us a possibility of interpreting the function of male corporeal pain and its eroticization in this text as well.

A Child is Being Born: Couvade and Masochism

I am suggesting, scandalously, that the idea of the phallus is a substitute for the child that the man cannot bear or suckle. In other words, I theorize that the otherwise virtually inexplicable train of thought of penis envy etc., which has, moreover, virtually no therapeutic value (cf. Torok), is a supervalent thought. If one follows Freud’s further description of the formation of the supervalent thought, one will see how pre-
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cisely it describes and accounts for the myth of the phallus: a conscious “reactive thought”—She wants to be a man—is formed in order to repress the unconscious one—I want to be a woman!14 “Ours are greater than hers” means “Hers is greater than ours.”

At first glance, there is not much new in the form of male subjectivity that I am analyzing here. The image of the suffering rabbis is reminiscent, at least, of similarly tortured bodies of Christian saints in its orientation toward pain. These privileged figures of western cultural history have also been spotlighted at various relays in the history of psychoanalytical accounts of masochism.15 The first way station in this via dolorosa is, of course, Freud’s essay, “The Economic Problem of Masochism” (Freud 1984 <1924>). In this paper, Freud distinguishes three forms of masochism, “as a condition imposed on sexual excitation, as an expression of the feminine nature, and as a norm of behavior.” These three forms are then classified by him as respectively, “erotogenic, feminine, and moral masochism” (Freud 1984, 415).

On the form of masochism that Freud calls “feminine,” he avers, “But if one has an opportunity of studying cases in which the masochistic phantasies have been especially richly elaborated, one quickly discovers that they place the subject in a characteristically female situation; they signify, that is, being castrated, or copulated with, or giving birth to a baby” (Freud 1984, 416). Now to my naif’s mind, there is something strange indeed about a list like this, for women are literally copulated with, indeed literally giving birth to babies, but are not—literally—castrated. Moreover, there are differences in significance between being copulated with and giving birth that cannot be elided. In other words, what Freud is identifying as feminine includes a unique capability of the female body, an attitude in sexual intercourse to which certain cultural/psychic interpretations may be given (since, after all, men can be copulated with), and a purely hypothetical psychical construct, an explanatory myth. What is strange and requires reading here is the fact that for Freud all of these seem to have precisely the same epistemological valence.

While it would be extremely foolhardy to produce any
generalizations whatever about masochism itself, I would like to suggest vis-à-vis this text that the psychic mechanism that it is explicitly projecting into masochism is precisely desire to give birth. I have already indicated that these rabbis are symbolized as feminized through and by their sufferings; I wish now to specify this more. They both suffer as if giving birth, Rabbi El’azar with the blood that is removed from under his body while he lies in bed and Rabbi by his sitting on the stool and screaming, certainly evocative in a culture in which women gave birth while sitting on a stool as well. I propose then, very tentatively, another line of interpretation of the etiology of masochism in men, one that connects it, I would suggest, with a great many cultural and psychic structures, namely birth envy. Masochism is, on this hypothesis, a series of actings out of childbirth. The so-called castration is an attempt to achieve the status of femaleness, the fantasies of being copulated with have an obvious function, and the pain suffered and desired is the pain of labor and delivery. On this hypothesis, only the last element, namely fantasies of giving birth to a baby is necessary to the masochistic male formation while the others are facultatively/ causally/ associatively related to this last fantasy, and sure enough, in the talmudic narratives, the only element that I discover is the fantasmatic representation of male birth pain, the structure that I am calling couvade. I would suggest, therefore, that the very incongruity of the Freudian list that includes desire to be “castrated,” desire to be copulated with, and desire to give birth is really a mask for desire to be female, tout court. The very need to produce a myth of castration anxiety—fear of being female—an entirely negative representation of femaleness and the counterpart of the phallic-myth, is thus precisely a palpably desperate move to fend off the real fear, the fear of not being female (Cooper 1986, 127–28). Thus it is not denial of castration that produces the category of “femininity” but, if anything, it is the very construction of “castration” (the idea of it) that is produced through a denial. For desire to be/fantasies of being castrated, then, my interpretation would substitute desire to have a vagina (Cp. Limentani 1984; Lane 1986). Not a loss but a gain.

Support for this couvade theory of male, i.e. “feminine,”
masochism comes from an unexpected source. In the one moment in all of Venus in Furs where any attempt is made to articulate a theoretical explanation of Severin's desire to be dominated by a woman, he claims:

To endure horrible tortures seemed from then on the highest form of delight, particularly if the torturer was a beautiful woman, for to my mind the poetic and the diabolical have always united in women. I turned this idea into a veritable religion. Sensuality took on a sacred quality, indeed it seems the only sacred principle, and woman in her beauty became something divine, since she was called upon to perform the most important function in life, the continuation of the species. Woman seems to be the personification of Nature, she was Isis, and man was her priest and slave; she treated him cruelly just as Nature casts aside whatever has served her purpose as soon as she has no more need of it. (Sacher-Masoch 1991, 179 [emphasis added])

We have here, I think, a remarkable insight into the causal nexus between the erotic aspects of masochism and the "feminine" aspects of its performance. Both derive from the same source, the mystery of the female ability to have babies which men utterly and miserably lack and long for.19

