

# Talmudic Transgressions

*Engaging the Work of Daniel Boyarin*

*Edited by*

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# Phallic Jewissance and the Pleasure of No Pleasure

Elliot R. Wolfson

There are men who are just as good as women. It happens. . . . Despite—I won't say their phallus—despite what encumbers them that goes by that name, they get the idea or sense that there must be a jouissance that is beyond. Those are the ones we call mystics.

JACQUES LACAN, *Encore 1972–1973*



The inspiration for this essay is Daniel Boyarin's playful recasting of jouissance as *Jewissance* to connote a sense of pleasure that for many Jewish men and women ensues from an "extraordinary richness of experience and powerful sense of being rooted somewhere in the world, in a world of memory, intimacy, and connectedness."<sup>1</sup> More telling is Boyarin's invocation of this neologism in a second passage: "The Jew Freud is mostly too busy trying to get the Aryan phallus . . . except, of course, for the one very significant moment . . . that brief gap when *Jewissance* is glimpsed by Freud."<sup>2</sup> The pleasure related to Jewishness—a feeble translation of the more robust term *Yiddishkeit*—arises despite Freud's "assumption that Judaism is to be characterized as a compelling renunciation of the senses (the mother) for the spirit (the father, phallus, logos), and that this renunciation has generated in the Jew, *from the time of Moses*, a sense of superiority with respect to the pagans, that is, a sense of profound well-being in a world that is hostile and threatening to Jews."<sup>3</sup> Boyarin contextualizes Freud's representation of Judaism as "a posture of severe

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1 Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), xxiii.

I am honored to contribute an essay in the volume celebrating the scholarly achievements of Daniel Boyarin, steadfast friend, loyal companion, and fellow crosser of borderlines. I salute Daniel for the intellectual rigor, academic courage, and moral integrity he has exhibited over these many years. I express gratitude to Virginia Burrus for her helpful comments, both stylistic and substantive, on an earlier version of this study.

2 Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, 256 (emphasis in original).

3 Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, 256–57 (emphasis in original).

self-control grounded in an endless series of instinctual renunciations” as an effort to ward off Otto Weininger’s argument that the masculine/Christian nature of Kantian critical philosophy is foreign to the feminized Jewish psychic and moral constitution. The description of Moses proffered by Freud is thus viewed as a “desperate grab for this Spirit (phallus) that Weininger had denied the Jew, a signifier of his profound need to ward off, not so much homoeroticism . . . but femininity.”<sup>4</sup>

In Boyarin’s interpretation, the Freudian misreading of biblical Judaism as “an austere, desiccated, incorporeal renunciation of the senses” was occasioned by a “dire need to be manly, to discover a manliness at the origins of Jewishness, Moses, and the Bible.”<sup>5</sup> However, building on the work of Jay Geller,<sup>6</sup> Boyarin notes a somewhat conflicting vein in Freud’s account of circumcision as the “very act that enables the resistance (*Widerstand*) of the Jewish people, the mark of repression/sublimation that releases the ‘uncanny secretion’ . . . which feminizes the Jewish man . . . At the site of the penis, the overdetermined mark of gendered and ‘racial’ anomaly, circumcision concentrates for Freud the ‘castration’—political and sexual—of the male Jew, the Jew as female (penisless), queer (perverse and passive) and homeless (in Diaspora). All of these motifs come together in Jewissance.”<sup>7</sup> As Boyarin perceptively notes, Freud forged a synthesis of these two sentiments by arguing defensively that what was stigmatized as the femaleness of the Jew, both in terms of circumcision and devotion to study, actually heralds that the Jew is “more masculine than the Greek, who in his very masculinity is less restrained, less able to ‘renounce instincts,’ and thus paradoxically less ‘male’ . . . Jewish carnality, adherence to a law characterized by its passionate attachment to blood and flesh and thus described . . . as feminine is transvalued by Freud into a very masculinist *Geistigkeit* or denial of the body itself. The very binary oppositions of maleness and femaleness, renunciation and submission, civilization and oppression have been destabilized in Freud’s text.”<sup>8</sup>

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4 Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, 257.

5 Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, 257.

6 Jay Geller, “A Paleontological View of Freud’s Study of Religion: Unearthing the *Leitfossil* Circumcision,” *Modern Judaism* 13 (1993): 49–70, esp. 50–52.

7 Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, 258.

8 Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, 259–60.

### Phallic Jouissance and Correlativity of the Self-Same

In this study, I shall continue my own reflections on a form of Jewissance that may be elicited from the kabbalistic tradition and I will ruminate again on the ramifications of this idea for a transvaluation of gender. I have in mind the phallic jouissance related to the demiurgic playfulness of the inexhaustible and incomposite will of the infinite (*Ein Sof*), a will, devoid of willfulness, that wills nothing extrinsic to itself. This volition is typically located in *Keter*, the first of the ten gradations that constitute the divine pleroma, also referred to as *Attika Qaddisha*, the “holy ancient one,” *Arikh Anpin*, the “long suffering one,” or *setima de-khol setimin*, the “concealed of all the concealed.”<sup>9</sup> These designations allude to the fact that the will is the origin (*alef*) that is before the beginning (*bet*), the nihilating nonground, the place of no-place, where we cannot discriminate between being and nonbeing, presence and absence, necessity and contingency, eternity and temporality.<sup>10</sup> In rather bold language, the activation of this will is portrayed in images that rhetorically convey autoerotic arousal. When the mythopoiesis is mapped psychoanalytically, the act of *Ein Sof* can be viewed as akin to the narcissistic desire of the male to expand the contours of self into the space of the feminine, the other that remains, as Lacan put it, “forever Other” because “there is no Other of the Other.” But if there is no othering of the other, then the other must necessarily be “the locus in which everything that can be articulated on the basis of the signifier comes to be inscribed,” that is, “the Other in the most radical sense [*radicalement l’Autre*].”<sup>11</sup> Lacan concedes that there is no other without the inscription of the phallus, the seminal signifier, even if we accept that the other as lack topologically resists the totalization of the symbolic signification.<sup>12</sup> Expressed in Irigaray’s nomenclature, the “auto-affection” of the man is to “search for the first home,” that is, the nostalgia for the mother-womb who has given birth to and enveloped him, sheltering and sustaining him. In the topography of the

9 The terminology is derived from *Zohar* 3:288a (*Idra Zuta*).

10 For a more elaborate discussion, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Nihilating Nonground and the Temporal Sway of Becoming: Kabbalistically Envisioning Nothing Beyond Nothing,” *Angelaki* 17 (2012): 31–45; Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 78, 171–74.

11 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore 1972–1973* (ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, translated with notes by Bruce Fink; New York: Norton, 1998), 81 (hereafter cited as *Encore*); *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XX: Encore 1972–1973* (ed. Jacques-Alain Miller; Paris: Seuil, 1975), 102.

12 On the Lacanian conceptions of space and the real, see Tom Eyers, *Lacan and the Concept of the ‘Real’* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 61–93, esp. 91–92.

phallic imaginaire, love of self takes the form of a return to and through the other, but the other is, at bottom, an extended part of the self.<sup>13</sup> The primary expression used by sixteenth-century kabbalists to communicate this motif as it applies to the infinite, based on biblical and rabbinic precedent, is *sha'ashu'a*,<sup>14</sup> but other terms are used as well by later authors, for example, *ta'anug elyon*, the “supernal delight,” or *ta'anug ha-atsmi*, the “essential delight,” that is, the delight of the essence (*atsmut*) that has no essence.<sup>15</sup> These terms denote a mode of musing and bemusing—playing or toying with oneself—that is both orgasmic and pensive.<sup>16</sup>

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- 13 Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 60 (emphasis in original).
- 14 Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 94 and 340–42 n. 162 for reference to some of the relevant sources. See also below, n. 16.
- 15 These expressions are deployed in Ḥabad literature. See Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 94, 119, 300, 318 n. 43, 340 n. 160, and 375 n. 41; Wolfson, “*Nequddat ha-Reshimu*—The Trace of Transcendence and the Transcendence of the Trace: The Paradox of *Šimšum* in the RaShab’s *Hemshekh Ayin Beit*,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 30 (2013): 75–120, esp. 87–88 n. 41. For a wide-ranging survey of the concept of pleasure in kabbalistic and ḥasidic sources, see Moshe Idel, “*Ta’anug*: Erotic Delights from Kabbalah to Hasidism,” in *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism* (ed. Wouter J. Hanegraff and Jeffrey J. Kripal; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 111–51. See the briefer discussions in Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), 139–40, 214, 328 n. 246; Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 238–39. The correlation in ḥasidic sources of *ta’anug* and the male organ, and the related homology between the bliss of union with God and sexual gratification, is noted by Idel, *Hasidism*, 234–35; Idel, “*Ta’anug*,” 118, 138–41. Idel emphasizes two central features regarding the treatment of *ta’anug* in Ḥasidism, the theurgical and the anti-ascetic; that is, he notes the preoccupation with the idea of the individual—principally the *tsaddiq*—augmenting God’s delight through ritual observance, and the fact that the emphasis on pleasure for the human mitigates against those who would ascribe to ḥasidic piety a categorical denunciation of the physical and the adoption of a spirituality predicated on an austere asceticism. I have offered a different perspective on the relationship between the ascetic and the erotic poles of the mystical experience.
- 16 For my previous analysis of this motif and reference to other scholars who have discussed it, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 69–72, 189–92 n. 174–80; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 271–87; Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 135–36. See also Daniel Abrams, *The Female Body of God in Kabbalistic Literature: Embodied Forms of Love and Sexuality in the Divine Feminine* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2004), 112–13 [Hebrew].



My aim here is to consider the philosophical underpinning of this mythopoetic symbol. Starting from the assumption that there is nothing but the ubiquitous light of infinity—in the figurative language of Ḥayyim Vital, the “supernal incomposite light that filled all existence” (*or elyon pashut memalle kol ha-metsi’ut*)<sup>17</sup>—the primary creative fiat must be an act of self-begetting. With regard to the question of the gender of the infinite, we find three viable views: (1) Since *Ein Sof* is utterly nondifferentiated, it is beyond all attribution, including that of gender dimorphism; (2) *Ein Sof* is neither male nor female but it is nonetheless depicted primarily as the former within which the latter is contained—although the infinite is treated apophatically as the unfathomable that has no name or appellation, it is still described as light, and the character of light is to proliferate, which is further linked to lovingkindness, an attribute that is gendered as masculine; (3) *Ein Sof* is neither male nor female but it is branded as feminine or, more specifically, by the symbol of the mother.<sup>18</sup> Despite the seeming promise of this third possibility, kabbalistic symbolism is impeded by an overbearing phallicism that applies to the maternal imagery as well. There is no evidence to substantiate the contention that the motif of the phallic mother<sup>19</sup> can be construed as a gynocentric criticism of masculinity,<sup>20</sup> nor is there credence to the presumption that the male kabbalists desired to cultivate experiences of the divine that were not circumscribed within a phallic discourse, that is, a discourse for and about men that has little concern for women’s self-representation extricated from the mire of a patriarchal framework of meaning and gender inscription.<sup>21</sup>

17 Ḥayyim Vital, *Ets Ḥayyim* (Jerusalem, 2004), 1:2, 11c.

18 Concerning the last possibility, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Constructions of the *Shekhinah* in the Messianic Theosophy of Abraham Cardoso, with an Annotated Edition of *Derush ha-Shekhinah*,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 3 (1998): 11–143, esp. 59 n. 150. However, see my comments about the motif of the Great Mother and the kabbalistic *Ein Sof* in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 68 and 105.

19 On the symbol of the phallic womb and the androcentric transvaluation of motherhood in kabbalistic lore, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 98–106; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 77–88.

20 Abrams, *The Female Body*, 92–123, esp. 113–15.

21 I am here responding to the attempt to retrieve a more positive and less androcentric understanding of the maternal symbol in the kabbalah offered by Ellen Davina Haskell, *Suckling at My Mother’s Breasts: The Image of a Nursing God in Jewish Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012). For a more extensive criticism, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Patriarchy and the Motherhood of God in Zoharic Kabbalah and Meister Eckhart,” in *Envisioning Judaism: Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (ed. Ra’anana S. Boustani et al.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013),

As feminist theorists have shown, a feature of the phallographic mindset is its totalizing nature: all is subsumed under the sign of the phallus. This is not to say that kabbalists were unaware of the fact that ontically the female body is independent of the male or that they were oblivious to societal roles unique to women. Acknowledging these truisms does not defy the truth that the phallus is viewed in kabbalistic symbolism as the decisive marker by which both masculinity and femininity are to be assessed. Elizabeth Grosz reminds us of this rudimentary axiom of feminist theory: “Phallogocentrism is explicitly *not* the refusal of an identity for women (on the contrary, there seems to be a proliferation of identities—wife, mother, teacher, nun, secretary, whore, etc.), but rather, the containment of that identity by other definitions and other identities.”<sup>22</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that qualities unique to the physiology of women are appropriated by kabbalists, however problematic and repugnant this may be from a feminist perspective.<sup>23</sup> The experiences of women, including breastfeeding and other maternal traits, are not taken on their own terms in kabbalistic texts but only as they are specularized through the prism of a patriarchal symbolic order. The following appraisal of Irigaray by Butler can be applied to the kabbalists: “the reinscription of the maternal takes place by writing with and through the language of phallic philosophemes. This textual practice is not grounded in a rival ontology, but inhabits—indeed, penetrates, occupies, and redeploys—the paternal language itself. . . . To mime means to participate in precisely that which is mimed, and if the language mimed is the language of phallogocentrism, then this is only a specifically feminine language to the extent that the feminine is radically implicated in the very terms of a phallogocentrism it seeks to rework.”<sup>24</sup>

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1049–88, esp. 1058–59 n. 30. For another discussion of the maternal archetype in thirteenth-century Spanish kabbalah, see Hava Pedaya, “The Great Mother: The Struggle between Nahmanides and the Zohar Circle,” in *Temps i espais de la Girona Jueva: Actes del Simposi Internacional celebrat a Girona 23, 24 i 25 de març de 2009* (Girona: Patronat Call de Girona, 2011), 311–28.

