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FANTASIES OF DEVIANCE IN MENDELE AND AGNON

by

DAVID ABERBACH

Fantasies of deviance, including latent homosexuality, are not a major or overt theme in the fiction of Mendele Mocher Sefarim (pen name of S. Y. Abramowitz, 1835?–1917) and Samuel Joseph Agnon (1888?–1970) but are, nevertheless, an unmistakable part of the characters whom they depict. These characters, for various reasons and to varying degrees, are deflected from normal heterosexual attachments and are inclined, for this reason, to forms of perversion which at times mirror the distortions and breakdown in the societies in which they live.

Indeed, some of the features of their psychological makeup are hardly explicable, when taken together, except as signs of sexual malaise: most strikingly, their dreams and fantasies, in which sex roles are confused and identities reversed, and their constant search for and overvaluation of a strong man, or successful lover, as a model for identification and emulation; and, more generally, their emotional immaturity, their fear of women and difficulty with them, the men being rather weak and passive in relation to the women, who are dominant, at times cruelly, leading to frequent expressions of sexual inferiority, frustration, and unwholeness. As both writers were, at least nominally, Orthodox Jews in a more puritan age than the present,¹ and homosexuality is against Jewish law, neither could deal openly with this theme: Mendele injects it with elements of ribald, even grotesque, fun, notably

1. On the harsh climate for the depiction of homosexuality in Western literature during the latter period of Mendele's career and the early period of Agnon's career, see J. Meyers, *Homosexuality and Literature, 1890–1930* (London: Athlone Press, 1977).

in *Mas'ot Binyamin ha-Shlishi* (1878Y, 1896H),² while Agnon's treatment of it is often characterized by a mocking, recoiling allusiveness.

It is true, of course, that Mendele and Agnon are different in many ways. Agnon, being a half-century younger, was more familiar than Mendele with Western European culture and behavior. Mendele's anti-traditionalism and social realism often clash with Agnon's neo-Romanticism and his adherence to tradition. Unlike Mendele, Agnon does not think in abstract, allegorical terms. Yet Mendele's influence on Agnon is detectable not just in Agnon's style and technique, but also, to an extent, in his psychological characterizations; and this may be seen by comparing and contrasting the motif of sexual perversion and homoeroticism in their writings.

In particular, Mendele's *Susati* (1873Y, 1909H) and Agnon's *Sippur Pashut* (1935) provide mutually illuminating paradigms of family structures which sometimes produce a homosexual son:³ in *Susati*, a father who has died, leaving the anxious, indulgent mother to raise her only son; and in *Sippur Pashut*, a strong-willed, manipulative mother and a weak father. In neither work, however, does the homosexual undercurrent emerge as a behavioral phenomenon, but it remains as a clear, merely latent, and in itself not necessarily abnormal alternative in fantasy in the absence of healthy heterosexual bonds.

The central struggle in *Susati*, as stated in the title of its opening chapter ("Israel tries to be a man"), is the creation and assertion of masculine identity. Israel, an orphan raised by his mother in the Russian Pale of Settlement during the reign of Alexander II, is in his twenties and still unmarried. Ostracized by his society as a Maskil, he fails in his bid to enter university. Feeling maddeningly trapped and frustrated, he projects his yearning for manhood onto the mare. The mare, a figment of his imagination in madness, is herself an allegorical representation of the Jews as a people in search of masculine identity, lost when uprooted from their ancestral homeland. Once a noble prince, the mare has been unsexed in exile, she confesses to Israel: "In those days there lived a wise, good prince. This prince, while still a boy, would

2. References to Mendele's writings are from the one-volume *Kol Kitve Mendele Mocher Sefarim* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1947). When two dates are given, the first refers to the Yiddish and the second to the Hebrew text. Translations from the Hebrew are by David Aberbach, unless indicated otherwise.