Feminine and Moral Masochism

One of the strikingly equivocal features of the talmudic narrative is that for both of its heroes it offers two incompatible explanations for their masochism, and thus for the cultural/psychic functions of masochism itself. One could suggest that in each case an erotic explanation and a moral explanation of the masochism are both offered, thus locating both of these "cases" at the interstice between feminine and moral masochism, a moral masochism that has a very different tonality than the one discussed by Freud. Thus for Rabbi El'azar, one explanation given within the text has him in an
erotic relationship to his pain, “My brothers and lovers come!,” and his suffering is explicitly called by the suffering brought on by love. The other explanation, however, indicates that the pain came on him—however voluntarily—as punishment for his moral defection in sending an innocent Jew to his death. Rabbi, on the other hand, is presented as taking on his suffering because he sees that suffering is desirable, i.e. that the suffering man is desirable to the female erotic/subject, but, on the other hand, his pains are explicitly located (and devalued) as a punishment as well for moral obtuseness. The two are in a kind of chiastic relationship. Rabbi El’azar invites his pains for moral reasons and then they are eroticized, while Rabbi invites his pains for erotic reasons and then they are provided with a moral explanation.

Now, on the one hand, this very thematized contradiction within the text supports the analytical distinction between these moments in masochism, but on the other hand, it affords, perhaps, a way beyond the taxonomies implied by their separation into different forms by Freud (and then by Reik 1941). In other words, the very connections for the text proposes through its inner tensions between different explanations of the masochism here suggests that they may not, in the end, be separable into different “forms.” Freud himself derives both of the other “forms” of masochism from the erogenetic one (417). It would be thus an easy temptation to simply recuperate the tension within the talmudic text at the level of the psyche and argue that what is being acted out here is the attempt of the psyche to disguise erogenetic masochism in moral masochism. After all, as I have just said, Freud does not let the moral masochist “get away with it.” He is identified as merely hiding further the erotic scenario underlying his pleasure in pain, the desire (as Freud understands it) to have a “passive (feminine) sexual relation to [the father]” (Freud 1984, 424), which I am reinterpreting rather as a desire to be impregnated by the father.

This is, however, too easy and will not allow us to see the differences between cultural formations within which such psychic positions for males are pathologized—with names like masochism—those in which they are the province of celibate
saints—such as early Christianity—and those in which they are valorized models for normative, paternal masculinity, such as early rabbinic Judaism. These rabbis, for all of their masochism, that is for all of their “feminization” when perceived from the standpoint of the European myth of the phallus, are not, when seen from within the culture’s texts, unmanned (Geller 1992). Comparing the structures of “Christian masochism” and these rabbinic masochists will help us see this point.

Christian Masochism: Theodore Reik

The old problem of suffering, which had occupied the ancient philosophers for so long, had been subjected to a new attempt at solution in late Judaism and early Christianity. Suffering was affirmed, even glorified, and its value was acknowledged, for it opened the gates of paradise. Did Jesus not say: “Be of good cheer. I have overcome the world”? The dying Saviour had found a new way of enjoyment. The steps of suffering became rungs of the ladder to heaven. The warrior-ideal is by and by replaced by the ideal of the saint or martyr. The late Jewish prophets and the Christian faith bring the glorification of masochism. But behind the pleasure of the suffering there appears the triumph. The greatest of all sufferers, who drank the cup of sorrow, who was humiliated and crucified, was the one to conquer the world. (Reik 1941, 342)

It is perhaps symptomatic that Reik here refers to “late Judaism” and “early Christianity,” that his Judaism ends with the Prophets, and that he, a Jew, refers to Jesus as the “greatest of all sufferers, “for precisely what is missing in his account is, I claim, a differentiation of Jewish from Christian masochism.

A paradigmatic case for Reik of Christian masochism is the story of Francis of Assisi, who upon feeling intense sexual desire went outside and rolled himself in the snow and in a bush of wild roses, thus explicitly attacking the “thorn in his flesh” with thorns in his flesh. As Reik correctly interprets, “In
the experience of Saint Francis the pain serves as defense against the sinful desire” (Reik 1941, 350). The question remains, however, why sexual desire is sinful. Here we have, in a sense, the crux of my argument that there is a particularly Jewish pattern of masochism represented in these talmudic stories that is significantly different from Christian masochism. Without intending this to be an inclusive or exclusive explanation, I would like to suggest that the “masochism” of the Christian saints and martyrs is integrally and necessarily connected with the rejection of sexuality, just because masochism (for men) is precisely an attempted renunciation of the phallic order. However, since Christian culture had fully accepted the myth of the phallus—the fantasmatic equation of the phallus to the penis—renunciation of the phallic order could only be read as renunciation of the penis. Hence, the necessity for “castration,” for celibacy.