22 Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 174 (emphasis in original).

23 I well understand that as a political gesture the feminist hermeneutic seeks to challenge monolithic readings and to recover dimensions of the past that will destabilize the androcentrism in order to effect changes in the present and the future. But on what basis is an interpretative stance that highlights homogeneity to be excluded from an acceptable heterogeneity?

24 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (London: Routledge, 1993), 45–47.

The point is obfuscated, for instance, in the interpretation on the part of some scholars of use of the image of suckling (*yeniqah*) by Isaac the Blind, one of the first kabbalists in Provence, to signal a more intimate form of gnosis of God than knowledge (*yedi'ah*), which biblically also connotes sexual intercourse of a presumably phallic nature. It is striking that this kabbalist and others who followed him availed themselves of the metaphor of suckling to speak about the most intimate form of mystical wisdom: the female anatomy here is invoked as the prototype of surplus and beneficence rather than lack and passivity. However, it is still necessary to evaluate the image of breastfeeding in the context of the overall semiotics to which the kabbalist subscribed. Put simply, how does he understand the gender valence of the nursing breast *vis-à-vis* the mystic who is nourished by sucking its milk? Although not stated explicitly, it appears to me that the utilization of this image by Isaac the Blind overturns the expected hierarchy by concurrently masculinizing the feminine (the divine attribute that corresponds to the mother) and feminizing the masculine (the male kabbalist contemplating and receiving the effluence from the sefirotic domain). But there is no justification to infer that this beckons a nullification of the phallocentrism or a valorization of the female anatomy for its own sake.<sup>25</sup> The overturning preserves the hierarchy that it upends, since the female that bestows (*mashpi'a*) assumes the persona of the male and the male that receives (*meqabbel*) assumes the persona of the female. It is possible for the tables to be turned such that the vessel ascends to the position of the crown—this reversal, affiliated with the messianic epoch, can be formulated in terms of Irigaray's petition for the progression of looking at the female as the "physical receptacle for the penis" to her becoming "the enveloping of a receptacle that is less tangible or visible"<sup>26</sup>—but this does not eradicate the respective values assigned to each gender.

The appeal to the divine plenitude might be one of the factors to explain the kabbalists' utilization of masculine and feminine imagery to describe both the inner dynamics of the Godhead and the human experience thereof, but this in itself does not enable kabbalistic discourse to escape the stranglehold of the phallogocentric system of signification.<sup>27</sup> To move past this impasse

25 Abrams, *The Female Body*, 124–25.

26 Irigaray, *An Ethics*, 55.

27 As suggested by Haskell, *Suckling*, 107. I would offer a similar response to the thoughtful work of Devorah Bat-David Gamlieli, *Psychoanalysis and Kabbalah: The Masculine and Feminine in Lurianic Kabbalah* (Los Angeles: Cherub, 2006 [Hebrew]). The author makes use of Freudian psychoanalysis and the psychology of the self and object-relations to interpret the relationship between masculine and feminine potencies in Lurianic

requires embracing the *erasing of erasure*<sup>28</sup> or the *apophysis of apophysis*,<sup>29</sup> that is, a return to the pleromatic nothingness wherein all dichotomies are effaced and the only law that prevails is the messianic Torah, a lawfulness beyond law, inasmuch as there is no more distinction between permissible and forbidden.<sup>30</sup> In such a state of mindfulness, or mindlessness as the case may be, we can no longer distinguish between light and dark, day and night, holy and profane, male and female, Jew and non-Jew. History, however, has proven how hard it is to achieve this utopian hypernomianism existentially—without denying the impressive increase of egalitarianism in Jewish communal life of several denominations—since it potentially prescribes the cessation of Judaism as the embodiment of a singular cultural-religious path, the very path that leads to the surmounting of the path. The crypto-messianic Sabbatian and Frankist movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are the exceptions that prove the rule.<sup>31</sup> In spite of their penetrating and sophisticated

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kabbalah. I concur with her that reading the theosophic myth psychoanalytically offers a deeper understanding of the theosophical symbols—I prefer to think of the matter through the image of the double mirroring, the theosophical mirrors the psychological and the psychological mirrors the theosophical—but I do not concur that relating the ego to the material aspect of the feminine leads to a more positive valorization of the subjective perception of reality, which includes the qualities of fragmentation, dualism, negation, lack, absence, want and deprivation. The use of Aristotelian hylomorphism only tightens the knot of phallomorphism inasmuch as the essential/formal is identified with the male and the contingent/material with the female. In Lurianic terms, the masculine is correlated with light and the feminine with the vessel. Gamlieli is right to note that the substance of the self (*atsmi*) is a merging of these two elements, the former identified as *hawwayah* and the latter as *ani*, but, as I have argued in the body of this study, the vessel is itself a manifestation of the light, albeit in a diminished state.

28 Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 49–78.

29 Elliot R. Wolfson, “Sage is Preferable to Prophet’: Revisioning Midrashic Imagination,” in *Scriptural Exegesis—The Shapes of Culture and the Religious Imagination: Essays in Honour of Michael Fishbane* (ed. Deborah A. Green and Laura S. Lieber; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 186–210, esp. 204; Wolfson, “Bifurcating the Androgyne and Engendering Sin: A Zoharic Reading of Gen 1–3,” in *Hidden Truths From Eden: Esoteric Reading of Genesis 1–3* (ed. Caroline Vander Stichele and Susanne Scholz; Atlanta: SBL, 2014), 83–115, esp. 110; Wolfson, *Giving*, xxvii, 228–36.

30 Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 161–223.

31 Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 176–85, 232–40. Several scholars have discussed the augmented role of women in these messianic movements, but for my purposes, while this evidence is extremely interesting and important, it does not transmute the phallogocentrism into a gynocentrism. The practical roles assigned to women, as activist as they may be, are still part of an overall scheme that assigns value to their activities insofar as they are

ruminations about the *coincidentia oppositorum* apposite to infinity,<sup>32</sup> kabbalists have advocated that on the level of social reality it is necessary to keep the opposites separate and thus the endtime is endlessly deferred. Even in terms of pondering the phenomenological parameters of mystical vision, there is no access to the nameless but through the name, no way to imagine the formless but through form.<sup>33</sup> A repercussion of invoking the name and the form is to remain entangled theopolitically in the phallic web of biblical-rabbinic monotheism and the asymmetry of gender that this entails.

One of the most vivid articulations of this predilection is the view of many kabbalists that the focal point of the visionary encounter is the corona of the phallus (*ateret berit*).<sup>34</sup> The textual corpus, which in the end is the only foundation that can vindicate our speculative leaps, demonstrates unequivocally that

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dialectically related to the power of the phallus. See citation and analysis of some of the relevant sources in Wolfson, "Bifurcating," 107 n. 39.

32 Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 199–231.

33 Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 123–25.

34 For my initial analysis of this theme, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Circumcision, Vision of God, and Textual Interpretation: From Midrashic Trope to Mystical Symbol," *History of Religions* 27 (1987): 189–215. In an effort to present an alternative to my uncovering of this pervasive aspect of the esoteric tradition, Jay Michaelson, "I'm Just Not That Kind of God: Queering Kabbalistic Gender Play," in *Queer Religion: Homosexuality in Modern Religious History*, vol. 1 (ed. Donald L. Boisvert and Jay Emerson Johnson; Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012), 51–68, 60, states that "circumcision is an opening; it is an act of inscribing negative space upon the phallus that enables an openness to receive the Divine influx, be it troped as prophecy or theophany. The gendered nature of inscribing an opening on the sex organ is obvious; given the symbolic understanding of presence and absence . . . it is more plausible to understand the feminine principle as residing not in the corona, which was always present, but in the corona *as revealed* by the inscription of feminine 'negative space' upon the phallus. Symbolically, in phallic symbolism, the feminine is not a positive quantity, but a negative one; it is absence rather than presence" (emphasis in original). I regret to say that the distinction between locating the feminine in the corona (*atarah*) and asserting that the corona is revealed by the inscription of the feminine as negative space upon the phallus is, at best, a distinction without any difference, and, at worse, an intentional obfuscation masked in a jargon that cannot be elicited exegetically or eisegetically from kabbalistic texts. It is notable that no proof-text is cited by Michaelson to anchor his conjecture. Even if we are asked to ignore this minimum scholarly convention, we still must wonder if there is any meaning in the statement—apparently offered as a contrast to my view—that the "gaze upon the feminine is not the gaze upon the *atarah* but, rather, upon that which reveals it" (61). There is neither textual nor logical rationale to justify the delineation of the feminine as the negative space that reveals the corona. When one actually reads the relevant texts, it is abundantly clear that the feminine aspect is linked to the corona of the glans penis exposed in the second phase of the circumcision

kabbalists have continually spoken of the corona as the feminine aspect of the phallus that is visibly disclosed through *peri'ah*, the pulling back of the inner lining of the prepuce to expose the glans, the second phase of the circumcision ritual according to rabbinic jurisprudence.<sup>35</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, this belief is critical for a proper understanding of the ontological structure of male androgyny embraced by the kabbalists as well as their hermeneutic of esotericism that turns on the paradoxical convergence of absence and presence, concealment and disclosure. Inasmuch as the phallus is the veiled object of contemplative vision, the absence of presence is made present through the presence of absence and the concealment of disclosure is disclosed through the disclosure of concealment.<sup>36</sup> A pivotal part of this argument is that the meontology of kabbalistic theosophy—the assumption that ultimate reality is not a definable being with identifiable properties but rather an event of presence that is always in excess of being present—demands an inverting of the Aristotelian classification of substance (*ousia*). For the kabbalists, the projection of being is gauged from the standpoint of the nonbeing of withdrawal—the more absent, the more present; the more secreted, the more displayed. What there is can never be there but as what is not there; what is given cannot be given but as what is ungiven.<sup>37</sup>

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ritual. The rationale for the seemingly bizarre symbolism is that the *Shekhinah* can be designated as the diadem inasmuch as the latter represents sovereignty.

35 The statement by Michaelson, "I'm Just Not That Kind," 60, that the corona is "an inscription of the feminine negative capacity within the masculine positive one that only appears as an erasure from the phallogocentric reductionist view of potentiality," is not only a gross flattening of my position but an erroneous and artful subterfuge. I have stated repeatedly that the penile corona is the dimension of God that is, paradoxically, present in its absence by being absent in its presence. Circumcision instantiates the hermeneutical duplicity that dictates that the secret must be concealed in its disclosure and disclosed in its concealment. See Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 133. To cite one of my previous formulations verbatim from Elliot R. Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness: Gleanings from Zoharic Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 263: "Circumcision is the sacrament through which the Jew enacts the role of dissimulation by cutting away the foreskin to create the sign, the presence that is re/presented through its own absence. The paradox is fully expressed in the insistence on the part of kabbalists that it is forbidden to gaze on the corona that is laid bare. In the disclosure is the concealment, for the marking of the sign occasions the erasure of the name." See also Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1994), 334 n. 30, 336–45.

36 Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 128–41.

37 Compare Jacques Derrida, *On the Name* (ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood et al.; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 96 [Jacques Derrida, *Khôra* (Paris: Galilée,

In gender terms, the masculine is the translucent but internally hidden and the feminine, the opaque but externally exposed. Thus, building on themes culled from older rabbinic literature, one zoharic passage enunciates the tacit transposal of the metaphysics of presence in the following ocularcentric terms: Moses beheld the glory through the speculum that shines, which corresponds to the masculine, but what he saw were “concealed colors” or “colors that are not seen”—the luminosity that has no image—whereas all other prophets beheld the glory through the speculum that does not shine, which corresponds to the feminine, and what they saw were “revealed colors” or “colors that are seen”—the image of the imageless, the icon of the invisible.<sup>38</sup> That the invisibility of the male is made transparently visible through the reflectivity of the female accords with a well-attested idea that the imagination—the cognitive faculty of the soul that parallels the *Shekhinah* above<sup>39</sup>—makes present

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1993), 30]: “There is *khōra*; one can even ponder its *physis* and its *dynamis*, or at least ponder these in a preliminary way. But what *there is*, there, is not [*mais ce qu’il y a là n’est pas*] . . . this *there is*, which . . . gives nothing in giving place or in giving to think [*cet il y a qui d’ailleurs ne donne rien en donnant lieu ou en donnant à penser*], whereby it will be risky to see in it the equivalent of an *es gibt*, of the *es gibt* which remains without a doubt implicated in every negative theology, unless it is the *es gibt* which always summons negative theology in its Christian history” (emphasis in original). Compare Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, vol. 2 (ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 173. It strikes me that one can discern in the caution of identifying the *il y a* and *es gibt* a critique of Heidegger and in the final statement that the *es gibt* “always summons negative theology in its Christian history” a critique of the view expressed at a later date by Marion. In my judgment, the Heideggerian *es gibt* is closer to Derrida than he acknowledges, since what is given is always also withheld from being given and, as a consequence, impervious to the ontological underpinning of negative theology, the assumption that the being of nonbeing is present as absence and the nonbeing of being absent as presence. See Wolfson, *Giving*, 237–41.

38 *Zohar* 2:23a-b, and see analysis in Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 379–83.