3. See I. Bieber et al., *Homosexuality: A Psychoanalytic Study* (New York: Basic Books, 1962). For a clear account of various theories on the origins of homosexuality, see A. Storr, *Sexual Deviation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977).

wander far from home, to see what went on in the world, and he became famous among the nations. The king of Egypt, a land defiled with the idols of magicians, sorcerers, and wizards, got angry with the prince, who had come as a visitor to live in his country. He consulted his retinue and said: Let us find a good way of destroying him. The magicians used their sorcery to turn the prince into a mare and made him do the hardest work, building Pithom and Rameses with bricks and straw" (p. 312).⁴

Israel's longing "to be a man" (pp. 309, 318) thus runs parallel with the mare's longing to be a prince again, and his jumbled feelings for the mare betray his unconscious self-perception. At one point, he weeps for the mare and is even ready to sacrifice his life for her (p. 313), but he is also enraged at her sluggish acquiescence to her condition. Her groans and kicks give him relief, for they signify her struggle to regain her former state (pp. 313, 322).

In wildly discordant fantasies, Israel reflects on the mare's sex change in relation to his own sexual uncertainties. He thinks, for example, "If the mare is a prince, I, a male, in contrast, am a princess" (p. 315), and imagines that in a former incarnation he might have been the Queen of Sheba. But he also wishes, or suspects, that he was Judah Maccabeus, in its context an image of exaggerated masculinity so fantastic that it suggests a desperate need on his part to compensate for the weakness in his male identity. Later, his fear-ridden temptation by the Devil and the sexual abandon which this entails might express that side of him which seeks a perverse, distorted masculine identity at the expense of others, by abandoning moral scruples.

The night after he fails his university examination at the hands of antisemitic examiners, Israel has continual nightmares of being a sacrificial cock. These nightmares bring out starkly his conviction of being emasculated socially and emotionally: "Eyes watched me in reproach and anger, and the game began, a terrifying game! The players took their parts: some as donkeys, oxen, or human beings, and I played the role of the rooster, bound at their mercy, a sacrifice for the Day of Atonement" (p. 320).

As a sacrifice on the altar of the twisted world in which he lives, Israel is ripe for demonic possession. In this state of breakdown, his social and sexual crisis merges with his role as symbol of the Jewish people. In the end, appropriately for a work first published in czarist Russia in 1873, though

4. Compare this with Exodus, chap. I. For images of the horse as a male symbol, see Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Bialik's "Avi," and D. H. Lawrence's "St. Mawr"; perhaps the best-known clinical example is Freud's case of Little Hans.

Israel does gain much insight into his predicament and recovers his sanity, his problems, like those of the Russian Jews, remain unsolved.

As a study of madness and latent deviance, *Susati* is directly linked with Agnon's *Sippur Pashut* (1935). The latter work, published over sixty years later, lacks the overall social impact of *Susati*, but is in some ways a far more subtle and controlled character study. Agnon's only novel telling of a youth growing up at home, *Sippur Pashut* is also, on one level, a study of emasculation and madness, with undertones of latent deviance. Set at the turn of the century in the town of Shibbush (a play on Buczacz, Agnon's hometown, and meaning "disruption, confusion, disturbance"), it, too, depicts an unstable family in a time of social upheaval producing a son vulnerable to breakdown.

The madness of Hirshl Horowitz, like that of Israel in *Susati*, erupts out of his suppressed, intumed anger, which finds expression in a nightmare of being a sacrificial rooster. Hirshl's murderous rage at his wife, Mina, is evidently linked to his tortured bond with his mother, who has engineered this loveless marriage. Hirshl has no way of disposing of this anger other than by turning it in on himself. He develops an insane fear of slaughtering roosters and of being a slaughtered rooster. We are told by the narrator that Hirshl hides his knife at night to protect himself from his sado-masochistic impulses: "An angry man is not in control. In an impulse, he could kill every rooster on earth. Hirshl was right to hide his knife at night" (3:201).⁵

Like Israel, Hirshl in madness feels himself to be disembodied and out of control. His sexual identity, too, appears distorted. Hirshl deliriously addresses trees, as Israel does animals, as superior beings. When found raving in the fields near Shibbush, Hirshl pleads, "Don't slaughter me, I'm not a rooster" (*ibid.*, p. 218).

In his analysis of the rooster imagery in Agnon, the critic Baruch Kurzweil points out that the word for "rooster," *gever*, is the same as that for "man."⁶ Hirshl's terror at being a slaughtered cock could, therefore, symbolize his fear of emasculation or his sense of having been emasculated, deprived of the power to act forcefully in his interests. This interpretation is equally applicable to Israel in *Susati*. As Mendele provided Agnon's chief artistic

5. Unless indicated otherwise, quotations from Agnon are taken from *Kol Sippurav shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon*, 8 vols. (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1953–62).