Masochism and Fecundity

In contrast to this, the rabbinic masochists represented in the story here are clearly not celibate. The stories are embedded in a context in which it is precisely their conjugal lives that are the issue, and they are represented in the larger context as having children. Indeed, I claim that the issue of progeny is the central theme of the text (Boyarin 1992). If it were not already marked enough, the fact that Rabbi undertakes his masochistic passage in order to win the heart of a woman makes this painfully clear. All this suggests to me that refusal of the phallus—even this may be granting too much—does not necessarily entail giving up the penis; it is not equivalent to castration in this culture. We find this brought out explicitly in another text of the Babylonian Talmud which deals with the issue of voluntary suffering:

Rava said (and some say it was Rav Hisda): If a man sees that physical suffering is coming upon him, let him examine his ways, as it says, “We will examine our ways, and research them, and repent unto the Lord” [Lamentations 3:40]. If he examines but finds no [fault], then he should assume it is because of slackness in the study
of Torah, for it says, "Blessed is the person whom God makes suffer and to whom He teaches Torah" [Psalms 94:12]. But if he assumes so, but cannot discover any slackness in the study of Torah, then it is known that these are the sufferings of love, as it says, "He whom God loves, He will chastise" [Proverbs 3:12]. Rava said that Rav Sehora said that Rav Huna said: Anyone whom God desires, He will cause him physical sufferings, as it says, "[Whom] God desires—disease oppresses!" [Isaiah 53:10]. It could be even if he did not receive them [the pains] lovingly, but it says, "And if he makes himself a sin-offering" [Isaiah 53:10]—just as the sin-offering is brought willingly, so the sufferings must be willing. But if he accepted them [lovingly], then what is his reward? "He will see offspring and live a long life" [Isaiah 53:10], and not only this, but his studies of Torah will succeed, for it says, "He whom God desires, he will cause to succeed" [Isaiah 53:10]. [Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 8a]

The ascetic, or living martyr, who lovingly accepts the pains, even devastating ones, that God in His desire and love causes the loved object, what is his reward? Precisely the supremely non-celibate satisfactions of fatherhood! We see, here then, a different psycho-cultural pattern from the one that issued in what Reik calls Christian masochism. Whatever the mechanisms are that produce this Jewish cultural pattern, they are not apparently connected with a disavowal of the sexual-reproductive body.

This text not only supports the previous interpretation of talmudic masochism, it provides an important dimension that the earlier text was lacking. The psychic structure that I have hypothesized as underlying "feminine" masochism is male mimesis of the "female" position, owing to birth-envy. Observing the specifics of the descriptions of the pain in the talmudic stories, I have, of course very tentatively, suggested as well that the desire for pain involves a form of couvade, an acting out of birth pains themselves. The last-cited text enables me to add another dimension, however. Desire for pain need not be explicable in only one way. As Dr. Ruth Stein has remarked to
me, the psychoanalytic experience affords evidence of “conspicuous, painful, and abhorrent personal experiences generative of what later becomes a masochistic personality.” Even more to the point, she observes “the abuse, humiliation, despair, and the terrible no-exit dependency on a powerful, malevolent or opaque other” [personal letter of August 23, 1993] (cf. Brennan 1992, 197). We discover this element here at the psycho-social level, where God has apparently sent suffering without cause, i.e., we find here par excellence such a no-exit dependency on an, at least, opaque Other, and the response is—precisely as in clinical masochism—eroticization of the pain itself. Jessica Benjamin remarks that “current psychoanalytic theory appreciates that pain is a route to pleasure only when it involves submission to an idealized figure” (Benjamin 1988, 60–61). Here we have a literal and precise rendition of this thesis, for the already existing pain is transformed into pleasure through interpreting it/experiencing it as submission to an idealized figure. Thus if “anyone whom God desires, He will cause them physical sufferings,” then it follows that anyone to whom God causes physical sufferings, He desires. This is yet another aspect of masochism as identification with the Mother, as the one who seeks and finds recognition through the Father (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1989, 196). We thus see the mimesis of the “feminine” doubled and over-determined. On the one hand, it is an acting out of couvade, of desire to bear the father’s baby, and on the other, a more general psycho-social demand for recognition from the Father (Benjamin 1988, 60). Thus, according to my speculation, we have two sources for the eroticization of pain which converge in a mimesis of femininity: on the one hand, identification with the mother and desire to bear the father’s child and a mimetic, pain-ful enactment of childbirth; on the other hand an acting out of a “female” demand for recognition from the male Other, God, once more through an acceptance, even a desire for pain.

In this respect, therefore, Christian and Jewish masochism are very similar, even identical. The point of the cultural specificity of Christian masochism and of its relation to the phallus can, however, be further seen in another way. The
rabbinic discourse of martyrdom itself shares many of the features of the Christian discourse including willingness, even eagerness, to die for love of God. One might, indeed, in both cases refer to the discourse of martyrdom as an eroticization of pain and death. That is to say, at one level—shall we call it the psychoanalytic?—I would argue that masochistic behavior in the individual and in cultural representations is “about” gender—following my suggestion of birth-envy—but at another level it also has particular political and social functions that are inflected from culture to culture. At this level, there is an enormous difference between Jewish and early Christian martyrologies. The Jewish martyrs, of which Rabbi Akiva is the ideal type (Boyarin 1989), are all within the paternal order. Every single one of them was married and a parent. According to the tradition, Rabbi Akiva, the paradigm, undergoes his martyrdom at the age of one-hundred-and-one, i.e. he is the sort of prototype of the sufferer rewarded with progeny and long life. All of this suggests a different relationship between asceticism-martyrdom—understood under the sign of masochism—and the phallus.