39 Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 270–325. Lamentably, this aspect of my scholarship has been ignored by everyone who has argued that I only assign a negative role to the feminine. They have all overlooked the fact that I have written about the correlation and double mirroring of the *Shekhinah* and the imagination, and the positing of the latter as the prism through which the concealed is manifest and the internal is exteriorized. Also disregarded by my critics is the fact that I have noted that kabbalists identify the *Shekhinah* as the focal point of liturgical worship and ritual obedience. See, for instance, Elliot R. Wolfson, “Iconicity of the Text: Reification of Torah and the Idolatrous Impulse of Zoharic Kabbalah,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 11 (2004): 215–242, esp. 225–26. It is true, however, that with respect to this matter, I have stressed that what distinguishes fidelity from idolatry is that the former entails the veneration of the *Shekhinah* when she is united with the masculine potencies, whereas the latter involves the separation of the *Shekhinah* and her

that which is absent without collapsing absence into presence.<sup>40</sup> To express the matter in terms that may be slightly easier to apprehend, the male is symbolized by the ineffable name and the female by the pronounceable epithet. The ineffability of YHWH is safeguarded precisely through its vocalization as Adonai in the same manner that the concealed remains concealed through the guise of what is revealed.<sup>41</sup> My accentuating the juxtaposition of lack and the female is indicative of this reversal: the female represents what forever eludes presence—in Levinas's terms, the face that goes beyond the face (*un visage qui va au-delà du visage*)<sup>42</sup>—the masculine absence that is known as absent only in its specularization through the mirror/veil/cloak of the feminine, just as the concealed name is both spoken and unspoken through the revealed name, and the external sense of the Torah is manifest through its occlusion in the internal sense and the internal sense occluded through its manifestation in the external sense. As I argued many years ago, the claim that the interior image of the male can be contemplated visually only through the external sheath of the female undergirds the enduring paradox of the kabbalistic mechanics of vision and the iconicity of the divine: *what has form is invisible and what is visible has no form.*<sup>43</sup>

The rite of circumcision is a potent expression of the medieval rabbinic phallogocentric norm and cannot validate the hypothesis that kabbalistic gender-play disrupts a “monist-phenomenological unity” by postulating a

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objectification as an autonomous power. Nevertheless, there is little room to doubt that I acknowledged the feminine as the center of the kabbalists' attention. Consider my summation in Wolfson, “Iconicity,” 27: “There is an implicit spiritual danger in the revelation of Torah, for it can lead to the reification of the feminine as a distinct object of idolization. Kabbalists were especially cognizant of this peril since their contemplative envisioning was so tied up with the feminine potency.” I will refrain from responding in more detail to those who have criticized me, but let me say that the piling up of texts where images of the feminine appear is not a substitute for a bona fide counter-argument. I have expanded on this methodological point in Wolfson, “Bifurcating,” 98 n. 23.

40 For an elaboration of this theme, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Retroactive Not Yet: Linear Circularity and Kabbalistic Temporality,” in *Before and After: On Time and Eternity in Jewish Esotericism and Mysticism* (ed. Brian Ogren; Leiden: Brill, 2015), 15–50, esp. 27–30.

41 Wolfson, “Iconicity,” 28.

42 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (trans. Alphonso Lingis; The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 260; *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980), 238.

43 Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 274–75. This is also the gist of my argument in “Occultation of the Feminine and the Body of Secrecy in Medieval Kabbalah.” See Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness*, 258–94, esp. 260.



“genuine and irreducible sense of otherness.”<sup>44</sup> Even in contexts where there is an ostensible reversal of the accepted hierarchy, a more careful scrutiny of the texts divulges that the feminization of the male body comes at the expense of masculinizing the female. The dynamic of gender operative in traditional kabbalah does not accommodate the possibility of the male being feminized without the female being masculinized. I will cite one of countless texts that illustrate this incommensurability. In his description of the world of points (*olam ha-nequddot*)—a technical term in Lurianic kabbalah (also referred to as *olam ha-nequddim*) assigned to the unstable world of chaos (*olam ha-tohu*), the punctiform constellation of the infinite light in which the breaking of the vessels (*shevirat ha-kelim*) occurs and results in a restructuring of the light in the world of rectification (*olam ha-tiqqun*)—Israel Saruq writes as follows:

*Malkhut* of *Yesod* is not visible, for she is conjoined [*devuqah*] to *Yesod* . . . when she is [conjoined] to *Yesod*, that is, disclosed [*be-gilluy*], it<sup>45</sup> is referred to by the masculine term, as is written, “This [*zeh*] is the reason Joshua circumcised [all the nation]” (Joshua 5:4), and circumcision is the disclosure of the corona [*gilluy ha-atarah*]. When the corona is concealed and not revealed or seen, then it<sup>46</sup> is referred to by the feminine term *zo’t*, as it is written “This [*zo’t*], after my skin will have been peeled off, and from my flesh I will behold God” (Job 19:26). . . . Thus it is clear to you that when the corona is revealed, it is referred to by the masculine *zeh*, and when it is concealed in the foreskin, it is referred to by the feminine *zo’t*.<sup>47</sup>

Assuredly, this text attests to the fact that the play of gender is fluid—androgyneity entails the transgendering possibility of the male becoming female and the female becoming male—but it is not accurate to say that this fluidity “is arguably more performative than essential.”<sup>48</sup> Political correctness aside, the performative nature of gender mutability affirmed by kabbalists is a byproduct

44 Michaelson, “I’m Just Not That Kind,” 62.

45 The shift from the third person feminine pronoun to the third person neuter pronoun implied by the expression *niqra*, which I have rendered as “referred to,” is found in the text itself and thus, in spite of the awkwardness, I have translated accordingly.

46 In this case as well the grammatical sense of the text is confusing, for the word *atarah* is feminine and yet it is followed by the words *we-eno megulleh we-eno nir’eh* and by the expression *niqra*, all of which are masculine.

47 *Limmude Atsilut* (Munkács, 1897), 7a.

48 Shaul Magid, *Hasidism Incarnate: Hasidism, Christianity, and the Construction of Modern Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 97. Magid’s general comment about

of an inflexible taxonomy. Thus, in the aforementioned text, Saruq argues that the feminine *Malkhut* is signified by the masculine demonstrative pronoun *zeh* when she is conjoined to *Yesod* and disclosed as the corona through circumcision, but she is signified by the feminine demonstrative pronoun *zo't* when she is concealed in the foreskin. Bracketing the intrinsic connection that is forged between femininity and the demonic, what is most relevant to our discussion is the fact that both the concealed and the revealed aspects of *Malkhut* are contingent on the female being located ontologically in the phallus.

One can wish that “the drama of redemption... be (re)configured not in terms of totality, but of infinity—precisely because the phallic pretension to completeness has been circumcised,”<sup>49</sup> but this queering of the phalломorphism—the proffering of a different kind of feminized male based on the circumcision of circumcision—is not corroborated by kabbalistic texts. Even the tantalizing attempts to speak of the unspeakable infinite are more complicated than the Levinasian distinction between totality and infinity can uphold. As I noted above, *Ein Sof* can be envisaged in postmetaphysical terms as the infinite nothingness that is not delineated by images of affirmation or negation, the indeterminate essence that has no essence, the otherwise than being that is neither being nor nonbeing.<sup>50</sup> On this score, we may be tempted to refer to *Ein Sof* as the “infinitely-other,” which as Derrida succinctly summarized the view of Levinas, “cannot be bound by a concept, cannot be thought on the basis of a horizon; for a horizon is always a horizon of the same, the elementary unity within which eruptions and surprises are always welcomed by understanding and recognized.”<sup>51</sup> However, inasmuch as *Ein Sof* comprehends the other as part of its otherness—the sefirotic emanations unfold from the very being in which they are enfolded—difference is incorporated in the sameness of the one that is differently the same. Let me exemplify this by a passage from a short treatise widely believed to have been composed by Isaac Luria himself on the doctrine of *tsimtsum* as it relates exegetically to what is, properly speaking, the opening of the *Zohar*, “In the beginning of the decree of the king, the hardened spark engraved an engraving in the supernal luster” (*be-resh hurmenuta de-malka galif gelufe bi-tehiru illa'ah botsina de-qardinuta*). In the egression of the influx from the infinite, there emerges the dyad of light

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the kabbalistic approach to gender is prompted by his interpretation of the passage from Saruq that I have cited.

49 Michaelson, “I’m Just Not That Kind,” 63.

50 Wolfson, *Giving*, 78.

51 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (translated, with an introduction and additional notes, by Alan Bass; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 95.

(*or*) and vessel (*keli*)—the former correlated with masculine mercy and the latter with feminine judgment—but the vessel is itself constituted by the trace (*reshimu*) of the light that is left behind in the vacuum (*maqom ha-panuy*) from which the light withdrew.

“Engraved an engraving”—to comprehend whence the vessels came to be in the beginning of the emanation, since the *Ein Sof* is absolute simplicity [*pashut be-takhlit ha-peshitut*]. The explanation is that prior to the emanation he and his name alone were<sup>52</sup> and he filled the space of all the worlds. When it arose in his simple will [*retsono ha-pashut*] to bring into existence all the worlds and to benefit what is other than him, he contracted his presence [*tsimtsem shekhnato*] and his light vanished above and the place [*maqom*] wherein the worlds will be created remained empty [*panuy*]. When the light reverted, it vanished above from the reversion of this light, which is the force of judgment that was there, for by means of it the light vanished above. All the reversion of light is only from the perspective of judgment, for the light extends limitlessly. From that force of judgment that was there . . . the vessel was made, and from the light that vanished there remained a trace in the empty space in which the light initially extended. By means of the trace that remained the first vessel was made.<sup>53</sup>

52 *Pirqa Rabbi Eliezer* (Warsaw, 1852), ch. 3, 5b.

53 *Lurianic Kabbalah: Collected Studies by Gershom Scholem* (ed. Daniel Abrams; Los Angeles: Cherub, 2008), 256 [Hebrew]. This passage raises questions about the surmise of Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1956), 262, that Luria's doctrine of *tsimtsum* was meant to offset the pantheistic tendencies of earlier kabbalah, including the zoharic anthology, with a more theistic orientation based on a clearer ontic distinction between God and nature. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 413 n. 87: “Luria himself . . . states quite bluntly a purely theistic view which seems to have been somewhat blurred in his later oral teachings.” For a theistic interpretation of the Lurianic myth of *tsimtsum*, see also Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays* (ed. Werner J. Dannhauser; New York: Schocken, 1976), 283; and the fifth of the “Zehn unhistorische Sätze über Kabbala” in Gershom Scholem, *Judaica 3: Studien zur jüdischen Mystik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 267–68, and analysis in David Biale, “Gershom Scholem's Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah: Text and Commentary,” *Modern Judaism* 5 (1985): 67–93, esp. 79–80. For my critique of this approach, see Wolfson, “Nihilating Nonground,” 33–34. See, however, the reference to Scholem cited below in n. 61.

The monistic view implied in the assumption that the vessel is made by means of the trace of light that remained in the space emptied of the light is bolstered in a second passage in which the zoharic image of the “supernal luster” is thusly explained by Luria: “The luster [*tehiru*] is called the first vessel, the primordial ether. It is called ‘luster’ because it is resplendent and it shines exceedingly, and it is not a vessel except in relation to *Ein Sof*, which shines within it.”<sup>54</sup> The demarcation “vessel” is not absolute but relative—in relation to the infinite, the luster is a vessel, but in truth, it is light.

Luria’s point is amplified by his disciple Vital:

Thus by means of this contraction [*ha-tsimtsum ha-zeh*] . . . there was in him the aspect of essence [*atsmut*] and vessels [*kelim*], for the contraction of the light brought about the reality of the vessels . . . but we do not have permission to speak more about this elevated place, and the enlightened will comprehend the beginning of the matter from its end. . . . And yet, it is not actually a vessel [*eno keli mammash*] but in relation to the light that is within it, it is called “vessel.” However, it is pure and luminous in the extreme of purity, subtlety, and luminosity.<sup>55</sup>

That the vessel is itself light seriously neutralizes the argument that kabbalists posited the existence of an other that is not absorbed in the light of the infinite totality, since the vessel is the primary symbol to demarcate alterity *vis-à-vis* the light. I am, of course, aware of the fact that Vital’s version of *tsimtsum* addresses the question of how *Ein Sof* can make space for that which is allegedly other than itself.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, this can be traced to Luria himself, as is attested in the language of the aforementioned text, “When it arose in his simple will to bring into existence all the worlds and to benefit what is other than him [*le-zulato*].” *Prima facie*, the expression *le-zulato* would lend support to Scholem’s conjecture that Luria’s teaching promotes a theistic orientation that counterbalances the more pantheistic tendency of earlier kabbalistic sources according to which the line separating God and nature is blurred.<sup>57</sup> This seems to be confirmed by another passage from Luria’s commentary where the zoharic language, “In the beginning of the decree of the king,” is explained as follows: prior to the creation of the worlds, God and his name alone were, and there

54 *Lurianic Kabbalah*, 258.

55 Vital, *Ets Hayyim*, 1:2, 12d.

56 Vital, *Ets Hayyim*, 1:2, 11c-d.

57 See above, n. 53.

was nothing upon which his kingship (*malkhuto*) could hinge,<sup>58</sup> that is, divine governance and providence are dependent on the existence of a world that is purportedly autonomous.

