

Virility and Piety

Martin Samuel Cohen

In the third act of Molière's *Tartuffe*, Elmire's surprise at being propositioned by the outwardly pious Tartuffe is met by a lengthy tirade of self-justification on the part of the world's best known hypocrite. He begins, plausibly, by explaining that virility and piety are hardly synonymous: "*Ah! pour être dévot, je n'en suis pas moins homme....*"¹ The learned audience is reminded of Corneille's line, "Ah, though Roman I be no less of a man" from his *Sertorius*, and is amused at the switch. But although it feels right to say that the line is wry even without the sense of lighthearted parody the allusion to Corneille provides, the more interesting point for moderns to ponder is the fact that the wit of the line depends on the tacit understanding on the part of the audience that, for being *dévot*, one is, somehow, *indeed* less of a man; it is as though recognizing the existence of One greater than oneself is an emasculating act in and of itself. Furthermore, if one tempers subservience with love of the Divine, then the act is even more an act of self-denial. It is these ideas I'd like to flesh out in this essay.

It is worth noticing that this supposed antipathy between religious devotion and manliness is a modern notion and that, in antiquity, the ideal figure of male piety was idealized as young and virile, as a warrior, athlete or bridegroom. It is not accidental that the artistic convention in Christian art that points to saints and holy men is the halo, the athlete's garland of light that signifies to the metaphysical athlete what the ivy wreath meant to the mundane sportsman. The notion of defining the figure of piety as one who is able to win the race of the spirit and to cross the finish line unscathed and first is an ancient one, yet it is, I think, strangely appealing today.

Eventually, the athlete, the hero and the ascetic came to be identified. The Christian imitates his prototype; as Jesus ran the good course on earth, suffered and was redeemed, so will his pious followers. The pagans, when it came to erecting a metaphoric temple to the notion of virility used the same notion of *imitatio deorum*, unconcerned with the discomfort this effort caused the early Church. Augustine explains that dialectic neatly in his *Confessions*:

...if it had not been for the fact that (the pagan playwright) Terrence had put into one of his plays a worthless young man who regards Jupiter as an example to himself of how to seduce people...He is looking at a painted fresco "which told how Love descended in a golden shower to Danae's lap, and so a woman was beguiled."

And then observe how he excites himself to lust, as though he had an example for it among the gods: "What God? Why, he who shakes the temples of the sky with his own thunder! Am I not, mere man, allowed to do the same? I did and I enjoyed it too."²

Yet Augustine also satisfied libidinal impulses with a prayer on his lips and prayer not unlike Jesus' at Golgotha at that. Augustine reveals in shame that before he chose the path of renunciation, he had often prayed: "Lord, make

¹ *Tartuffe*, III iii 966. "Ah! I am no less a man for being pious..."

² *Confessions I:16*, trans. R. Warner, 1963, p. 34.

me chaste and continent, but not yet."³ Jesus, on the other hand, was far from denying the mission of his career as he himself understood and had proclaimed it when he prayed: "Father, take this cup from me."⁴ He too was prepared to run the course assigned him-- but Augustine could still add, "...but not yet."

If the *imitatio* can lead either to the gross assertion of one's right to satisfy the libido, as in Terrence, or one's own obligation to ignore and deny those desires, then it is against this choice that the Jewish attitudes must be evaluated. The true value, in fact, of all comparative study is precisely in the ability that comes from such study to appreciate the situation that pertained in antiquity as the source we are studying came into being. Here, the situation is quite intriguing: on the one hand, we would expect Judaism, with its strict sexual code and its supremely continent Deity, to follow the Christian model, and in fact to have set that model in the first place. It seems reasonable to expect the rabbis to have held up God Himself as an example to encourage the Jew to imitate that God when it comes to controlling emotions and passions. On the other hand, the pagan model might also be seen as having within it the seeds of a Jewish approach-- the idea being that to deny human needs and passions is vaguely equivalent to denying the perfection of God's creation. For that young man in Terrence to thwart his own desires at that moment would have been a suggestion that Jupiter himself was imperfect; to refuse what the Torah permits is to feel capable of more mature judgement than that of the Creator.

When the rabbis declared the Song of Songs to be the holiest of the holy writings, they were apparently pleased with the description of the bridegroom that would henceforth be understood to represent God to the male Jew in search of a imitable Deity:

My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand,

His head is as the most fine gold; his locks are bushy and black as a raven.

His eyes are as the eyes of doves by the river of waters, washed with milk and fitly set.