These rabbinic male ideals, then, provide a representation of a third term, the bodied penis that mediates between the plenitude and lack, a “good enough” father who need not have the phallus in order to not be castrated. The metaphor of the stick/axe used by Rabbi El‘azar’s wife is seemingly a phallic image par excellence, and, of course, it cannot be denied that there is one aspect of the phallus that is retained here, namely its use as an image of penetration. However, in this context, where that which renders the axe so effective and desirable is precisely the drastic pain and disease that the rabbi has taken on himself, this is hardly a representation of the unimpaired and unimpairable bodily envelope, of the coherence and plenitude that the phallus is taken to mean. Two things that ought not to be combinable have conjoined in the figures of these rabbis; on the one hand a male subjectivity that refuses the dominant fiction, if you will, that refuses to be a representation of wholeness, coherence, and impenetrability; on the other, sexual and procreative competence. These men have no phallus, but their penises remain intact. It is this structure that I am referring to as Jewish masochism.
One point should be made perfectly clear here. I am not disclaiming the critique of male dominant patterns of rabbinic Judaism that has been leveled by feminist critics. Indeed, I have participated in those critiques (e.g. Boyarin 1993). This is not an argument that Judaism was better for women than Hellenism or Christianity. Men dominated women in rabbinic culture, both officially and undoubtedly intimately as well (but I would assume that the intimate patterns, of which we know nothing, replicated the official ones, for good or ill). I certainly am not claiming a utopian value for talmudic masculinity as such. I am, however, suggesting that there are moments in this masculinity which are utopian and present utopian symbolic possibilities for us as well. In the following denouement of this discussion I will try to bring out both sides of this ambivalence.

The Dark Side of the Force

It is impossible to ignore, of course, a dark and sinister moment in this text. I have already spoken of the paternal function simply absorbing the maternal one. We do not have, therefore, in this “couvade” a pure celebration of femaleness, not by any means, but rather an attempt (as in most forms of couvade) to appropriate and control completely the reproductive function. Envy always has the potential for grave violence toward the envied person, and womb envy is no exception. I very tentatively suggest that it is the motivating force for much of the violent practice toward women in general, i.e. cross-culturally. In effect, in this text, in the moment in which procreation is arrogated by the House of Study with the sixty boys born owing, as it were, to the activity of Torah, the text/culture seems to be straining for an all male parthenogenic ideal, one that would simply erase women. This is thematized in two ways: by the very locus of the annunciation to these women that they will become pregnant (of course, I do not mean to deny that their pregnancies will take place in the “natural” fashion) and by the insistence that a whole generation of children born will all be male.

This theme is carried out, as well, in the implicit contrast
between the blood that the Rabbi sheds which is, as we have seen, a symbolic female blood and the blood that he controls through the ritual of the blood examination to determine the "purity" of the women.\(^{35}\) The latter is the realm of Torah, as opposed to the realm of "deeds." We seem to have, then, a representation and celebration of the all male world of Torah in which women function only as necessary biological instruments to produce more men. The creation and maintenance of such homosocial communities produced practices (or at any rate discourses) of erasure of female desire and even cruelty toward women, as has been well documented by feminist critics, but they did not do so uncritically, and this is the point that is often missed in feminist analyses of the material. The text is highly critical of this moment of Torah as well.\(^{36}\) Note that when the wife, in effect, dismisses Torah entirely as being irrelevant in her choices of erotic object—"As for Torah, I know nothing; you have told me"—neither the protagonist nor the text is in any way disparaging of her. The desiring male, Rabbi Yehuda, simply sets off to meet her criteria of desirability, not to reform them. Secondly the world of the House of Study is presented in this text as a place of danger and competition. The Rabbi's wife does not want him to go back there because she fears danger to her husband there. Moreover, much of the narrative context deals with the jealousies and rivalries of the House of Study, and in one passage such rivalries even have deadly effect.\(^{37}\) I think, therefore, that it is the text itself that is exposing us to the dark side of its own valued homosociality here, itself indicating the violence and distortions of the community in which "all the children are boys" and proposing a version of masochism, of mimesis of femaleness, that will be not only an appropriation of the female but an attempt to celebrate female/maternal, non-violent behavior and thus approach an "antiphallic" masculinity, one that incorporates "femaleness" without stealing it.

A reading of the end of the story will help, perhaps, to bring this conformation into better focus, for this story is set in the time of the Christian martyrs, at the time of the early emperors. Rabbi Yehuda in this tale is Rabbi Yehuda the Prince, the political leader of Palestinian Jewry and a good
friend (according to legend) of the Roman emperor, Antoninus. It is impossible to read his masochism, then, as a form of political resistance in quite the fashion that the martyrdoms of the Christians or the Girondins have been read (Sacher-Masoch 1991, 212). What then is the purpose of his pain? Both the context of the story and the details suggest that it is not political resistance that is at stake here but cultural resistance. A way, then, is suggested for drawing together the two themes of Jewish masochism that I have been speculating with. The general problem of (male) masochism is how to be a man. In a cultural world in which masculinity is associated with the phallus, the question becomes: What is a male who has no phallus? Is he a woman or a eunuch? The answers the text offers are in a sense a refusal of both options by suggesting that the non-phallic male, the male who individually or culturally resists or renounces the myth of bodily coherence, power, singularity, and unimpairability symbolized by the phallus can, nevertheless, be a good-enough male, good-enough, that is, to be a father. Indeed, such renunciation is demanded by this culture in its representation of ideal masculinity.