In my opinion, however, it is more accurate to accept that there is an unresolved tension between the theistic and the pantheistic tendencies in the Lurianic material. On the one hand, the light of the infinite (*or en sof*) is identified as the sole reality of all that exists in the cosmological chain from the highest to the lowest; nothing could be sustained even for a nanosecond if that light were extinguished. The continuity of being is portrayed symbolically in the image of one anatomic being: *Ein Sof* is the soul of the soul (*ne-shamah li-neshamah*) that emanates *Adam Qadmon*, which comprises the four worlds, and the aspect of the essence (*atsmut*) that is within him consists of the five pneumatic gradations (*nefesh, ruah, neshamah, hayyah, and yehidah*). The world of emanation (*atsilut*) is identified as the aspect of the body (*guf*) and the worlds of creation (*beri'ah*), formation (*yetsirah*), and doing (*asiyyah*) as the aspect of the garments (*malbushim*). The lower three worlds thus constitute one world (*olam ehad*) that is the garment of the emanation (*levush ha-atsilut*), a picture that doubtless is meant to underscore the organic unity of all levels of being. In Vital's words: "You have already been informed with respect to all these worlds how this one becomes a body for that one, and this one for that one, such that all the worlds entirely are as one [*kol ha-olamot kullam ke-ehad*]."<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, in the very same context, Vital insists that the world of emanation is distinguished from the other three worlds inasmuch as they are not considered to be from the aspect of divinity (*elohut*).<sup>60</sup> But if we take seriously the logical inference of the claim that the vessel itself is made of the residue of light that remains in the space after the light has been withdrawn, then it is not at all clear, irrespective of the effort of the kabbalists to argue otherwise,<sup>61</sup> that we do not end up with a pantheistic monism in which the difference between beings disappears, and this is so even if, as I myself have argued,<sup>62</sup> it is necessary to avoid thinking of the kabbalistic infinite in ontological terms as the Eleatic unity that comprehends all beings in a totalizing way that negates their embryonic particularity. Notwithstanding

58 *Lurianic Kabbalah*, 258.

59 Vital, *Ets Hayyim*, 3:3, 17a.

60 Vital, *Ets Hayyim*, 3:3, 17a.

61 See especially Scholem, *Major Trends*, 272–73.

62 Wolfson, *Giving*, 78, 171–74, 197.

the validity of attributing multiplicity to the *Ein Sof*,<sup>63</sup> and the implied sense of a *fractal whole*, I am not certain that kabbalists can affirm an infinity that escapes being sublated into a totality, however discordant and polyvalent that totality might be. Even if we acknowledge that the infinitivity of *Ein Sof* can be distilled only as transfinite or as an increasable actual-infinite—an unbounded succession of ordinal numbers whose unity is formed by an indefinite division beyond mathematical determination—it is still germane to say that *Ein Sof* is the absolute minimum that is the absolute maximum, the infinitesimal whose magnitude comprehends everything incomprehensibly and therefore is incapable of increase or diminution.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, expressed from a gender perspective, some of the most prominent kabbalists have depicted the infinite in decidedly masculine imagery without an independent feminine complement.<sup>65</sup> One may dismiss or marginalize the textual evidence, but it is a pipe dream to imagine that male kabbalists from the middle ages through modernity to the present postulated a *genuine and irreducible sense of otherness* when they locate the ontological root of the feminine in the corona of the phallus.<sup>66</sup> This points to a collapse of gender difference into gender singularity, a system of thought wherein truth is homogenized by the criteria of equality and sameness—something is true in the fullest sense when it is equal to itself.<sup>67</sup> Once again, Butler’s observation regarding Irigaray can be applied seamlessly to the kabbalists: “Disavowed, the remnant of the feminine survives as the *inscriptional space* of that phallogocentrism, the specular surface which receives the marks of a masculine signifying act only to give back a (false) reflection

63 Here we could note an affinity between the kabbalistic notion and Levinas’s observation regarding the creative contraction of infinity (*la contraction créatrice de l’Infini*), which may reflect the kabbalistic doctrine of *tsimtsum*, that multiplicity and limitation are not only compatible with infinite perfection, they articulate its very meaning, and, in that respect, infinity can be said to be produced only by renouncing the incursion of a totality (*L’Infini se produit en renonçant à l’envahissement d’une totalité*). See *Totality and Infinity*, 104; *Totalité et infini*, 77. On the possible influence of the kabbalistic doctrine of *tsimtsum* on Levinas, see Wolfson, *Giving*, 104, and reference on 362–63 n. 83–84 to other studies (including some of my own) wherein this possibility is entertained.

64 My analysis is inspired by the discussion of Cantor’s absolute infinity and the transfinite in Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 113–127, esp. 115–17.

65 Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 181–82, 186–87, 270–71.

66 Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 75–77.

67 I am here influenced by the argument regarding Plato in Ann Bergren, “Architecture, Gender, Philosophy,” in *Innovations of Antiquity: The New Ancient World* (ed. Ralph Hexter and Daniel Selden; New York: Routledge, 1992), 253–305, esp. 263.

and guarantee of phallogocentric self-sufficiency, without making any contribution of its own.”<sup>68</sup>

To note that gender is evidently a correlative phenomenon<sup>69</sup>—we cannot speak of male without female or of female without male—misses the point that in a phallogocentric worldview, *correlativity is expressive of a lack of alterity*, since the other is symptomatic of the same. One cannot readily discover—let alone recover—difference within difference but rather difference within indifference, which makes all the difference in the world. That is to say, it is possible to speak of masculinity without femininity because the latter is ontologically comprised in the former. The inverse, however, is not feasible and thus we cannot speak of femininity without masculinity, of a world that is exclusively female—indeed, the isolation of the female in this way constitutes the

68 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 39 (emphasis in original).

69 Avraham Elqayam, “On the ‘Knowledge of Messiah’—The Dialectic of the Erotic Peak in the Messianic Thought of Nathan of Gaza,” *Tarbiz* 65 (1996): 665–85, esp. 665 n. 107 [Hebrew], and more recently, Leore Sachs Shmueli, “R. Joseph of Hamadan’s *Commentary to the Ten Sefrot*,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 32 (2014): 227–321, esp. 251 n. 107 [Hebrew]. See my response to Elqayam in Wolfson, “Constructions,” 60–61 n. 153; Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 220–21 n. 118. As far as Shmueli, the text from Joseph of Hamadan that she cites (250) to support Elqayam’s criticism of me concerns the distinction between *Hokhmah* and *Binah*, the second and the third of the ten emanations: “From the perspective of *Binah* and forward there is masculinity and femininity, overflowing from one side and receiving from the other side. But [with respect to] the attribute of *Hokhmah*, everything is conjoined one to the other [*ha-kol nidbaq zeh im zeh*], and masculinity and femininity are not yet discernible; that is to say, it is not yet discernible through which side there is overflowing and through which side there is receiving. Therefore this attribute is not [characterized as] overflowing and receiving but only as overflowing.” After referring to my assertion that from this passage we may deduce that the aspect of the divine beyond sexual differentiation is still depicted in essentially male terms (*Circle in the Square*, 198 n. 1), Shmueli offers the following alternative: the statement that “everything is conjoined one to the other, and masculinity and femininity are not yet discernible” means that at this stage there is no “gender distinction” (*havhanah migdarit*) at all and not simply that there is only the masculine in which the feminine is enfolded. Support for my interpretation, however, may be elicited from the end of Joseph of Hamadan’s comment that we cannot describe the attribute of *Hokhmah* by the twofold process of overflowing and receiving but only as that which overflows. Translated into gender terms, this implies that *Hokhmah* comports as purely masculine. Again we see that in a phallogocentric semiosis correlativity is asymmetrical. Of course, we cannot imagine overflowing without receiving, but the author says explicitly that there is overflowing but no receiving, just as other kabbalists imagined that the highest aspect of divinity is right without any corresponding left or male without any corresponding female. See references in n. 72–73 below.

theological transgression of idolatry or in the rabbinic expression for heresy, the cutting of the shoots.<sup>70</sup> I have argued elsewhere that the kabbalistic logic of a noncorrelative correlativity is buttressed by several rabbinic dicta. For example, there is the maxim that above there is no left, which does not mean that there is a third space that is neither left nor right, but that the godly expanse is entirely right,<sup>71</sup> a theme that is applied by kabbalists to the uppermost dimension of the divine, a sphere of unmitigated compassion.<sup>72</sup> One of the most vivid images to transmit this idea is the portrayal of *Keter*, or the countenance *Arikh Anpin*, as the single eye of mercy without a corresponding eye of judgment, that is, the masculine without an independently existing feminine.<sup>73</sup> As preposterous as it seems, we are obliged to visualize a male that prefigures the bifurcation into male and female, or in the locution of one zoharic passage describing the status of gender in *Attiqa Qaddisha*, “in the place where male and female are integrated, they do not exist but in an alternate way of being male and female” (*ba-atar de-itkelilu dekhar we-nuqba lo itqeyyamu ella be-qiyuma aḥara di-dekhar we-nuqba*).<sup>74</sup>

According to a second rabbinic motif, the eschatological state is described variously as the “world that is entirely good” (*olam she-kullo tov*), the “world that is entirely elongated” (*olam she-kullo arokh*), and the “day that is entirely Sabbath” (*yom she-kullo shabbat*).<sup>75</sup> By the tenets of the binary logic that has dominated Western thinking, none of these descriptions is sensible. In the absence of evil, how can we speak of goodness? In the absence of abridgment, how can we speak of elongation? In the absence of the weekday, how can we speak of the commencement or termination of Sabbath? But the implementation of a logic that dispenses with the correlative paradigm is precisely what some sages thought was necessary to imagine the world to come, an antithesis of our experience of the spatio-temporal world—a world that is good without evil, a world that is diurnal without the intervention of the nocturnal, a world that is Sabbath without any interruption of quotidian time. Kabbalists applied the counter-logic of this topsy-turvy world (*olam*

70 See above, n. 39.

71 Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 220–21. My interpretation is made explicit in the language of *Midrash Rabbah: Shir ha-Shirim* (ed. Shimon Dunasky; Jerusalem: Dvir, 1980), 1:45 (on Song of Songs 1:9): “Is there a left above? Is it not the case that it is entirely right [*ha-kol yamin*], as it says ‘Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, your right hand, O Lord, shatters the foe’ (Exodus 15:6)?”

72 *Zohar* 3:129a; Vital, *Eṣ Ḥayyim*, 13:13, 68c; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 179–80.

73 For citation of sources and analysis, see Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 218–24.

74 *Zohar* 3:290a (*Idra Zuta*).

75 See the sources cited in Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 229 n. 272.



*hafukh*)<sup>76</sup>—the logic that claims the middle excluded by the logic of the excluded middle<sup>77</sup>—to explain the proto-gender of the indifference of infinity: neither male nor female, not because the latter is reintegrated into the former, but because within the collapse of difference there is no longer any meaningful distinction between antinomies, and hence no ontological basis to sustain the alterity of the feminine *vis-à-vis* the masculine or that of the masculine *vis-à-vis* the feminine.<sup>78</sup>

### Autoerotic Arousal and the Engendering of the Male Androgyne

The efforts of medieval kabbalists to describe the originary stirrings within infinity are in line with the older patriarchal appropriation of the parthenogenetic myth that presumes the masturbatory nature of the primal generative deed.<sup>79</sup> Translated philosophically, the potential for boundary must be positioned within the boundless, for if that were not the case, the boundlessness of the infinite would be confined and its infinitude negated.<sup>80</sup> The paradox of *tsimtsum*, irrespective of how it is explained, seeks to account for the emergence of difference within indifference and to subvert that very possibility by

76 The expression is used in a narrative about R. Joseph the son of R. Joshua ben Levi in b. Pesahim 50a (and compare b. Baba Batra 10b) to describe the nature of the world to come *vis-à-vis* this world. R. Joseph reports that in a trance state, induced by illness, he saw “the upper ones below and the lower ones above,” to which his father responds “You have seen a clear world.” When it is understood that the hierarchy of things of this world is inverted in the world to come, then what seemed to be a “topsy-turvy world,” *olam hafukh*, is in fact a “clear world,” *olam barur*. The intent of the other dicta redactionally assembled in this talmudic section is to illustrate that the world to come is the antipode of this world.

77 For a more extended discussion, see Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 109, and see also Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 23–24, 110, 212.

78 Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 224; Wolfson, “Bifurcating,” 109–10. For a similar characterization of the ideal state of *Ein Sof*, see Abrams, *The Female Body*, 19. It is curious that in all the attention paid to my work on gender in the kabbalah, no one has bothered to take into account this dimension of my thinking. The fullest exposition of the transposition of the male-female hierarchy appears in my analysis of the messianic teaching of Menaḥem Mendel Schneerson. See Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 200–23.

79 See Yehuda Liebes, “Zohar and Eros,” *Alpayyim* 9 (1994): 81 n. 88 [Hebrew]; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 182–83.

80 The principle was already enunciated in the thirteenth century. See Azriel of Gerona, *Be’ur Eser Sefirot*, in *Ma’yan Moshe* (ed. Moshe Schatz; Jerusalem, 2011), 83: “*Ein Sof* is the perfection without deficit, and if you say that it has a limitless power but does not have a limited power, you diminish its perfection.”

concocting the other as a manifestation of the same—hence, darkness is an aspect of light, absence a facet of presence, evil an iteration of good. It follows that the initiatory act of generation must be, as I noted above, a self-begetting that results in the splintering of the light beyond light into the duality of light and darkness, the fissuring of the being bereft of being into the polarity of being and nonbeing.