His cheeks are as a bed of spices, as sweet flowers; his lips like lilies, dropping sweet smelling myrrh.

His hands are as gold rings set with the beryl; his belly is as bright ivory overlaid with sapphires.

His legs are s pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold; his countenance is as Lebanon, excellent as the cedars.

His mouth is most sweet; yea, he is all together lovely.⁵

³ *Ibid.* VIII 7, ed. cit., p. 174.

⁴ Luke 22:42.

⁵ *Song of Songs 5:10-16, King James Version. The rabbis declare the Song to be of exceeding holiness in Mishnah*

This is not to say that the Jew considered these lines to describe the physical appearance of God-- quite to the contrary, Judaism evolved a separate esoteric set of traditions dealing in fantastic terms with the precise topography of the Divine physiognomy, limbs, torso and inner organs. Those traditions, collected in the so-called **Shi`ur Qomah** literature, remained the province of the closed conventicles that studied such arcane mysteries. For the greater Jewish world, the standard approach was that of Maimonides, who denied a portion of the next world to anyone who ascribed even the most limited corporeality to God.⁶

In light of these attitudes, it is all the more surprising that the rabbis were as anxious as they were to identify the bridegroom with God. Despite the tension that ought to be overbearing, Jewish tradition dealt with the identification with very little dissent. In the medieval poem **Shir Hakkavod** attributed to Judah the Pious of Regensburg, the problem is linked to the question of the anthropomorphic description of God as the Elder of Days in the seventh chapter of the Book of Daniel:

They will see You as an old man and as a youth;
the hair of Your head, both grey and black.

In old age at Judgement Day and in youth in battle;
as a man of war whose hands are his greatness.

He wears a helmet of salvation on His head;
with His holy right arm, He brings salvation.

His head is filled with the dew of light;
His hair, with the splinters of Night.

He adorns Himself with me, for He desires me;
and He will be the crown of my desire.

His head's image is as pure gold;
the Holy Name is engraved on His forehead.

His own people made Him the crown of grace and glory,
of splendour and desire.

The curls of His head are as a youth's;
his hair is all black curls...

He is dazzling and ruddy and His garments are red...⁷

Yadaim 3:5.

⁶ **Hilkhot Teshuvah 3:7.** For those who didn't study Maimonides, the doctrine was neatly summed up in the hymn that closes the evening service on Friday evening: "He has neither body nor the appearance of a body."

⁷ **Shir Hakkavod**, lines 10-17, 22. The reference to God's "hands which are his greatness" is a bit obscure, but is based on Deuteronomy 33:7. The precise names engraved on the divine forehead are listed in the various **Shi`ur Qomah** texts.

This is the image that is specifically intended for **imitatio**. Emulating the exquisite masculinity of the godhead is a desirable act for the single reason that it will render a man more like his God. There is not the hint of process; hence it is not commanded to act out this imagery and no rabbinic authority suggests it ought to be and neither is the image given any concreteness through ritual. Hence the Jewish man is never called upon to act out the imagery of the Song in the same way, for instance, that he is called upon to act out his faith in the doctrine of creation with his observance of the Sabbath or in this eternity of the covenant with his observance of the ritual of circumcision. The image of the supremely virile Deity is merely then for a man to use when he was in need, for legitimate spiritual reasons, of a visible godhead for which he might yearn and towards union with which he might move. It is the absence of a reasonable counterpart to this idea for women that displays the basically patriarchal, slight misogynist orientation of classical Judaism, not the fact that a meditative focus is provided for the religiously inclined man. It is in this type of snub that lies the true slur against woman, rather than in the exclusion of women from this or that specific branch of ritual activity.

Virility thus becomes a symbol of realized potentiality: just as God manifests himself as a warrior in war and as an elder in judgement, so does the masculinity of the Jewish man exist to be realized in imitation of his Designer. Certainly, the same can be said of Jewish women and their femininity, but it is important to realize that that is our post-feminist observation, not the context in which the idea was first conceived. That one can transfer the concept of beauty as the medium for the contemplation of union with God from the male to the female context makes the lot of Jewish women simpler, but does not make the original terms in which the idea was developed any less cool towards the plausibility of female union with God.