This structure is doubled in the story of Rabbi El'azar as well. In a part of the story that occurs before the section I have been dealing with, we are informed that he began his masochistic passage in horror at his previous violence, his collaboration with the Roman rule:

They [The Romans] brought Rabbi El'azar the son of Rabbi Shim'on, and he began to catch thieves [and turn them over to the Romans]. He met Rabbi Yehoshua, the Bald, who said to him, "Vinegar son of Wine: how long will you persist in sending the people of our God to death?!" He said to him, "I am removing thorns from the vineyard." He said to him, "Let the Owner of the vineyard come and remove the thorns." One day a certain laundry man met him, and called him, "Vinegar son of Wine." He said, "Since he is so brazen, one can assume that he is wicked." He said, Seize him." They seized him. After he had settled down, he went in to release him, but he could not. He applied to him the
verse, 'One who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards himself from troubles' (Proverbs 21:23). They hung him. He stood under the hanged man and cried. Someone said to him, "Be not troubled; he and his son both had intercourse with an engaged girl on Yom Kippur." In that minute, he placed his hands on his guts, and said, "Be joyful, O my guts, be joyful! If it is thus when you are doubtful, when you are certain even more so. I am confident that rot and worms cannot prevail over you." But even so, he was not calmed. They gave him a sleeping potion and took him into a marble room and ripped open his stomach and were taking out baskets of fat and placing it in the July sun and it did not stink.

In this story (which I have analyzed at much greater length in Boyarin 1993a, 200–212), we find our hero doing in Palestine as the Romans do. The result of his actions, condemned within the text by the voice of Rabbi Yehoshua the Bald, end in the death of an apparently innocent man. Although the text retrieves Rabbi El'azar's own innocence by emphasizing that the executed laudryman was not so innocent himself, nevertheless Rabbi El'azar is seized with guilt for his violent behavior. The punishment that he takes on himself is first of all the painful operation of having basketsful of fat removed from his stomach, another grotesque violation of the envelope of the body and perhaps also a symbolic representation of childbirth, and then the acceptance of the painful disease that involved the bleeding discussed above. We find, doubled, therefore, the relationship between masochism as punishment and masochism as the acting out of birth-envy that we have already seen in the story of Rabbi. Precisely because the fault is read as phallic, as behaving in the fashion of/in collaboration with "Roman" masculinity, its redemption is anti-phallic.

It is this feature that finally provides us with the possibility of understanding the culturally distinct connection between the "feminine" masochism of these rabbinic texts and the dimension of "moral" masochism involved in them as well. If the desire to be female, to be fecund and nutritive, is not
symbolized as a castration, simply because masculinity is not symbolized as the phallus in the sense of plenitude and perfection, then the appropriation or incorporation of "maternal" characteristics is not a loss of the male capability to generate. Both the word for love in Aramaic and the word for mercy in Hebrew are identical in root with the word for womb: דְּנָה. Without the phallus, birth-envy need not turn into repudiation of femininity but can be its opposite. If you wish a womb, the text seems to suggest, become loving and merciful. Rabbi is being taught here twice. He learns that the suffering male is desirable, to women and to God, and that, therefore, bodily pain, impairment, is to be desired by the male. If he begins with the arrogance of the phallic ruler who tells the calf that she is to die because that is her destiny, in the end he has learned to have compassion on the infants of the rat; you don’t have to be a Mother (i.e. a woman) in order to be “maternal” (Benjamin 1988, 172).

Resisting the Dominant Fiction; or,
Masculinity at the Margins of the Roman Empire

In her recent *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992), a book that works unremittingly and assiduously within the Lacanian paradigm of the phallus as fraud and castration as the knowledge of that fraud, Kaja Silverman presents a version of masculinity that she refers to as the "dominant fiction." This dominant fiction of which she speaks is constituted by the myth of the equation of the penis to the phallus, that is by a narrative that ascribes to maleness—indeed defines maleness through ascribing to the male an "unimpaired bodily ‘envelope’ . . . —fiercely protective of its coherence" (Silverman 1992, 61). The penis>phallus becomes then the very symbol of power and privilege, as well as of completeness, coherence, univocity. And thus Silverman concludes, "Conventional masculinity can best be understood as the denial of castration, and hence as a refusal to acknowledge the defining limits of subjectivity. The category of 'femininity' is to a very large degree the result" (46). In other words, a reading of the binary
opposition of the genitals as signifying male unity, singularity, plentitude and female difference, multiplicity, and lack has had enormous cultural consequences (Goux 1992, 46). We have become used to naturalizing this set of oppositions—indeed as a constellation to be resisted—but as one that is, as if in its larger outlines, universal at the same time. Psychoanalytic discourse, even as it resists this naturalizing move, at the same time reifies it, suggesting a psychic association between penis and phallus. Indeed by using terms like phallus and castration, psychoanalysis makes such association ineluctable, thus further emphasizing or insisting on, willy-nilly, the timelessness of the association between male genitals and power, coherence, and singularity; female genitals with lack, emptiness, and multiplicity.