The theoretical underpinning of the kabbalistic myth is illumined adroitly by a passage in Schelling's *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände* (1809).<sup>81</sup> Cogitating over the problem, raised by Fichte, if it is possible to step out of the Absolute I and move towards the Not-I that is separate from it, Schelling proclaims that what is distinct and divided from God cannot come to be in God except in a ground different from God, but if nothing is truly outside of God, it is not possible to speak of a ground that is really different from God. The contradiction is resolved only if we assume that things distinct from God have their ground in "that which in God himself is not *He Himself* [*was in Gott selbst nicht Er Selbst ist*], that is, in that which is the ground of his existence." To elucidate the point, Schelling offers the following analogy: the ground of God's existence, which is in God but is not God, is the "yearning the eternal One feels to give birth to itself [*sich selbst zu gebären*]. The yearning is not the One itself

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81 I have elaborated on the affinities between Schelling's philosophy and the kabbalistic speculation on this topic in Elliot R. Wolfson, "Achronic Time, Messianic Expectation, and the Secret of the Leap in Ḥabad," in *Habad Hasidim: History, Thought, Image* (ed. Jonatan Meir and Gadi Sagiv; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2016), 45–86, esp. 57–73 (English section). On the affinities between kabbalah and Schelling, see Christoph Schulte, "Zimzum in the Works of Schelling," *Iyyun* 41 (1992): 21–40; German version "Zimzum bei Schelling," in *Kabbala und Romantik* (ed. Eveline Goodman-Thau et al.; Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1994), 97–118; Christoph Schulte, *Zimzum: Gott und Weltursprung* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014), 296–323; Jürgen Habermas, "Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism: Schelling's Idea of a Contraction of God and Its Consequences for the Philosophy of History," in *The New Schelling* (ed. Judith Norman and Alistair Welchman; London: Continuum, 2004), 43–89, esp. 53–61. For further references, see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 392–93 n. 2. Regarding the more general influence of Jewish esotericism on German Idealism, see Jürgen Habermas, "The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers (1961)," in *Philosophical-Political Profiles* (trans. Frederick G. Lawrence; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 21–43; Paul Franks, "Inner anti-Semitism or Kabbalistic Legacy? German Idealism's Relationship to Judaism," *International Yearbook of German Idealism* 7 (2010): 254–79; Franks, "Rabbinic Idealism and Kabbalistic Realism: Jewish Dimensions of Idealism and Idealist Dimensions of Judaism," in *The Impact of Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought, vol. 4: Religion* (ed. Nicholas Boyle et al.; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 219–45.

but is after all co-eternal [*gleich ewig*] with it.”<sup>82</sup> The yearning to give birth to itself, the eternal act of self-revelation (*Selbstoffenbarung*),<sup>83</sup> which is also associated with the actualization of the will (*Wille*) of the primal being (*Urseyn*), is the act of self-affirmation (*Selbstbejahung*)<sup>84</sup> that dialetheically engenders difference within the indifference of the infinite.

Schelling’s insights, which may have been inspired in part by Jewish esotericism, can be applied to the kabbalistic discussion of the vessel in relation to the light: the vessel is contrasted with the light but it comes into being from the trace of the light that remains after the withdrawal of the light and thus it occupies the position of the not-God that is within God. In the Lurianic material, the yearning to give birth to oneself, technically an asexual reproduction or an act of parthenogenesis, is nevertheless demarcated as intercourse, for just as psychologically—at least when viewed through the phallogocentric lens of a heteroerotic fantasy—the impulse of the male to overflow is dependent on conceiving a female to receive, so theosophically the proliferation of masculine mercy is animated by the constriction of feminine judgment.<sup>85</sup> In the final analysis, the kabbalistic myth is an elaboration of the rabbinic belief that divine creativity proceeds from an admixture of mercy and judgment, respectively signified by the names YHWH and Elohim. Hence, the exemplar of the male androgyne, attested widely in kabbalistic literature,<sup>86</sup> is based on a logic of noncorrelative correlativity, which is reinforced by the androcentric reading of the account of the creation of Adam as male and female in the first chapter of Genesis in light of the account of woman being created out of man’s rib/side in the second chapter.<sup>87</sup>

82 Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (translated and with an introduction by Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt; Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 28 (emphasis in original); *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände* in Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 7 (ed. Karl Friedrich August Schelling; Stuttgart: Cotta, 1860), 358–59.

83 Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 29; *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 359.

84 Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 21; *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 350.

85 Compare the formulation of this principle by Luria in *Lurianic Kabbalah*, 257: “It follows that all the expansion [*ha-hitpashshetut*] is by means of the five [aspects of] strength [*gevurot*] that are in the Mother, and this is ‘Who prepared the spirit of the Lord’ (Is. 40:13), ‘who’ [*mi*] is *Binah*, ‘prepared the spirit of the Lord,’ which is *Hokhmah*, and the spirit of the Lord is the soul that is within it, and by means of ‘who’ it is arrayed and delimited. However, ‘who’ garbs it and becomes a vessel in relation to it.”

86 See the expanded discussion in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 142–89.

87 Wolfson, “Bifurcating,” 92–102.

Boyarin detected a similar perspective in Philo and some early Christian sources: the primal Adam is, in the language of Jean-Joseph Goux that he references, a “masculine-neutral,” that is, an unengendered male. To speak of this being as both male and female—as we find in the first and fifth chapters of Genesis—means that it is neither male nor female, which is to say, it is singularly male.<sup>88</sup> Boyarin contrasts the spiritual androgyne of the Philonic/Christian orientation with the corporeal androgyne of the rabbis according to which the first Adam is a physical hermaphrodite, that is, a dual-sexed creature in one body, rather than a genderless masculine that represents the universal and transcendent as opposed to the feminine that represents the particular and immanent.<sup>89</sup> “Rabbinic discourse on sex/gender,” writes Boyarin, “refuses this narrative of one-ness fallen into two-ness, insisting on a two-ness of humanity in the flesh from the beginning, from the conception by God, as it were. Two sexes exist from the beginning and sexual joining does also. Heteronormativity is thus ontologically grounded within the rabbinic tradition.”<sup>90</sup> Boyarin further posits that in their refusal to read sexual difference as secondary and fallen, the rabbinic sages anticipate Irigaray in her “opposition to the (masculinist) metaphysics of substance.”<sup>91</sup> To his credit, Boyarin forthrightly acknowledges that despite the rabbinic resistance to the “essentialist dualism” of constructing the spirit as masculine and the body as feminine, the culture of the sages did “implacably and oppressively prescript women’s roles” even more restrictively than in Christian communities where women historically had institutionally sanctioned ways of becoming male and thereby achieving transcendence of a utopian nature.<sup>92</sup>

88 Daniel Boyarin, “On the History of the Early Phallus,” in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages* (ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 3–44, esp. 3–12. The reference to Goux occurs on p. 8.

89 Boyarin, “On the History,” 26–34. Compare Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 31–46, 78–83, 231–35; Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 180–200.

90 Boyarin, “On the History,” 27.

91 Boyarin, “On the History,” 28.

92 Boyarin, “On the History,” 30. See also Boyarin, “On the History,” 27; Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 75–76. In the latter work, Boyarin accepts the gender-asymmetry of rabbinic culture in both its Palestinian and Babylonian manifestations, but he insists nonetheless that the androcentrism was not monolithic and that the redemptive task of the scholar is to recover forces in the past that opposed the dominant patriarchy and thus provide a trajectory of empowerment and transformation in the present and the future (see *Carnal Israel*, 227–45). My approach to kabbalistic material has been different. Even though my goal,

My own engagement with these themes in kabbalistic material largely concurs with Boyarin's conclusions about the Philonic/Christian position, although the kabbalists obviously presented their perspective as an enhanced reading of the rabbinic sources. The textual evidence suggests that medieval kabbalists combined the myth of the male androgyne and the rabbinic propensity to enforce a socio-economic structure of male dominance and female submission. The anthropological attitude no doubt impacted their theosophical imagination even though the self-presentation leaves the impression that the anthropological is derivative from and reflective of the theosophical. Accordingly, even though there is no female counterpart to the male in *Ein Sof* or in *Keter*, we must speak of an aspect of judgment that complements the quality of grace—the capacity for limit submerged in the limitlessness labeled zoharically as the *botsina de-qardinuta*, the hardened spark, or the *qaw hamiddah*, the line-of-measure, the mechanism by which the infinitely expanding light is constrained<sup>93</sup>—but this falls short of positing the female as being on a par with, and certainly not superior to, the male. Both empirically and logically, kabbalistic literature espouses that in the highest recesses of infinity the feminine is not yet configured as an autonomous being *vis-à-vis* the masculine. The agency that provokes the infinite to emanate the dyadic structure of donor and recipient is a copulation that is not dependent on the partition of gender, that is to say, an autoerotic stimulation, which is tellingly referred to by the Sabbatian theologian Abraham Cardoso,<sup>94</sup> and perhaps in his wake by Jonatan Eibeschutz, as *ziwwug mineh u-veh*, a copulation from itself and unto itself.<sup>95</sup> There is nothing inherently deviant about this formulation; it corresponds to

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too, is to transform the past and not to reproduce misogyny or to reify female passivity, I have maintained that the transformation can occur only if there is a better appreciation that the traditional androcentrism is monolithic and the phallocentrism intractable.

93 *Lurianic Kabbalah*, 258; Vital, *Ets Hayyim*, 1:2, 11d (*Mahadura Batra*). It goes without saying that many more sources could have been cited. For a comprehensive survey of numerous passages relevant to this symbol, see the pamphlet edited and introduced by Joseph Rosenfeld, *Tsehoq de-Yitshaq: Heleq Botsina de-Qardinuta* (New York: Netsah, 2014). As I have argued, this entity functions like the upper phallus and it is particularly the aspect of judgment—the dimension of the feminine within the phallic domain—that serves the primary demiurgic role. See Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 137, 321, and references cited on 487 n. 198.

94 Wolfson, "Constructions," 59–62.

95 Jonathan Eibeschutz, *And I Came This Day unto the Foundation* (edited and introduced by Pawel Maciejko, with additional studies by Noam Lefler, Jonatan Benarroch, and Shai Alleson Gerberg; Los Angeles: Cherub, 2014), xxvi–xxvii, and 20 (Hebrew text). The relationship of Eibeschutz's treatise to the thought of Cardoso is noted by Maciejko, xxi.

the viewpoint articulated by kabbalists considered by both traditional and scholarly authorities as normative. Thus, for instance, Vital describes the “first copulation” (*ziwwug ha-ri’shon*) as the “male rousing himself without the provocation of the feminine [*nit’orer ha-zakhar me-atsmo bilti hit’orerut ha-negevah*] and the will and desire arose in him to copulate even though there was not yet the aspect of the female waters<sup>96</sup> [*we-alah bo ratson we-ta’awah le-hizdawweg afillu she-lo hayah adayin behinat mayyin nuqvin*]. Thus, this copulation was exceedingly hidden [*ha-ziwwug ha-zeh hu ne’lam me’od*] and it was not in the aspect of the intercourse of his genitals with her genitals [*ziwwug yesod dileh bi-yesod dilah*], for the female was not yet created in the world. . . . Therefore, this first copulation was in the supernal will [*ha-ratson ha-elyon*], the thought [*mahashavah*], the upper brain [*moha illa’ah*], in the secret of the supernal will that is entirely masculine without any discernment there of the feminine [*be-sod ha-ratson ha-elyon she-kulla dekhura we-en sham hekker negevah*].”<sup>97</sup>

I deliberately repeat the words that might strike a dissonant chord in the ears of those seeking to elicit a more dialogical approach to gender from the kabbalistic sources: *entirely masculine without any discernment there of the feminine*. Of course, there is a way to retrieve correlativity even in the imaginal space described as entirely masculine. Insofar as the psychosexual fantasy of phallic projection is dependent on vaginal receptivity, we can, and must, speak of the feminine as the potential for boundary lodged within the boundless. It is thus feasible to ascribe primacy to the female as the causal agent: without conjuring a vessel to receive the wellspring would not overflow. But this hardly loosens the phallogocentric grip; the knot is made tighter by the depiction of the female as the potential for otherness comprised in the all-encompassing infinity that knows no other, a totality that must include everything, even that which is excluded. The disparity between totality and infinity advanced by Levinas does not map easily unto the kabbalistic *Ein Sof*.<sup>98</sup>

Here we do well to return to the Lurianic doctrine of *tsimtsum*, which, as we have seen, is a corollary of the quality of judgment. There have been numerous

96 See below n. 151.

97 Vital, *Ets Hayyim*, 39:2, 67d. See Elliot R. Wolfson, “Divine Suffering and the Hermeneutics of Reading: Philosophical Reflections on Lurianic Mythology,” in *Suffering Religion* (ed. Robert Gibbs and Elliot R. Wolfson; New York: Routledge, 2002), 101–62, esp. 124, and *Language, Eros, Being*, 271. Compare Hayyim Vital, *Mavo She’arim* (Jerusalem, 1904), 3.2.12, 38a: “The *Malkhut* [of *Keter*] is not revealed for the reason that is known, because in *Arikh Anpin* the aspect of the feminine is not openly discernible [*en behinat nuqba nikkeret bo be-gilluy*].”

98 But see the text discussed above, n. 63. On the relationship of Levinas to kabbalah, see sources cited in Wolfson, *Giving*, 279 n. 68.

attempts to explain this myth by kabbalists and scholars of the kabbalah, but one aspect that seems to me to apply to the different explanations is the feminization of the demiurgic capacity of the infinite. For the purposes of this analysis, I will illumine the point through the work of Eibeschütz, *Wa-Avo ha-Yom el ha-Ayin*. Although this treatise was considered by contemporaries of the author to be heretical and scandalous,<sup>99</sup> and modern scholars, too, have cast aspersions on it—it has even been dubbed “blatantly pornographic”<sup>100</sup>—I would counter that with respect to the issue at hand, Eibeschütz offered a terminologically lucid and conceptually astute account of the Lurianic doctrine, demonstrating an especially sensitive attunement to its gender implications. The commencement of creation occurs when the infinite will or thought, which comprises the prototypes of the ten *sefirot*<sup>101</sup> referred to as “aspects” (*beḥinot*)—five expressive of lovingkindness (*ḥasadim*) and five of strength (*gevurot*)—crystallizes into a point of condensation, the *nequddah*, which is located in *malkhut de-en sof*, the idiom coined by later kabbalists, and particularly the Sabbatians, based on what was apparently the teaching of Luria regarding the potential for differentiation within the indifference of the infinite.<sup>102</sup> In relation to the emanations above her, *Malkhut* is the feminine capacity par excellence, the gradation that is the place that receives the masculine efflux,

99 See the review of the controversies surrounding this work offered by Pawel Maciejko, “Coitus interruptus in *And I Came this Day unto the Fountain*,” in *And I Came This Day*, vii–xx.