6. B. Kurzweil, *Massot al Sippure S. Y. Agnon* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1970), pp. 216 ff.

model in Hebrew prose, it is inconceivable that Agnon was not influenced by this classic work. In addition, Mendele appears consciously to have used the cock as symbol of manhood: during a brief remission from madness, Israel is told of how, when mad, he bowed to a rooster and addressed it as *geber*, a man of valor. In this unconscious pantomime, he implicitly charged himself with unmanly weakness and ineffectuality.

In *Sippur Pashut*, similarly, Hirshl's sense of emasculation, sexual frustration, and suppressed rage at women appear to enhance his potential for deviance, whether consciously or not. He is particularly alarmed by his responsiveness to the touch of Yonah Toiber, the matchmaker who arranges his marriage.

Whatever Toiber's true character, Hirshl sees him in contrast with himself, as one who knows how to manage his life. Toiber's touch (3:180–81), feminine as his first name and surname suggest—Yonah in Hebrew and Toiber in Yiddish are feminine and mean “dove”—is similar both to that of Blumah (pp. 82–83), Hirshl's cousin, for whom Hirshl longs from a distance, and also of Hirshl's mother (p. 100).⁷ Even after his marriage to Mina, Hirshl remains guiltily attracted to Toiber's touch: “Isn't it a disgrace that when he takes my hand in his I want to kiss it. . . . How smooth are Yonah's hands” (p. 213). When Hirshl undergoes psychiatric treatment in Lemberg, the hand of Dr. Langsam takes over: “The strong hand that casually held his when he arrived and left was not soft like Toiber's, and he felt no wish to kiss it” (p. 227). This is about as far as Agnon could go in the mid-1930s in suggesting possible deviant impulses on the part of his central character.

Agnon goes further in his exploration of distortion and the exchange of sexual identity in later works, notably *Temol Shilshom* (1945) and *Shirah* (1971), both set in Palestine, at the turn of the century and in the 1930s respectively. Neither novel gives much detail about the family backgrounds of the central characters, but psychologically they have much in common with Hirshl in *Sippur Pashut*. As in the latter work, Agnon introduces fantasies of deviance as signs of pathology and social breakdown. Yitzhak Kummer in *Temol Shilshom* comes to Palestine with the idealism of a pioneer but gets bogged down in his life in Jaffa and Jerusalem, first becoming involved with Sonia, who does not care for him, and finally marrying Shifra, daughter of

7. For pertinent discussion of the feminine images and symbolism in *Sippur Pashut* in relation to the Hebrew literary tradition, see N. Aschkenasy, *Eve's Journey: Feminine Images in Hebraic Literary Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986).

an ultra-Orthodox zealot in Jerusalem. His story merges in the last quarter of the novel with that of Balak, a rabid dog who on one level appears to reflect Kummer's perverse impulses. In an act which seems to defeat the initial idealism of the novel, the dog bites Kummer, who contracts rabies and dies. In delirium shortly before death, Kummer has a series of hallucinations in which he mixes male and female with seeming indiscrimination. These fantasies suggest that the dog-bite, their cause, is a symbol of deviance and breakdown in which the lines of Kummer's psychological weaknesses suddenly become clear. In one fantasy, Kummer recalls characters who appear earlier in the novel, such as the taxidermist Arzaf and the hermit Sweetfoot, both described as men who know how to live alone, unencumbered by women as Kummer is: "When Yitzhak managed to remember Arzaf's name, he found him in Sweetfoot's shack stroking Tzutzik's teeth, talking to him as if he were female, saying *ati* to him. Tzutzik enjoyed being coddled like a bitch" (5:597). The fact that Kummer imagines the dog treated as female is significant in the scheme of a novel in which dogs are often compared with people. A homosexual component in Kummer's makeup might be implied here and also in a juxtaposed fantasy in which he finds his friend, Rabinowitz, in women's clothes.

Such fantasies of transvestism, with their hints of suppressed sexual deviance, appear also in *Shirah* (1971). In this, Agnon's last, unfinished novel, the central character, Manfred Herbst, has obsessive fantasies of Shirah, a nurse in the local lepers' hospital in Jerusalem. These fantasies, like those of Hirshl Horowitz in *Sippur Pashut*, are full of violence against women. At one point, for example, Herbst, consumed with lust, frustration, and rage at Shirah, craves for her to become a man: "He opened his mouth until the rows of his teeth stuck out and began to chatter against one another. He got up and screamed, 'And if you want to live, then live, only turn into a man'" (p. 164).