Silverman, however, refers to this constellation as “the dominant fiction.” Her very use of the term “fiction” and its association with the political power implied by “dominant” as well suggest strongly a particular historical, cultural construct. This would pose as well the possibility of other cultures having other dominant fictions, other narratives of how male is symbolically related to female. However, at other points in Silverman’s discourse she seems rather to accept than contest a certain psychoanalytic version which would read this narrative not as the dominant fiction of a particularly cultural formation but as the normal, structuring organization of the human psyche, always and everywhere, except when (temporarily) ruptured by particular “historical” circumstances. Thus at one point she writes:

By “historical trauma” I mean a historically precipitated but psychoanalytically specific disruption, with ramifications extending far beyond the individual psyche. To state the case more precisely, I mean any historical event, whether socially engineered or of natural occurrence, which brings a large group of male subjects into such an intimate relation with lack that they are at least for the moment unable to sustain an imaginary relation with the phallus, and so withdraw their belief from the dominant fiction. Suddenly the latter is radically de-
realized, and the social formation finds itself without a mechanism for achieving consensus. (Silverman 1992, 55)

This formulation clearly portrays the dominant fiction not only as dominant but as normal—if not normative—allowing itself to be interrupted only under the pressure of extreme and even violent circumstance, such as war, i.e. that sort of “historical event . . . that brings a large group of male subjects into such an intimate relation with lack that they are at least for the moment unable to sustain an imaginary relation with the phallus” (emphasis obviously added). In other words the default situation is one in which male subjects are so out of touch with lack, so protected against their own “castration” that they can imagine that the penis is identical to the phallus and thus project all lack onto female subjects. This ordinary situation, however, by being contrasted to history, is itself projected as being beyond history or above and outside of history and thus, as in Lacan (and Freud) as being beyond and outside of a particular cultural formation. This argument is only strengthened by the apparent implication of Silverman’s text that the social formation (any social formation?) can only achieve consensus, i.e. maintain hegemony and continue to exist through this particular dominant fiction, the one that “forgets” castration, that forgets that the phallus is a fraud.

For Silverman, “history” is the trauma that temporarily disrupts the phallic Imaginary. I would rather treat “history” as the set of processes that produces the phallus as a defense against male envy, as a form of couvade. The material analyzed here suggests that there are cultural formations wherein masculinity itself is not identified with the phallus. If my hypothesis—namely that the phallus itself is a defense mechanism against male envy of femaleness—has any explanatory value, it would predict precisely that there would be cultures that enact (and defend against) this envy differently and that do not, therefore, “need” the phallus, allowing the female body to take up directly (and not be reversed privation) its function of signifying sexual difference. While this may indeed not be any “better for women,” as Marianne Hirsch has

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ruefully remarked to me, it does involve a very different configuration of gender and set of performances of gender. If nothing else, the way, it seems, that our talmudic story valorizes male envy of femaleness is by exhorting, in effect, men to be more like women, specifically by taking on nurturing functions and behaviors. The whole point of these stories would seem to be then, to provide an alternative masculinity to the dominant fiction that the Romans were busily imposing all over the Mediterranean and Europe, an alternative masculinity not unlike the Christian alternative ideal of the gentle, humble, compassionate, “maternal” male (Bynum 1962). Christian culture, however, ascribed such qualities to celibates in contrast to the other masculine models of the hero and the warrior. Talmudic culture, by refusing the phallic-myth, made possible the production of another type of dominant fiction and thus another kind of male subjectivity. As the Talmud charges its predominantly male readers, “The heart of the matter is: Be one of the persecuted and not one of the persecutors; one of the insulted and not the insulters”—a signally unzionist sentiment (Bava Kamma 93 and passim). Here and there it may even have worked.

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Notes

1. For an old-fashioned version of this explanation, see Thurn as quoted in Dawson (1929, 84). Another aspect which cannot be denied is the notion that couvade symbolically establishes paternity, i.e. that this man is the father of this child. I think that these two facets, in fact, complement each other and address the same set of anxieties.

2. Thus I think certain feminist thinkers concede too much when they talk of childbirth and lactation only in terms of abnegation or living for the other and not in terms of desire and pleasure (e.g. Benjamin 1988, 89). I think that Benjamin confuses castration and aphanisis (125). Was Karen Horney only a victim of false consciousness when she wrote:

   At this point I, as a woman, ask in amazement, and what about motherhood? And the blissful consciousness of bearing a new life within oneself? And the ineffable happiness of the increasing expectation of the appearance of this new being? And the joy when it finally makes its appearance and one holds it for the first time in one's arms? And the deep pleasurable feeling of satisfaction in suckling it and the
happiness of the whole period when the infant needs her care. (Horney 1967, 60)

Now this is, in some ways, a highly problematic utterance on Horney’s part. Such romantic mystifications of the joys of maternity can (and have) been used as blunt tools in the project of oppression of women, and, moreover, as an answer to Ferenczi’s claims in *Thalassa* that women have no natural desire for (or pleasure in) coitus, this is hardly adequate, but as an answer to claims that regard motherhood just as a burden, I think Horney’s “testimony” here is that of an expert witness—a mother three times and a highly self-aware and independent one at that. Recognizing that maternity has enormous psychological and physical attractions (for women—and as envy for men) does not necessarily and inevitably, it seems to me, lead to a confinement of women (in either sense). See also Hirsch (1989, 101) on this passage.

3. Goux (1992, 50) makes a somewhat similar suggestion.

4. For a somewhat similar suggestion see Bernheimer (1992, 121), but Bernheimer finally attributes Lacan’s move to his individual narcissistic desire to “receive prestige as a theoretician” (127–28). An argument could be made that these reduce to the same point.

5. The Persian emperor.

6. Of all the genres of literature, somehow magic realism with its sense of being essentially grounded in the real, historical world but going intermittently “over the top” into a surrealist mode seems to fit much of talmudic narrative better than any other. It is important to emphasize that there is almost no reason to imagine any historical reality behind any of the details of the story at all beyond the sheer facticity of the names of the characters and their otherwise-known historical status.