100 Maciejko, “Coitus interruptus,” xix. On the use of the adjective “pornographic” to describe Sabbatian kabbalah in general, and the singling out of *Avo ha-Yom el ha-Ayin* as an extreme example, see Yehuda Liebes, *On Sabbateanism and Its Kabbalah: Collected Essays* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1995), 107 [Hebrew].

101 The tradition that the seeds for the ten emanations, or their archetypes, are implanted in the indivisible *Ein Sof* goes back to some of the thirteenth-century Spanish kabbalists, and may have been enunciated as early as Isaac the Blind of Provence. For a detailed study of this possibility, see Moshe Idel, “The *Sefirot* above the *Sefirot*,” *Tarbiz* 51 (1982): 239–80 [Hebrew]. Consider the articulation of this idea in a source closer to Eibeschütz, Israel Saruq’s *Perush Sifra di-Tseni’uta*, printed in *Limmude Atsilut*, 34b: “The ten *sefirot* have a root above, that is, in the essence [*be-atmut*] of *Ein Sof*, blessed be he, and the *Ein Sof* is in each and every gradation that was hidden within it.”

102 Liebes, *On Sabbateanism*, 308–09 n. 71. Liebes claims that the idea of pinpointing the aspect of *Malkhut* within *Ein Sof* appears only in Saruqian texts (one mentioned by him is cited in the next note), but it is alluded to in Vital, *Ets Ḥayyim*, 42:1, 89c. The compression of the light to a point likened to the letter *yod*, or more precisely the midpoint of the light that assumes the shape of a circle, as a consequence of the *tsimtsum*, is also affirmed by Vital, *Ets Ḥayyim*, 1:2, 11c–d.

the quality of judgment that imposes measure on the immeasurable light, the matrixial space whence the worlds are created.<sup>103</sup> In the words of Eibeschtütz:

When the time came to fulfill his thought, and the day arrived that *Ein Sof* summoned in his simple will to create the worlds, he conceived that there should be the secret of the contraction [*sod ha-tsimtsum*], that is, that all the expanding aspects would come to one place, that is, to the place of the point . . . where there is some root and place for the mundane . . . for the whole time that they were expanding in the utmost expansion, there was no place to create the worlds on account of the magnitude of their expansion, and this had to come about through the secret of judgment because judgment delimits and gives a boundary to everything living, which is not the case for the mercy whose expansion is limitless. There is no image [*tsiyur*] for the worlds here, but all the worlds need an image, and every image is by way of measure and limit, and everything is in the secret of judgment. Therefore, he had to constrict the light from the expansion to one point. The secret of the contraction is judgement, as is known, and this is the way that there is a place to prepare for the mundane to construct the worlds. . . . All of the expanding aspects come to one place, that is, the place of the point . . . which receives all the aspects . . . and the aspects become “in the one place” (Genesis 1:9) the aspect of a complete configuration [*partsufshalem*] . . . the configuration in

103 Compare the commentary on the zoharic section *Sifra di-Tseni'uta* by Isaac Saruq, printed in *Limmude Atsilut*, 34b. After affirming that all of the ten *sefirot* have a root in the essence of *Ein Sof*, Saruq draws a contrast between the upper nine and the tenth: “When he comes to the gradation of the *sefirah* of *Malkhut*, which was hidden in the essence of the blessed One, the blessed One imagined [*shi'er*] in his essence that in this place it is appropriate to construct the worlds, for in all the gradations of the nine supernal *sefirot* there is no need for there to be worlds, since all of these attributes of the nine *sefirot* can be attributed to him even though he is not acting through those attributes. However, it is not justified to attribute to him kingship [*malkhut*], that is, dominion [*sholtanit*], if he is not ruling over others. Therefore, he brought [into actuality] all the worlds from the point of *Malkhut* that is in his essence.” On the thematic and linguistic connection between *Ein Sof* and *Malkhut*, see Elijah ben Solomon, *Tiqqune Zohar we-Tiqqune Zohar Ḥadash im Be'ur ha-Gra* (Vilna: S.J. Fine and A.Z. Rosenkranz, 1867), 50b: “The beginning of the will [*hatḥalat ha-ratson*] and the commencement of thought [*re'shit ha-ma'hashavah*] is the end of action [*sof ha-ma'aseh*] to rule over all the actions, as it is said ‘there is no king without a nation,’ and this is *Malkhut*, for within her there is no action at all but only rest, and this is the Sabbath . . . Therefore he is called by the name *Ein Sof*, for *Malkhut* is the terminus of everything [*sof ha-kol*] but with respect to him there is no terminus [*bo en sof*].” See Joseph Avivi, *The Kabbalah of the Gra* (Jerusalem: Kerem Elyahu, 1993), 99–100 [Hebrew].



which is comprised the will and power of *Ein Sof* contained therein, and this is the place of the world.<sup>104</sup>

The mystery of *tsimtsum* is presented here as the compression of the infinite effusiveness to one place—referred to on the basis of the rabbinic gloss on the divine name *maqom* as “he is the place of the world” (*meqomo shel olam*)<sup>105</sup>—also described as the constriction to a point that makes possible the materialization of the mundane (*hol*). Needless to say, the ascription of spatiality to the female accords with a widespread phallic pattern that is well documented in feminist theory.<sup>106</sup> I would go so far as to say that the Lurianic doctrine lends support to Irigaray’s explication of ancient theogonies and their adaptation in philosophical theories of subjectivity:

The gods, God, first create *space*. . . . God would be time itself, lavishing or exteriorizing itself in its actions in space, in places. . . . Time becomes the *interiority* of the subject itself, and space, its *exteriority*. . . . The subject, the master of time, becomes the axis of the world’s ordering, with its something beyond the moment and eternity: God. . . . Which would be inverted in sexual difference? Where the feminine is experienced as space, but often with connotations of the abyss and night . . . while the masculine is experienced as time.<sup>107</sup>

Constructively, Irigaray notes that the “transition to a new age requires a change in our perception and conception of *space-time*, the *inhabiting of places*, and of *containers*, or *envelopes of identity*.”<sup>108</sup> A novel conception of spacetime would be more agreeable to both sexes, but what is relevant to this study is that Irigaray’s categorization of the old template of space/cosmos as feminine and time/God as masculine is a suitable lens through which to

104 *And I Came This Day*, 19–21 (Hebrew text).

105 *Bereshit Rabbah* (ed. Julius Theodor and Hanokh Albeck; Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1965), 68:9, 777–78.

106 Many have discussed the correlation of the feminine and spatiality. See, for instance, Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 83–140, esp. 111–24; Jorunn Økland, “Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus’: On the Relationship between Religion, Gender and Space,” in *Gender, Religion and Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (ed. Ursula King and Tina Beattie; New York: Continuum, 2004), 152–61, esp. 154–58.

107 Irigaray, *An Ethics*, 7 (emphasis in original), and see analysis in Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 173–76.

108 Irigaray, *An Ethics*, 7 (emphasis in original).

investigate kabbalistic cosmology. I grant that, according to kabbalistic symbolism, the feminine space is not only penetrable but also generative, conceiving as well as receiving, imposing form on the formless. Thus, Eibeschütz remarks that the name Eve, which is decoded scripturally as the “mother of all living,” *em kol ḥai* (Genesis 3:20), is affixed to the feminine place/point because she is the “vessel of activity for the secret of the contraction [*keli ha-ma’aseh le-sod ha-tsintsum*], for if not for her the aspects, which are the structure of the worlds [*binyan ha-olamot*], would expand impenetrably, and by means of her they receive boundary.”<sup>109</sup> To be a vessel is not merely impassive; it signifies a sense of vitality related to the delimitation of the spatial cavity necessary for there to be extension. However, the generativity is consistently valorized as masculine and the penetrability as feminine.

To sharpen the point let me contrast the kabbalistic conception of the primordial space (*ḥalal*)—the plenitudinous vacuum that takes shape within the vacuous plenum—and the Derridean description of the Platonic *khōra* as a “third kind” (*tritōn genos*) between the sensible and the intelligible, neither being nor becoming, neither negative nor positive,<sup>110</sup> a “neutral space,” the “place without place, a place where everything is marked but which would be ‘in itself’ unmarked.”<sup>111</sup> I do not see any evidence that the space of which the kabbalists speak can be characterized in this amorphous and impassive way and thus subject to what Derrida calls the “para-logic” (*paralogique*) or the “meta-logic” (*métalogique*) of the oscillation between the double exclusion of *neither/nor* (*ni/ni*) and the double participation of *both this and that* (*à la*

109 *And I Came This Day*, 22 (Hebrew text).

110 Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, 171–73. See Charles P. Bigger, *Between Chora and the Good: Metaphor’s Metaphysical Neighborhood* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 362–80. The observation of John Sallis, *Chorology: On Beginning in Plato’s Timaeus* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 97, that “Timaeus’s withdrawal from saying the beginning corresponds precisely to the withdrawal of the beginning from being said, its withdrawal from (the) discourse,” provides an interesting point of affinity with the apophatic dimension of the kabbalistic doctrine of *tsintsum*, but this cannot be explored here. On the impossibility of speaking about the absolute singularity of the *khōra* and giving it a proper name, on the one hand, and the obligation to speak of it, on the other hand, see Derrida, *Psyche*, 173–74. For an attempt to think of the notion of “making way” associated with the Platonic *khōra* in relation to the withdrawal of the kabbalistic *tsintsum*, based on a different aspect of Sallis’s analysis (*Chorology*, 132), see Virginia Burrus, “Carnal Excess: Flesh at the Limits of Imagination,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17 (2009): 247–65, esp. 248 n. 4.

111 Derrida, *On the Name*, 109; *Khōra*, 59.

*fois . . . et, ceci et cela*),<sup>112</sup> the clearing—the *différance*—that gives rise to “an opposition which must in turn be shielded from some grammatical or ontological alternative between the active and the passive,” to the point that “the thought of the *khōra* would trouble the very order of polarity,”<sup>113</sup> including the binary of sexual difference framed in the “anthropomorphic schemas of the verb *to receive* and the verb *to give*.”<sup>114</sup> By contrast, the space posited by kabbalists subsequent to the withdrawal/contraction of the infinite has its root in the point imprinted in the pointless, the *malkhut de-en sof*, and thus it is expressive of the dialectic of receiving and giving. It is not both because neither, nor neither because both, as Derrida argued, but rather in the place/point of the feminine the constraint of receiving instigates the expulsion of giving, the interiorization of the exterior facilitates the exteriorization of the interior, and the enshrouding of the formless transpires in the specter of the form of the world. The principle of alterity—the basis for the possibility of worldhood outside the infinite—is thus dependent on the inclusion of exclusivity in the inclusivity of the exclusion.

For the kabbalists, *infinity is the totality*, since the totality of infinity is such that it must possess the potential to be less than infinite. Insofar as there is no absolute other *vis-à-vis* infinity, the differentiated unity that consists of the four worlds of emanation, creation, formation, and doing—what in today’s scientific parlance would be called the multiverse—is represented imagistically as emerging from the nondifferentiated unity through an act of autoeroticism that is at the same time an act of self-reflection. The idea endorsed by kabbalists bears resemblance to the Aristotelian description of God as thought thinking itself, a concept that had a profound impact on Neoplatonic speculation, which in turn influenced the religious philosophies and mystical theosophies promulgated by Jews, Christians, and Muslims through the middle ages. The state of noetic jouissance—the will willing nothing but the nothingness of the will—translates anthropologically into the ascetic praxis of desiring not to desire, which proleptically portends the state appropriate to the messianic unveiling of the veil, the disclosure of the concealment of the phallic insignia, a rescinding of circumcision, the phallogocentric triumph over phallogocentrism. The meditative bonding with and imaginary configuration of the divine is intensely erotic but at the same time predicated on the repudiation of carnal desire. Not only is there ample textual evidence that kabbalists ideally should

112 Derrida, *On the Name*, 91; *Khōra*, 19.

113 Derrida, *On the Name*, 92; *Khōra*, 22.

114 Derrida, *On the Name*, 95 (emphasis in original); *Khōra*, 29. See analysis in Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 254–55 n. 28.

devote themselves to a domestic asceticism and restrict their sexual activity to a bare minimum, but there is proof as well that even when engaged in spousal coitus, they are required to curb their physical pleasure by imagining that they are uniting with the *Shekhinah*.<sup>115</sup>

Moreover, to the extent that the kabbalistic symbolism is informed by the identification of the body/senses with the feminine, on the one hand, and the soul/intellect with the masculine, on the other hand, we can apply to this material the assumption regarding the subjugation of the maternal to the paternal. In sync with the staging of castration as part of the Freudian Oedipal complex, the logocentrism promoted by kabbalists is grounded in and further grounds the phallogocentric import of circumcision, the unveiling of the phallus that must be veiled, and in this sense, the somatic inscription of the covenantal mark provides the key to comprehend the play of esotericism, the conviction that the secret can be revealed only insofar as it is concealed.<sup>116</sup> We find in kabbalistic sources the idea that this ceremony weakens the libido, and thus in some sense it can be compared to castration, but I do not think this can be easily assimilated into reading circumcision as the feminization of the Jewish male. Rather than understanding this *rite de passage* as a symbolic loss that diminishes the hegemonic reign of the phallus, kabbalists have viewed circumcision as a form of sublimation that intensifies the phallic empowerment. As I suggested many years ago,<sup>117</sup> the cut of circumcision relates symbolically to the ascetic abrogation of sexual desire, which is an expression of phallic jouissance, the yearning of the man to overflow and to be sheltered in the enclosure of the woman. Psychoanalytically, asceticism on the part of the male kabbalist is a feature of the construction of self that is rooted in the primal narcissistic impulse attributed to the divine, the impetus to extend phallically and to be contained in the space of the feminine, the potential for otherness that lies coiled in the undifferentiated sameness of infinity. The psychological drive, accordingly, may be viewed as an application of the theosophic myth or, alternatively, the theosophic myth may be viewed as an application of the psychological drive. Be that as it may, the crucial point is that the prominent

115 Elliot R. Wolfson, "Eunuchs Who Keep the Sabbath: Becoming Male and the Ascetic Ideal in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Mysticism," in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* (ed. Jeffrey J. Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler; New York: Garland, 1997), 151–85; Wolfson, "Asceticism and Eroticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophical and Mystical Exegesis of the Song of Songs," in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (ed. Jane D. McAuliffe et al.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 92–118; and the expanded versions of these studies in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 296–371.