It is also worth noting that the **Shir Hakkavod** brings up the image from the Book of Daniel more because it needs to be explained than because it supplements the image of a youthful God. The author of the song does not dwell on the image of the Elder and, in fact, he does not bring it up again, preferring to dwell on the image of the ruddy, dazzling youth. A particularly touching exposition of the reasons behind the appeal of this particular metaphor is given by Juan de la Cruz, who has no difficulty imagining that women will be equally moved to religious ecstasy through the contemplation of the exquisite virility of God. Like Judah the Pious, he too wrote a poetic midrash on the Song of Songs, his famous **Cantico Espiritual**. His thirty-sixth stanza introduces the bride's final speech:

Gocemonos, amado
y vamonos a ver en tu hermosa
al monte o al collado,
do mana el agua pura;
entremos mas adentro en la espesura.⁸

The Self, it is being suggested in these lines, is most clearly seen in the beauty of the self. The bride is addressing her bridegroom; Israel is addressing God. The bride is suggesting that she can best contemplate her own self by

⁸ *The Poems of St. John of the Cross*, ed. Barnstone, p. 104. E. Allison Peers offers the following translation in her 1961 edition of the poet's work: "Let us rejoice, Beloved/ and let us go to see ourselves in thy beauty/ to the mountain and the hill where the pure water flows/ Let us enter father into the thicket."

gazing at the beauty of God Himself. In the final line of the stanza, **entremos mas adentro en la espesura**, the bride is saying, "The beauty of the godhead is the path that might lead us further within, to the hill of pure water."⁹

Juan de La Cruz himself composed a commentary to his own poem in which he expressed, in particularly complicated language, the way his metaphor works:

And let us go to see ourselves in thy beauty: which signifies, Let us so act that, by means of this exercise of love aforementioned, we may attain to seeing ourselves in Thy beauty in life eternal: that is, that I may be so transformed in Thy beauty that, being alike in beauty, we may both see ourselves in Thy beauty, since I shall have Thy own beauty; so that, when one of us looks at the other, each may see in the other his beauty, the beauty of both being Thy beauty alone and I being absorbed in Thy beauty; and thus, I shall see Thee in Thy beauty and Thou wilt see me in Thy beauty; and I shall see myself in Thee in Thy beauty; and Thou wilt see Thyself in me in Thy beauty; so that thus I may be like to Thee in Thy beauty and Thou mayest be like to me in Thy beauty and my beauty may be Thy beauty, and Thy beauty my beauty; and thus I shall be Thou in Thy beauty, and Thou wilt be I in Thy beauty, because Thy beauty itself will be my beauty and thus we shall each see the other in Thy beauty.¹⁰

The text is a bit difficult to follow, but the idea seems to be that since man can only understand the love of and for God in terms of his personal experience in love for man, and specifically for woman (or, of course, woman for man), God makes the comparison as easy as possible by appearing Himself beautiful. It is in this light that the **Zohar's** comment must be taken, when the text declares in the name of Rabbi Phineas, "In the messianic period, the Holy One, blessed be He, will beautify the bodies of the righteous, like the beauty of Adam, regarding whom it was said as he entered into the Garden of Eden, 'And God will lead you forever...and you shall be as a fertile garden (Isaiah 58:11).'"¹¹ Here we have the notion in terms of time rather than space: the end of time will bring about union with the godhead for which man was created in the first place. As part of that procedure, the beauty of man

⁹ It is worth noticing that the virility of God in the Jewish context seems to be designed to serve men as a model rather than to serve women as a focus for their yearning. Juan de la Cruz seems to assume that the masculine language of the Song is designed for women to use as a stimulus for their pious longing for union with God. This later became a feature of Juan's own religious thinking; eventually he spoke of himself as the bride (rather than as the groom) in the imagery of the Song. This then became the ideal: the submission of mankind to God has its handiest parallel in the submission of women to men and so the truly pious man must emotionally feminize himself, of which the outer literary manifestation is his self-identification with the Shulamith.

¹⁰ *Spiritual Canticle*, trans. Peers, p. 456.

¹¹ *Zohar* I 113b.

will increase, to paraphrase Juan de la Cruz, thereby enabling him to see the beauty of God in his own beauty and to therefore be assured of an even more perfect union with the Deity.