7. Cf. in particular in this specific context Reik (1941, 277–91).

8. The larger context includes stories of their rivalry as schoolchildren and the competition between their fathers as well. See for the nonce Boyarin 1992. In another chapter of the present work, this aspect of the text will be analyzed more fully—particularly the role of the woman “between” the rivalrous men.

9. See meanwhile Boyarin (1991b) for a critical reading of the exclusion of women from Torah-study. In another chapter of the present research I hope to do further analysis of this issue from a psycho-sexual point of view. In brief I am going to argue that this has less to do with negative evaluations of women than with reserving one last performative marker of masculinity for the otherwise depallalized male rabbinic community.

10. I use the “scare-quotes” here to indicate that we are not dealing with real Romans either but with rabbinic fantasies of Romans. This point will be further elaborated in my essay “Rabbis and their Pals; or, are there Jews in the History of Sexuality?”. In the text discussed in that paper also, a man gives up his phallus in order to “win the hand” of a woman. In that text, a certain Jew, known for his physical and martial prowess, decides to learn Torah in order to marry a beautiful woman, and at the moment he agrees, discovers that his lance, upon which he had been wont to pole-vault no longer “works.” He, nevertheless, does not fail to marry and father children. I am not, of course, mobilizing some putative Freudian notion of a phallic symbol here. I am suggesting, rather, that the text itself is animating such a symbolism—knowingly. A narrative that has a man vault over a river on his lance, undergo a spiritual transformation in which gender is explicitly thematized, and then be unable to vault back on the same lance, seems clearly to be symbolizing masculinity through the working or non-working of the lance. Bram Dijkstra has made the point that painters of the nineteenth century frequently used snakes as a symbol of male sexuality, not because they were under thrall to psychological symbolism that they could not control and that Freud would diagnose, but because these symbols were culturally available to them—as they were, indeed, to Freud as well (Dijkstra
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1986). I am making a similar claim about the symbolism of the lance here, not imagining that it is a psychically universal “phallic symbol,” but rather that a particular culture has mobilized it as a symbol of active, violent, thrusting masculinity because of its iconicity.

11. I have no idea as yet whether the number itself is significant intertextually but am using it here as a subtext in the Rifffarian sense of a recurring linguistic moment within a narrative that points to the cultural paradigm with which the narrative is concerned.

12. Not so incidentally, this very attribute, translated “valor,” from the root that means strength and soldier, also marks a different set of gender attributes than the ones familiar from “our” culture.

13. Note the irony: the “Our Rabbi” who blames her is the same one who seeks her hand after her husband’s death.

14. To my knowledge this particular claim is new. It is, however, related to, and partially stimulated by the writings of Howard Elberg-Schwartz. Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel (1976, 285) accepts the notion of penis envy but understands the desire to have the penis as a female’s defense against the frightening power of the mother (cf. discussion in Benjamin 1988, 94–95). See also Kofman 1985 who locates the notion of penis envy in the individual psyche of the male analyst defending himself against “the violence of female desire,” thus coming somewhat closer to the view I am espousing here. I am suggesting, rather, that the very notion of penis-envy is simply the modern reflex and continuation of the phallic-myth itself, the culturally-historically specific invention of Greek/Roman culture to defend against the enormous pain produced in men by their inability to give birth and suck. See also David-Ménard (1989, 182).

Note how my hypothesis puts this entity into immediate context and contact with other cultural creations such as spiritual childbearing and suckling from the Symposium forward, just to take one salient example. This is accordingly quite different from, although superficially related to, the account of male domination that American Object Relations psychoanalysts have proposed (Benjamin 1988, 74–78).

15. This entire section would not have been possible without Silverman’s work. If I retrace her steps and take different turns at given points, I can only do so because of the map she drew.


17. Once more, notice how on the one hand this representation approaches that of Chasseguet-Smirgel but how different it is if the denial is tied to envy of the Mother’s fecundity and nutritive capacity rather than to fear of her destructive power (Chasseguet-Smirgel 1976, 282–83).

18. Cp. the following “confession” by a psychoanalyst:

Were it not for the emergence into consciousness of this “pointer fantasy” [material from the case being reported], the presence of vulvar envy would not have been formulated. His vaginal dream imagery would have remained symbols of castration to my understanding, and his language imagery—“I want to let you in,” “I want to be open to you”—might not have been connected to envy of female capacities. I suspect that much of such data is missed in the analyses of men, though quickly recognized when there are phallic references in the analyses of women. The analyst’s phallocentric and androcentric biases may obscure these valuable clues. (Lane 1986, 146)

In spite of this recognition, it should be noted, Lane’s notions of what is gender syntonic for men—“strength, assertiveness, activity, stoicism, courage, and so forth” (147) remain apparently undisturbed. Not surprisingly, I disagree with nearly every word of the explanation for his case that Lane presents (148–49), as I disagree with Limantani as well. (They both deserve, however, credit for even
recognizing a phenomenon that nearly everyone else in the (male) analytic establishment seems to have been determined to deny. Karen Horney has not even made it into the index of Bettelheim's book!

19. I should make clear that I am not arguing, therefore, for a biologically grounded and universal masochism. I am suggesting, however, that masochism is one culturally determined way of dealing with a universal? structure of the male psyche. Myths of gender such as that of certain Greeks whereby famously only the father contributes anything to the embryo while the mother is a mere housing for it would represent an extreme form of compensation for this misery as well. They are also a form of couvade.