116 Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 111–41.

117 Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 135.

role accorded ascetic denial in the cultivation of kabbalistic piety is related dialectically to the phallic sensibility: abstaining from carnal sexuality strengthens male virility in both the empirical and imaginal realms. In Lacanian terms, we can say that the eradication of the erotic partakes of the paradox that “not to want to desire and to desire are the same thing. . . . Not wanting to desire is wanting not to desire. . . . The subject knows that not to want to desire has in itself something as irrefutable as that Moebius strip that has no underside, that is to say, that in following it, one will come back mathematically to the surface that is supposed to be its other side.”<sup>118</sup>

### Ejaculating Beyond the Phallus: Feminine Jouissance and the Desire Not to Desire

It is pertinent at this juncture to recall the celebrated words of Lacan on the matter of feminine jouissance:

Woman can only be written with a bar through it. There's no such thing as Woman, Woman with a capital *W* indicating the universal. There's no such thing as Woman because, in her essence . . . she is not-whole. . . . A woman can but be excluded by the nature of things, which is the nature of words. . . . The fact remains that if she is excluded by the nature of things, it is precisely in the following respect: being-not-whole, she has a supplementary jouissance compared to what the phallic function designates by way of jouissance. . . . But, and this is the whole point, she has different ways of approaching that phallus and of keeping it for herself. It's not because she is not-wholly in the phallic function that she is not there at all. She is *not* not at all there. She is there in full (*à plein*). But

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118 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (trans. Alan Sheridan; New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 235. On Lacan's appeal to kabbalistic symbolism, especially related to the word *fundamentum*, which “designates one of the modes of divine manifestation,” see Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, 5, cited in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 482 n. 119. Lacan's relationship to kabbalah is explored in Gérard Haddad, “Judaism in the Life and Work of Jacques Lacan: A Preliminary Study,” *Yale French Studies* 85 (1994): 201–16, esp. 203–4. The author suggests that the source of Lacan's knowledge of kabbalah was Elie Benamozegh's *Israël et l'humanité*. On Lacan's attitude to Judaism, see also Gérard Haddad, *Lacan et le judaïsme précédé de Les sources talmudiques de la psychanalyse* (third ed.; Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1996), 283–304.

there is something more (*en plus*). . . . There is a *jouissance* . . . of the body that is . . . beyond the phallus.<sup>119</sup>

The feminine stands for the Real, the register of experience that resists the totalizing tendency of essentialization, a challenge to the sovereignty of the Symbolic, the masculinist economy of the same.<sup>120</sup> Hence, the essence of woman, paradoxically, is to have no essence, to be not-whole (*pas-tout*), to embody the something more that is always outside of and therefore less than the totality. The feminine is excluded by the nature of things, which is correlated with the nature of language. In contrast to the phallus, which is both the signifier that is the “cause of *jouissance*”<sup>121</sup> and the “ultimate significative object, which appears when all the veils are lifted,”<sup>122</sup> the vaginal orifice, signified by the preposition *la* in the expression *la femme*, is the signifier “that cannot signify anything . . . because it grounds woman’s status in the fact that she is not-whole. That means we can’t talk about Woman (*La femme*).”<sup>123</sup> As the signifier that signifies nothing, the signifier that is “necessarily missing,”<sup>124</sup> since it is always beyond the purview of symbolic signification, the feminine is the consummate veil that uncovers by covering, the sign that can show only what is not-shown, the invisible of the visible. The gender bias of Lacan’s psycho-semiotics is made explicit when he notes that the man “comes into play as a signifier . . . *quoad castrationem*, in other words, insofar as he has a relation to phallic *jouissance*.”<sup>125</sup> The act of writing (*l’écrit*)—as opposed to the signifier function (*la fonction de significant*) aligned with analytic discourse—“will show that woman’s *jouissance* is based on a supplementation of this not-whole (*une suppléance de ce pas-toute*). She finds the cork for this *jouissance* [based on the fact] that she is not-whole—in other words, that makes her absent from herself somewhere, absent as subject.”<sup>126</sup> Being the supplement of the not-

119 Lacan, *Encore*, 72–74.

120 For a nuanced analysis of the Real and the Symbolic, see Evers, *Lacan*, 36–60.

121 Lacan, *Encore*, 24.

122 The comment is from the Seminar of December 1957–March 1958, “Les Formations de l’inconscient,” cited by Anthony Wilden, “Lacan and the Discourse of the Other,” in Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis* (translated with notes and commentary by Anthony Wilden; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), 187.

123 Lacan, *Encore*, 73.

124 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety* (ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A.R. Price; Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 46.

125 Lacan, *Encore*, 35.

126 Lacan, *Encore*, 35.

whole, woman establishes the border of the potentially illimitable elongation of phallic desire—hence the metaphor of the cork or the plug (*bouchon*)—but this implies that she exceeds any representable or expressible signified and can be present only by being absent and absent only by being present. The grammar of the sexual interplay is such that the woman “seeks out man qua signifier,” since “man is nothing but a signifier,” whereas the “man seeks out a woman qua . . . that which can only be situated through discourse, since, if . . . woman is not whole—there is always something in her that escapes discourse.”<sup>127</sup> In a word, the feminine remains unspoken and outside the conventional canons of meaning based on an illusory sense of wholeness and fixity.

Lacan names this exclusivity—the refusal of incorporation into the whole—the “supplementary jouissance,” that is, the jouissance that is beyond the phallus, which is famously categorized as the “privileged signifier of this mark in which the role [*part*] of Logos is wedded to the advent of desire.”<sup>128</sup> Lacan clearly intended to elucidate the sense of desire from the perspective of the female, or as he put it, to thrust the reader “into how things stand at woman’s pole.”<sup>129</sup> However, there is much debate amongst Lacanian scholars whether or not he deposes the phalломorphosis or dialectically reinscribes it by viewing the woman as the inevitable negation of the phallic signifier, the not-whole *vis-à-vis* the whole, the negativity that bespeaks the potential for infinite fragmentation, the limit of the limitless that repudiates the possibility of being integrated into the limitless limit.<sup>130</sup> This seems to be implied by the assertion that woman—or, to be more precise, the definite article *la* in the expression *la femme*, which denotes the universal ideal of womanhood<sup>131</sup>—can

127 Lacan, *Encore*, 33.

128 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (trans. Bruce Fink, in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg; New York: Norton, 2006), 581.

129 Lacan, *Encore*, 72.

130 For a more extended discussion of this topic, which includes references to other scholars, see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 128–32, 482 n. 125, and compare the compatible analysis in Boyarin, “On the History,” 15–22. And see, more recently, Lorenzo Chiesa, *The Not-Two: Logic and God in Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 1–21, 106, 119–22, 171, 175–76.

131 See the note of Fink in Lacan, *Encore*, 72–73 n. 29, where he explains that he had to modify the translation because in English the expression “the woman” implies a specific woman and not inescapably the universal womanliness that Lacan is rejecting. For a more literal rendering of the French, see *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne* (ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, trans. Jacqueline Rose; New York: Norton, 1982), 144: “The woman can only be written with *The* crossed through. There is no such thing as *The* woman, where the definite article stands for the universal.”

only be written with a bar through it. It is important to take stock that the gesture of crossing out is not the same as erasure, inasmuch as a trace of what has been crossed out always remains overtly visible. I do not think there can be an erasure completely deprived of a trace of what has been erased. Nevertheless, there is a qualitative difference: the crossing out is an indication of deletion that conserves what has been deleted and hence it beckons overcoming rather than cancellation, a coming-over as opposed to a going-under.<sup>132</sup> Expressed in a different terminological register, the crossing out is an apophatic gesticulation, a speaking-not, an utterance that says and unsays concomitantly. In the specific case at hand, to classify the woman as not-whole means that she is always contrived from the vantage-point of the whole from which she is discursively eliminated. Lacan thus writes of the jouissance beyond the phallus as belonging “to that ‘she’ (*elle*) that doesn’t exist and doesn’t signify anything. There is a jouissance that is here about which she herself perhaps knows nothing if not that she experiences it—that much she knows.”<sup>133</sup> Unlike phallic jouissance, which can be articulated in the prevalent dogma of logocentric meaning, feminine jouissance is stripped of linguistic or rational expression. What the woman knows about her jouissance is that she does not know it apart from the ability to experience it.

The aporetic depiction of the feminine is consonant with Lacan’s more general understanding of jouissance as “what serves no purpose (*ne sert à rien*).”<sup>134</sup> Nonetheless, the sense of aimlessness applies to the nonphallic jouissance in a very singular manner. From this vantage-point the female is accorded a superior status to the male and the standard hierarchy is problematized. Lacan observes that women possess men,<sup>135</sup> a reversal of the commonplace correlation of maleness with possession and femaleness with privation. The demarcation of the female as the site of otherness, and the consequent essentializing the feminine as inessential—the essence that essentially defies essentialization—problematize the hegemony of the masculine. The more complicated question, however, is whether the conquering of the phallogocentric invariably engenders the potential for otherness as feminine in such a way that one remains entrapped in the semiotic web from which one is attempting

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132 The same can be said about the practice of crossing out used by Heidegger and, in his wake, Derrida. See Wolfson, *Giving*, 128, and references cited on 387–88 n. 317–18. On Heidegger’s distinction between overcoming (*Überwindung*) and surpassing or getting-over (*Verwindung*), see Wolfson, *Giving*, 100 and 361–62 n. 77–78.

133 Lacan, *Encore*, 74.

134 Lacan, *Encore*, 3.

135 Lacan, *Encore*, 73.



to escape. Lacan encapsulates his insight in the sentence *La jouissance de l'Autre*, “the jouissance of the Other,” the word *l'Autre* capitalized to indicate the irreducible alterity connected to this jouissance, an alterity that is related more specifically to “the body of the Other who symbolizes the Other.”<sup>136</sup> But is the jouissance beyond the phallus not another facet of the phallic jouissance in the same way that claims to ineffability are always declaimed through language? The woman is the signpost of the included exclusion—that is, the one included by being excluded, the one that is inside by being outside. This, I surmise, is the intent of Lacan’s caveat that the woman is not-wholly in the phallic function, that she “is *not* not at all there.” The double negative yields a positive: by being the signifier that lacks signification, the woman signifies the plenitudinal emptiness, and thus Lacan says of her that she is both “there in full” (*à plein*) but also “something more” (*en plus*).

Most noteworthy for our purpose is Lacan’s linking the jouissance beyond the phallus with mystical experience. Lacan admits that the jouissance of some mystics, such as Angelus Silesius, is “situated on the side of the phallic function,” but with respect to others, especially women visionaries like Hadewijch d’Anvers and Saint Teresa, Lacan writes: “It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics consists in saying that they experience it, but know nothing about it.”<sup>137</sup> Lacan even goes so far as to include his own *Écrits* on the list of “mystical ejaculations” that issue from the “jouissance of woman insofar as it is extra (*en plus*).”<sup>138</sup> The nexus between mysticism and this surplus is based on the destabilization of the stability of the meaning of language that results from the encounter with the inexplicable and nonthematizable.<sup>139</sup> The mystic catches a glimpse of the not-all, the jouissance that goes beyond, and thus disrupts the symbolic governed by the phallus. We should recall in this context Lacan’s expounding Freud’s contention that the Oedipal law is the transgressive act that lies at the heart of civilization: “We are, in fact, led to the point where we accept the formula that without a transgression there is no access to *jouissance*, and, to return to Saint Paul, that that is precisely the function of the Law. Transgression in the direction of *jouissance* only takes place if

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136 Lacan, *Encore*, 4.

137 Lacan, *Encore*, 76.

138 Lacan, *Encore*, 76–77.

139 The theme is explored in depth, particularly in relation to Bataille’s mystical theology, in Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 64–66, 146–70.

it is supported by the oppositional principle, by the forms of the Law."<sup>140</sup> Lacan incisively grasps the ideational intersection of *jouissance*, mystical ecstasy, and the transgressive overstepping of the law. Just as *jouissance* is the desire that trespasses the bounds of desire, and mysticism is the limit that semantically reveals the inadequacy of limits, so the fulfillment of the law is dialectically entwined with its annihilation. Invoking the Pauline discussion of the relation between law and sin in the seventh chapter of the *Letter to the Romans*, Lacan argues that the function of the law is to extend to the law beyond the law in the same fashion that mystical speech is an expansion to the language beyond language, the venture of unknowing through which one knows that something more is present in the absence of what is there in full and what is there in full is absent in the presence of something more.