It is for this reason that Krishna appears to Arjuna in the **Gita** as the iridescent warrior in which Arjuna can, recognizing the idealization of his own beauty, understand the majesty of his god. It is also the reason, ultimately, for which God does not appear at all at Mount Sinai, choosing to manifest himself behind a thick cover of cloud, smoke and noise. Just as the Sinaitic revelation was understood to be addressed to all Jewish people in all times, as Deuteronomy says "to those here today and to those not here," so could the national consciousness not tolerate the notion that anyone present see himself or his idealization in the divine self-manifestation, lest the universality of the moment be spoiled.¹²

There are times when, in the words of the psalmist, silence is praise, and the Jewish genius never turned from the recognition of this truth. The Jew in search of God may look to the bridegroom in the Song as a helpful meditative aid in looking within towards the essence of the divine that dwells just there, within the human breast, but the greatest of all prophets had the strength and eloquence (if that is the word) to turn aside at the sight of God's presence. Moses asks of God:

Show me Your glory

and God responds, knowing that Moses is capable of understanding more than the rest who must look within to see the spark. Moses can attain a higher state of communion; he can see nothing. God responds:

You may not see My face, for no man may see Me and live. But there is a place by Me which you may dig out the stone, and as My Glory passes by, I shall put you in the cave and I shall cover My hands over you until I pass, whereupon I will remove My hands and you can see My back, but My face may not be seen.¹³

This is what makes Moses the greater prophet than the others: he may look not merely inward to be prompted in his recognition of the divine by regarding the divine spark within himself, but outwards as well. The fact that outwards, he may see only Nothing, or at best, the faint recollection of a recently passed by Something, speaks reams for his extraordinary grasp of the essence of God. These are all special cases that we have mentioned to underscore the extraordinary daring of Juan de la Cruz that allowed him to utilize the terminology he chose to describe the importance for mankind of the divine proclivity of self-manifestation in beauty and splendour.

In a certain sense, it is the recognition of that spark of the divine within that creates the impetus for redemption in the first place. The Church father Athanasius wrote that it is because man is created in God's image that God's honour is at stake when human sin besmirch that Shape; that is Athanasius' explanation of why the redeemer needed to be in human shape, as though God had already set the stage for human redemption at the moment of creation when He made man in His own image. When Rabbi Akiba declared that "all is foreseen, but nonetheless free will is given" to man, he implied something akin to that idea, which is to say that despite the apparent freedom man enjoys to sin as he chooses, the redemptive stage was already set at the moment of creation, when all that ever would be was already foreseen and planned for. It is as once enheartening and a bit depressing to

¹² *To those here: Deuteronomy 29:14.*

¹³ *Exodus 33:18ff.*

think of creation in God's image both as providing the impetus and the justification for redemption. Perhaps ultimately, it is for this reason that the Jewish conception of a messianic figure has always been in human form-- it is only fitting that the era of redemption that is triggered by the divine Shape of mankind be ushered in by one himself in the shape of man. Even among Christians, it seems to be this notion, that the redeemer must bear human shape, that leads to the docetic heresy according to which Jesus was only shape and not substance at all. Both the docetic Jesus, the non-docetic Jesus and the Jewish messiah have the human image because that is originally the divine image and as such the redemptive impetus. The same could be said for all figures of redemption figured to appear in human garb: the Buddha, the taheb, the soshyant and the rest.

This should bring us back full circle to Tartuffe's dilemma. He protests that for him, piety and virility are happy partners in his make-up and not only do they not contradict and conflict with each other, but actually, they complement each other. This view is presented as the crux of Tartuffe's hypocrisy, yet, if the redemptive impetus is acquired through the reflection of the divine in man's image, then a heightened sense of one's attractiveness and comeliness should, in fact, reflect a higher sense of concern with the divine. The flaw, of course, is that Tartuffe couldn't care less about the archetypal divine shape of his body-- his prime concern is with Elmire's body. But the notion of the nexus between spiritually elevated and mundane athletic champions is a standard feature of religious literature.

The notion that the easiest and most practical means of viewing the divine is to gaze upon the divine reflection in the countenance of man, fashioned as he is in the divine image, leads to the identification of the ideal man, the hero and the spiritually successful pilgrim. Nevertheless, there is a different motif, related closely to this, which speaks to an even more basic need in man-- the need to view God not in another of the human race, no matter how idealized, but in one's self. Sometimes, one's self can be displaced by a father or mother, a substitution phenomenon well known from folk- and fairy-tales of all nations. When Joseph, for example, was being tempted to adultery with his master's wife, he exhibited fantastic strength of will to resist her charms. The rabbis mused as to precisely how God arranged for Joseph to resist. R. Samuel bar Nachmani suggested a simple answer. Based on Scriptural allusions, he deduced that Joseph had actually become incapable of sexual performance, as the text of Genesis does specifically state that, when Potipher's wife was trying to seduce Joseph, "...no man...was there at home (Gen 39:11.)"¹⁴ Rabbi Isaac uses another Scriptural allusion to suggest that a more graphic deterrent was necessary. Basing himself on the felicitous assonance of the Hebrew **zera`** ("semen") and a word that appears in Genesis 49:24, where the chastity of Joseph is being celebrated, he deduced that at the moment Joseph might have given in to his temptress, semen began to squirt out of his finger tips. One can see how that could have dampened the passion of the moment!¹⁵ A third opinion is cited in the name of Rabbi Matneh:

Joseph saw the image ('**aikonen**) of his father,
and his blood ran cold, as it is written, "From

¹⁴ *Genesis Rabbah* 87:7, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 1072.