Mas'ot Binyamin ha-Shlishi, in contrast, has none of the sordid pathology and hints of sexual deviation of Agnon's writings, but treats a "marriage" of men in the spirit of a Purimspiel. This allows Mendele to get away with a great deal that would otherwise have been inadmissible. The story begins in the fictional shtetl of Batlon ("Idlersville"), with the pious luftmensch Benjamin, a married man with children, undergoing a crisis of identity not unlike that of Israel in *Susati*, in which he, too, withdraws from his family. Intent, likewise, on proving himself a man, belatedly, by making the hard

trek to the Land of Israel, he devotes himself to an ideal of tough masculinity diametrically opposed to his nature. He adopts the figure of Alexander the Great—this recalls the Judah Maccabeus fantasy in *Susati*—as a male model of identification and, in order to combat his natural temerity, tests himself: “He decided to act bravely, to suppress his nature, to root out all fear from his heart. He forced himself to walk out alone at night, to sleep alone in his room, to go past the town limits, even though it exhausted and terrified him” (p. 60).

Next, he finds himself an ideal “wife”: Senderl the Woman, malleable and ludicrous, henpecked, beaten, and effectively emasculated by his wife, careless of his indignities to the point of masochism, ultimately warmhearted and loveable. (He is called Senderl the Woman because his wife puts him to work around the house and he often does women’s chores.) Mendele depicts their friendship as a parody of a homosexual “marriage,” perhaps the only way he could have portrayed it at the time: Senderl is Benjamin’s “helpmeet” *ezer ke-negdo* (p. 62), as Eve is to Adam (Genesis 2:20); and the biblical and rabbinic language of sexual desire and union—*teshukah*, *zivug*, *hityachadut*—is frequently used to heighten the tone of ribald farce. “My blood boils and I long for you” (p. 63), *ve-elekha teshukati* (Genesis 3:16), exclaims Benjamin to Senderl on proposing that they “elope” together; Senderl’s agreement raises Benjamin’s ecstasy to new heights in a parody of romantic love not unworthy of Groucho Marx: “‘My soul, the air I breathe, let me kiss you,’ cried Benjamin as he hugged Senderl the Woman lovingly” (p. 64); and when Senderl pulls a bundle of coins, his life savings, from his pocket, Benjamin’s joy is unbounded: “‘Now, beloved one of my soul, you deserve a kiss on every limb [*kol ever me-evre gufkha*],’ exclaimed Benjamin joyfully, embracing Senderl the Woman and hugging him” (p. 64). On the morning of their departure from Batlon, Senderl appears disguised as a woman, and once Benjamin ascertains that the bustling figure in skirts and kerchief is not his wife in hot pursuit, he brightens up and gazes at Senderl like a groom at his beautiful bride, *ke-khala na’ah be-eyne doda* (p. 65). They fairly sail along until Senderl tires, as a woman does according to the Talmud (Berachot 32b), *tash kocho ki-nekevah* (p. 66). To his everlasting credit, Senderl had busied himself like a “woman of valor,” *eshet chayil*, to prepare food for the way (p. 67), unlike Benjamin whose preoccupations are masculine and spiritual—until he gets hungry. Each declares his inexorable attraction to the other, Senderl revealing that he was drawn to Benjamin “like

a blind person . . . like a calf after the cow,” and Benjamin: “Our marriage was made in heaven, you and I are body and soul” (p. 67). When they reach the town of Kesalon, they parade like a honeymoon couple, “like bride and groom in the seven days of feasting after marriage, alone together, strolling in the gardens, enjoying one another’s every word and glance” (p. 80).

This parody of marriage reaches its climax when the “newlyweds” unwittingly fall into the hands of *khappers*, this being Russia during the Crimean War of 1854–56, when Jews were legally empowered to seize other Jews without valid papers and, in return for payment, present them for recruitment in the Russian army. Unconsciously aware of the danger, they have complementary nightmares which betray their deepest fears. Benjamin, clasping the hand of his hero Alexander the Great—echoed, perhaps, in Hirshl’s fascination with the hands of Yonah Toiber in *Sippur Pashut*—wakes to find instead that he has crushed a flea (p. 81). Senderl for his part has a simultaneous nightmare of being a pregnant woman suffering labor pains (p. 82).