An astonishing affinity to Lacan's thesis regarding the mystical, transgressive, and hypernomian character of *jouissance* can be elicited from the motif of *sha'ashu'a* that I mentioned above.<sup>141</sup> But is the kabbalistic idea of this pleasure beyond pleasure akin to the feminine *jouissance* or is it a *jouissance* that is inevitably phallic? I will respond to this query by examining carefully one arresting enunciation of the phenomenon from a treatise by Dov Baer Schneersohn, the second of the seven Ḥabad-Lubavitch masters. The main concern of this admittedly dense text is an exposition of the thirteen attributes of mercy located in the very highest province of the divine, referred to technically as the upper three aspects of *Attiq Yomin*, which is above the gradations of *Ḥokhmah* and *Binah* of *Arikh Anpin*:

This is from the aspect of the simple pleasure of the Head of all Heads, which augments the forgiveness [*marbeh lisloah*], above the Supernal Wisdom of the Torah and the commandments, by means of the true repentance on Yom Kippur. . . . And this is above, the aspect of the essential amusements of the aspect of the returning light of the power of the Ancient of Days. And this is what is said "Though Abraham regard us not [and Israel recognize us not]" (Is. 63:16), for the merit of the patriarchs,

140 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960* (ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter; New York: Norton, 1992), 177. Concerning this passage, see Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 270–71; Marc de Kesel, *Eros and Ethics: Reading Jacques Lacan's Seminar VII* (trans. Sigi Jöttkandt; Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 125–26. On the interface of *jouissance* and transgression, see also Russell Grigg, *Lacan, Language, and Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 110–11.

141 Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 278–79.

the benevolence and truth of Abraham and Jacob can dissipate before we will be known or discerned at all. The root [of the thirteen attributes] is greatly above them [and it is reached] by means of the repentance of the returning light that is even supernal to the periphery of the straight light . . . “Surely you are our father” (Is. 63:16), verily you, which is verily the essence of the infinite that is within the aspect of the simple pleasure of the Head of all Heads, which is called the Concealed of all the Concealed, and which no thought can comprehend at all, even the primordial Supernal Wisdom. This is precisely the aspect of Isaac [*yitshaq*], for he is the essential pleasure that is called revelry [*tsehoq*], which is the aspect of the power of the darts of fire (Song of Songs 8:6), the enflaming of the pleasure [*hitlahavut ha-ta’anug*] that ascends in the aspect of the returning light to its primordially.<sup>142</sup>

It is not possible to decipher all the symbolic allusions in this citation, but let me accentuate the salient themes that resonate with but also diverge from Lacan. Schneersohn links the thirteen attributes of mercy to the simple pleasure (*ha-ta’anug ha-pashut*) of the Ancient of Days (*attiq yomin*), also designated by the zoharic expressions Head of all Heads (*resha de-khol reshin*) and Concealed of all Concealed (*setima de-khol setimin*). This essential pleasure (*ta’anug ha-atsmi*), that is, the pleasure of the infinite essence (*atsmut en sof*), is kindled by the power (*gevurah*) of the returning light (*or hozer*), the feminine attribute of judgment (*din*), as opposed to the straight light (*or yashar*), the masculine attribute of benevolence (*hesed*). The reversal of the gender hierarchy is implied in the statement that the returning light is even higher than the periphery (*maqqif*) of the straight line, a graphic image that is meant to communicate that the feminine rises to a station above the masculine, the immanent that supersedes the transcendent.

This delight is identified as well as the “essential amusements” (*sha’ashu’im ha-atsmiyim*) of the feminine jouissance, a quality related to Isaac based on the scriptural *jeu de mots* between his name *yitshaq* and *tsehoq*, laughter or gaiety. The flame that ignites the pleasure is the attribute of judgment. As in the case of Lacan, the incomprehensible jouissance is a pleasure that can be satisfied pneumatically only through the desire not to desire.<sup>143</sup> From the kabbalistic perspective developed by the Ḥabad master as well, the ascetic abandonment of phallic desire is a virtue that surpasses the law, since the law, strictly speaking, mandates sexual intercourse for the sake of procreation. The

142 Dov Baer Schneersohn, *Torat Ḥayyim: Bere’shit* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1993), 152c.

143 Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 269 and 548 n. 52.

transgressive nature of *jouissance* is marked by the elevation of the delight to the quality of forgiveness above the wisdom of Torah and the commandments, and even above the merit of the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob, who stand respectively for lovingkindness and truth. The path for the human to reach that level, ritually enacted on Yom Kippur, is repentance, which, as I have shown elsewhere,<sup>144</sup> is the hypernomian foundation of the *nomos*, the surfeit of the law that involves the deferral of the distinction between guilt and innocence, a suspension that unsettles but at the same time secures the system of reward and punishment.

The place from which *jouissance* comes forth and to which it returns is *malkhut de-en sof*, which, as we noted above, is the capacity for limit lodged in the limitlessness of the infinite, the name that is “the disclosure of the light of the essence of the delights [*hitgallut or ha-atsmut de-sha’ashu’im*], which are called the amusements of the king in himself [*sha’ashu’ei ha-melekh be-atsmo*].” The hypernomian dimension of this auto-gratification, at once masturbatory and abstemious—the phallic ejaculation beyond the phallus—is underlined by the statement that it is above the “dissemination of the delights in the law” (*hitpashshetut ha-sha’ashu’im ba-torah*). The *jouissance* above the law, the repentance that is prior to the world, is the nameless name that precedes the nameless donning the garment of the name. Dov Baer elicits this deepest of mysteries from the verse “From of old, your name is ‘our redeemer,’” *go’alenu me-olam shemekha* (Is. 63:16), that is, from the place of eternity (*olam*) the name (*shem*) of the infinite, which is above the ineffable name, YHWH, the name incarnate in the wisdom of the Torah and the commandments, will redeem the people of Israel. Salvation comes not by compliance to the stipulation of the law but by adherence to the prospect for repentance, as R. Eliezer reportedly taught,<sup>145</sup> “If Israel repent, they will be redeemed.”<sup>146</sup> The seven Ḥabad-Lubavitch masters, from Shneur Zalman of Liadi to Menaḥem Mendel Schneerson, placed great weight on this Talmudic adage because of their commitment to the belief that redemption stems from a source that is higher than the law, the infinite essence that preexists the division into permitted and prohibited.<sup>147</sup>

144 Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 55–56, 168–69, 180–82. For the list of studies where I engage the idea of hypernomianism, see Wolfson, *A Dream*, 446 n. 93.

145 b. Sanhedrin 97b.

146 Schneersohn, *Torat Hayyim: Bere’shit*, 152d.

147 Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 166–67, 169, 171, 180–81, 274, 279–80.

## Conclusion

Many more texts could have been cited but due to limitations of space what I have presented will have to suffice to allow us to draw some conclusions. The Jewissance affirmed by kabbalists as a pietistic ideal mirrors their understanding of the originary stirrings of the infinite that resulted in the splitting of the unengendered male into the dyad of masculine and feminine. Although there is no independent female in *Ein Sof*, the fissure was brought about by the feminine aspect enclosed in the nondifferentiated as the potential for differentiation. The arousal to emanate is depicted as the self-amusement of the infinite will, the inciting of the masculine compulsion to expand by the feminine capacity to contract. The autoerotic gesture of this introspective jouissance is emulated by the kabbalists in the sensual rapture of mystical visualization that is consequent to the renunciation of corporal sensuality. In a manner that curiously accords with Freud, for the kabbalists, the male becomes more potently phallic by becoming female through the disavowal of the phallus. The full measure of Jewish carnality is thus determined from the standpoint of the denial of the body.

But does this lead to a destabilization of the binary opposition of maleness and femaleness? It cannot be denied that at the heart of the kabbalistic theosophy is the metaphysical problem of alterity and the ethical struggle to adjudicate between the identity of difference and the difference of identity. The primary function of the female is to serve as a receptacle to contain the seminal fluid of the male. This does not mean that kabbalists turn the woman into a “mute, passive surface”<sup>148</sup> or a “negative space.”<sup>149</sup> In the axiology of the kabbalistic symbolism, receptivity and negativity are positively affirmed. Not only is it the case that divine creativity is dependent on a dialectical process of bestowing and receiving, but in the receiving there is as much, if not more, power than in the bestowing.<sup>150</sup> Indeed, receptivity is a form of giving, a motif expressed rather poignantly in the kabbalistic understanding of Jewish men being assimilated in the female waters (*mayyin nuqvin*) that stimulate the male waters (*mayyin dukhrin*) of the divine.<sup>151</sup> More significantly, kabbalists accept the gender transfiguration of the male becoming female and the female

148 The expression is used by Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 255 n. 28, to describe Plato's application of the feminine to the *khōra*.

149 Michaelson, “I'm Just Not That Kind,” 61.

150 Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness*, 262.

151 Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 110–12, 227 n. 158–60, 228 n. 168; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 76, 95, 182, 185, 310–11.

becoming male, the contained being transposed by the container and the container by the contained. What I have resolutely maintained, however, is that this play of gender operates along strict and unambiguous lines such that the instability is determined by a constitutive stability: that which overflows is gendered as masculine and that which receives as feminine, and the ultimate purpose of the conjunction of male and female is for the judgment of the latter to be ameliorated by the mercy of the former. Luria pithily expressed what might be called the transcendental signifier of the kabbalistic semiotics of gender: “The supernal emanator had to be arrayed in masculine and feminine so that all of the emanation would concatenate in this way, and the judgments will be sweetened in mercy, for the male is mercy and the female judgment as is known.”<sup>152</sup>

As far as I know, no one has adduced a kabbalistic source where this pattern is undermined. I myself have discussed the messianic toppling of the hierarchy—conveyed in the scriptural images of the female encircling the male (Jer. 31:21) or of the woman of valor being a crown of her husband (Prov. 12:4)—but as I have also argued, these tropes of sabotage only fortify the preponderant rendering of the feminine as the inscriptional space of the self-constituting phallogocentrism.<sup>153</sup> In the eschaton, the female may well assume the posture of the male and thus the hierarchized scheme would be somewhat disrupted and the androcentrism decentered, but this transposition can hardly be considered a post-patriarchal deposing of the phallomorphism. A more drastic transvaluation of the patriarchal hierarchy would require the apophatic obliteration of difference to the point that even the dichotomy of giving and receiving is transcended. To be sure, the seeds for this upheaval are found in the texts of the tradition,<sup>154</sup> but the kabbalists themselves have only

152 Isaac Luria, *Perush Sifra di-Tseni'uta*, printed in Ḥayyim Vital, *Sha'ar Ma'amere Rashbi* (Jerusalem: Sitre Ḥayyim, 2014), 144. See Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 94–95.

153 Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 200–23, esp. 201; Wolfson, “Bifurcating,” 109.

154 I am here citing my own language in *Language, Eros, Being*, 85–86: “[W]ithin the tradition are the seeds of discourse necessary to bear fruit of a different color, texture, odor, and taste; we may even be justified in saying that *the implicit axiology of the traditional symbolism exceeds its own social limitations*. The rich legacy of kabbalah, therefore, may serve as a *repository of images that feminist theologians can reinterpret and extrapolate through creative (mis)reading*, reflecting a genuinely feminist perspective rather than merely expropriating ‘feminized patriarchal images’ in ‘transvestite masquerade,’ which, when properly fathomed, serve only to reinforce the androcentric subservience of women. . . . *The engendering of God in terms of current needs and cultural assumptions regarding the status of women and men is an ethical task of the highest priority. The work of critical hermeneutics, re/covering structures of thought as they appear from within philological concealedness, can*

reached the point of discerning that the female receiver can become the male giver. As Azriel of Gerona already put it in the thirteenth century: “Know that no emanation emanates except to attest to the unity of *Ein Sof*, and if the receiver was not unified with the bestower and the bestower with the receiver in one potency, it would not be ascertained that they are one potency. From their unity one knows the power of unification . . . and thus each and every thing is bestower and receiver.”<sup>155</sup> The oneness of infinity necessitates that the sefirotic emanations are each androgynous and therefore capable of both giving like a male and receiving like a female in accord with the gender stereotypes overwhelmingly affirmed by the kabbalists. The more profound subversion, however, would be one in which there is no more giver or receiver. The index of the ultimate Jewissance beyond jouissance, the pleasure of no pleasure, would be when we no longer had the need to speak of masculinized woman or feminized man. This possibility can be realized only when the tradition extends beyond the limits of its own margin and the phallogocentrism gives way not to matriarchy emulating patriarchy but to the dissolution of nondifference in confronting the face of the other as the same difference.

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*be seen as contributing in a helpful way to the therapy of a culture's collective soul.* But, as we are aware, the therapeutic process can be blocked when perceptions of the past are obscured or skewed on account of present concerns and future desires” (emphasis added).

155 Azriel of Gerona, *Be'ur Eser Sefirot*, in *Ma'yan Moshe*, 89. Compare p. 96: “Concerning what you asked about the bestower and the recipient, go and learn from the holy cherubim . . . sometimes this one acts for itself and this one acts for itself, sometimes they are equal in their actions, sometimes this one acts with the action of the other and sometimes they are transposed in their actions. Regarding this they said [b. Sukkah 14a], ‘Great is the power of the righteous who can convert the attribute of judgment to the attribute of mercy and the opposite is true of the righteous.’” Although this passage is likely an interpolation, it does correctly explain Azriel of Gerona's intent: every divine gradation has the capacity to bestow and to receive and it is precisely this principle that facilitates the transposition of masculine and feminine and the concomitant transvaluation of mercy and judgment.