¹⁵ *Genesis* 49:24 is a fairly obscure verse, but Rabbi Isaac's suggestion about the background of the phrase **vayyafozu zero`e yadav** suggests that he must have taken the beginning of the verse, **vateshev bi'etan qashto**, in a sexual sense as well also, thereby yielding the esoteric meaning "Through his (i.e. Joseph's) strength (i.e. of character), his bow returned (to its flaccid state) and the semen squirted (instead) from his fingertips."

the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (Gen 49:24.)¹⁶

The pun is that the word '**abir**' ("Mighty One") has a certain assonance with the word '**avir**', which is taken from the Greek **aer**, to which Rabbi Matneh is attributing the secondary meaning of "image." Thus upon seeing his father's image, he was brought to recall God and thus he found the strength not to sin. That the midrash as much as equates the image of the father with the image of God seems clear. Other darshanim presented variations of this idea. Rabbi Menahem, for example, taught that Joseph saw the image of "his mother and his blood ran cold."¹⁷ The point in either case is that God stamped His image on humanity so as to provide individuals in a populated world with the constant company of the divine image that they might be stimulated to emulation of God. Ultimately, however, it is one's own appearance, especially one's own comeliness, that is meant to provide the most potent reminder of the fact of man's creation by God. Rabbi Menachem and Rabbi Matneh both suggest that Joseph saw the image of a parent because, after one's self, one resembles one's parents more than anyone else.

The fact that the fact that parents resemble their children is no mere act of arbitrary heredity, but rather a calculated act of God designed to provide children (even adult children) with a living symbol of the image of God cast almost in their own image, is at the basis of a number of other rabbinic texts. The rabbis imagined that this was first perceived by Abraham, the first man who recognized the existence of God. The birth of Isaac, after all, must have raised an important question to Abraham. How could the God of Abraham be (or become) the God of Isaac? How could one God create two men in the same divine image who are of different appearances?¹⁸ But, in this first of all trials, God provided some extra help. Finding the word '**aikonin**' ("ikon, image") hidden in the word **lizqunav** in Genesis 21:2 (this is more reasonable and observable in Hebrew than in English transliteration), the midrash declares:

Isaac's image ('**aikonin**) was the same as Abraham's.¹⁹

To make the point that the the God of one was, in fact, the God of the other, Isaac was created not only in the same general shape as Abraham, but actually with the same face. They were identical, as their Gods were the same and only God.

The identity of the image in which mankind is created and the image of God is the particularly Jewish way of expressing a religious truth known to all great systems of religious contemplation. Christians once sang a hymn which began "Behold the Lord is our mirror / Open your eyes and see them in Him / Learn the manner of your face / Then declare praises to His spirit."²⁰ The ancient Vedic sages put it even more bluntly in the **Brihadaranyaka**

¹⁶ *Genesis Rabbah*, loc. cit.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *The very existence of this discussion makes is abundantly clear how literally the ancients took the Biblical remark about man's creation in the image and form of God. Rather than philosophizing the point out of existence, they presumed it meant literally that God created man to resemble His outer appearance.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 53:6, ed. cit., p. 561.

²⁰ *The Odes of Solomon*, ode XIII, ed. Charlesworth (Missoula, 1977), p. 64.

Upanishad, "The Self is the honey of all beings and all beings are honey for the Self. That radiant, immortal Person who indwells the Self, and that radiant, immortal Person who is the Self-- he is that very Self indeed: this is the Immortal, this is the Brahman, this is the All."²¹

But, of them all, none said it more beautifully than Wordsworth in a few lines composed above Tintern Abbey:

For thou art with me here upon the banks
of this fair river; thou my dearest Friend,
My dear, dear Friend; and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes....

²¹ *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* II,5,14-15, ed. Zaehner (in *Hindu Scriptures*; London and New York, 1966), p. 49.