20. In another chapter of the present research I intend to develop the theme of doubles as it occurs in this text and in the context.

21. Reik, however, disagrees with Freud's term "moral" masochism, substituting for it "social masochism" (292), as well as dissenting from his "biological" account of erotogenic masochism.

22. Reik, it should be emphasized, abandons the erotogenic form, which he understands to refer exclusively to a primitive connection between pleasure and pain in the organism and substitutes a binary taxonomy of feminine and moral (upon his further modifications of which, see below).

23. Cf. also Reik (1941, 15).

24. Cf. Reik (1941, 197) who, however, immediately denies this explanation, replacing it with "used and beaten by my father" (203). He never explains, however, the connection between used (sexually) and beaten. See there also p. 15 where desire to be impregnated by the father is reflected into desire to be raped by him. I think that the reason for this constant sliding away from the pregnancy wish is the ability to theorize the desire for pain in that scenario. If we read it, however, as precisely desire for the pain of childbirth, that is, in Reik's own formula, desire for the result of the pain, not the pain itself, then we do not need to assume desire for fantasies of violent abuse by the father.

25. Incidentally, Christian tradition notwithstanding, there seems little reason to understand the "thorn in my flesh" of 2 Corinthians 12:7 as referring to sexual desire. Everything in the context suggests that it is Paul's physical infirmity or deformity that he is citing.

26. Paradoxically, it is possible that for women martyrs and ascetics "masochism" has precisely the opposite and complementary political value, namely resistance to the phallic order. This claim is not based on an essentialist difference between genders but on a consideration of the different political positions of male and female subjects with respect to sexuality in a given culture.

27. I wrote "attempted," to imply failed, because to the extent that male celibacy is a further dis-embodying move it can at one and the same time be a renunciation of the phallic order of activity, penetration, and power and a bolstering of its meanings of coherence, univocity, and spirituality as opposed to corporeality, just because it is still functioning within the binary opposition of phallus and castration. In other words, this "castration," by reinforcing the separation of the phallus from the penis and thus the myth of the phallus per se, can, in fact, be at the same time a personal renunciation that is a social edification of the phallic order. Just as in our culture "straight men need gay men" (Miller 1991, 135), one could argue that in medieval Christian culture knights needed monks.

28. To put a point on this, as it were, I would (and will) argue that the Roman horror of Jewish circumcision derives precisely from the inability to distinguish between the penis and the phallus, such that circumcision becomes—explicitly—merged with castration! This conflation has had an inordinate tenaciousness in our cultural history as well, finally ending up in Freud. See Boyarin (in press).

29. For the homoerotic aspects of rabbinic religiosity, see Eilberg-Schwartz (forthcoming).
It is certainly not insignificant that the rabbinic proof-text repeatedly cited here is Isaiah 53, in Christian tradition interpreted as referring to the sufferings of Jesus.

I think that this interpretation (and thus this text) provides strong support for Freud’s contention that “the erotization of pain allows a sense of mastery by converting pain into pleasure,” against Benjamin’s puzzling assertion that “this is true only for the master” (61).

In another chapter of this research, I will try to relate this cultural difference to the symbolism of circumcision. It will be, however, problematized by a counter-interpretation that would hold that circumcision is precisely phallic in its meanings.

It is, however, striking that it is explicitly marked in the text as belonging to them, i.e. the rival Palestinians. There are other texts in the Babylonian Talmud as well that mark the Palestinians as super-males, vis-à-vis “us,” the Babylonians.

Cp. the material cited in Showalter (1990, 77–78), with, once more, the enormous caveat that the men of whom she speaks (late Victorian Englishmen) all believed in celibacy as an ideal.

My student, Charlotte Fonrobert, is preparing a dissertation engaging this practice and associated discourses in the Talmud from a critical feminist and anthropological perspective.

Cf. my “Rabbis and Their Pals,” for a talmudic story of such a moment of extreme cruelty and a powerful critique within the narrative itself.

Cf. again “Rabbis and Their Pals.”

The clever laundry man, who often opposes the rabbis, and sometimes bests them, is a topos of talmudic legend. For a similar confrontation in Greek literature, one could cite the confrontation of Kleon by the “sausage maker” in Aristophanes’ Knights 877–80, cited in Winkler (1989, 54).

Although on the surface the Rabbi is certainly applying the verse to the condemned man, who if he had not been so brazen would not have gotten into trouble, on another ( ironic?) level the verse is applicable to Rabbi El’azar himself. He is certainly experiencing a great deal of remorse already at this point and will have considerable troubles later on in the story as a result of his not “guarding his mouth and tongue,” by keeping silent and not condemning the laundry man to the Romans. According to one venerable manuscript (the Florence ms.), the text reads that “he applied to himself the verse,” thus activating this hermeneutic possibility openly.

In some ways I would define my overall intellectual project at this point as producing a significant synthesis between Freud and Foucault, understood precisely as thesis and antithesis. There are tensions in such a project, among them ones that I cannot yet address.

Silverman could, of course, argue that these were examples rather of traumatized male subjects in precisely the kind of historical crisis that temporarily disrupts the phallic relation, i.e. to accept the prevailing “Zionist” reading of Jewish Diaspora culture as pathological, owing to the “unmanliness” of Diaspora Jewish men. Given her (gender) politics, however, I hardly think that she would wish to promulgate such a view.

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