Some fifteen years after *Mas’ot Binyamin ha-Shlishi*, in “Bi-Yme ha-Ra’ash” (1894), Mendele depicted a second mock marriage in which, again, a pair of men, Mendele the Bookseller and Reb Leib, abandon their families in order to journey to the Promised Land: “We made a covenant to live together and neither would abandon his mate” (p. 407). Leib, like Senderl, is the “female” partner, and when the bedraggled travelers visit the Zionist representative (based on Leon Pinsker) in Odessa to ask about emigration—the story is set in 1881, after the outbreak of the pogroms—Leib “bent and curtsied and twisted up his face as women do” (p. 410). Later, when Leib looks in the mirror, Mendele imagines him to be a narcissistic female, and ugly to boot: “Putting on their makeup in front of the mirror, they tell themselves they are beautiful and unrivaled” (p. 413). There then follows a parody of the competitiveness often found among homosexuals: Mendele is sorely distressed at the sight of Leib accompanied by a young woman who, in fact, wants him not as a lover but as a Hebrew teacher. Leib appears to be betraying not only his wife but also Mendele, to whom he is “married,” and who assumes the worst when Leib, dressed in his Sabbath *kapote*, disappears with the woman. Here, too, Leib is identified as the feminine partner: “To make matters worse, I saw Leib’s everyday *kapote* hanging on the wall, and she seemed sad, her sleeves crusted with mud like the sleeves of a woman’s dress on Sabbath eve” (p. 415). Leib returns from his rendezvous spouting

Hebrew (the only time, incidentally, in the author's entire *oeuvre* when a character speaks Hebrew), full of excitement at being in demand as a Hebrew teacher. As in *Mas'ot Binyamin ha-Shlishi*, the climax is reached with the feminine partner's "pregnancy": "Reb Leib looked like a woman in labor struggling to give birth" (*ibid.*). Mendele sees that he has misjudged Leib, and now that Leib has found work, the 'marriage' is dissolved.

Against the background of these "marriages" of men, the hilarious matchmaking done by Mendele's fellow bookseller, Reb Alter, in *Sefer ha-Kabbtzanim* (1888Y, 1909H), while having a parallel in Sholom Aleichem's writings, seems to fit into a pattern. Reb Alter, seeing a chance to earn a hefty matchmaker's fee at the Yarmolinsk fair, hatches a match with excessive dispatch—to find that he has paired two grooms! This little tale, spiced with appropriate interjections of comic disgust, is, in fact, crucial in the structure of the novel; it triggers off the main story of Fishke the Lame, his disastrous marriage and his love for Beila the Hunchback (Alter's daughter, as it turns out). As elsewhere in Mendele's fiction, the women in *Sefer ha-Kabbtzanim* are either cruelly dominant and manipulative or fruitlessly yearned for, and divorce is common. Male bonds, such as those of Mendele and Alter, and, in the end, of Mendele and Fishke, are stronger and more stable. Mendele's initial amusement and pity for Fishke change to empathy and admiration once Fishke tells what it feels like to be in love, a state which Mendele has apparently never experienced.

This nose-in-the-candyshop-window mentality in sexual matters is shared by Agnon's creations, and for this reason, Agnon chose the expression *al kapot ha-manul*, "at the handles of the lock," from the Song of Songs (where it is the woman, not the man, who is in search of her beloved), as the title for his love stories. His characters are often diverted from healthy heterosexual attachments by obsessions with women who are out of reach or with the lover, or former lover, of the beloved. The most blatantly pathological example of such an obsession appears in the story "Ha-Rofe u-Grushato" (1941), in which the doctor is so tormented by thoughts of his wife's former lover that his marriage falls apart. At the climax of the story, the former lover becomes his patient. The extraordinary care with which he tends the man, whom he hates, might indicate an unconscious homosexual attraction and a narcissistic identification with him.⁸ (In the context of such writings, the ambivalent

8. "In all homosexual love, there is an element of narcissism." Storr, *Sexual Deviation*, p. 88.

hatred of Moshe Pinchas for Reb Shlomo in “Shne Talmide Hakhamim she-Hayu be-Irenu” [1946], which Moshe Pinchas admits is irrational, might be interpreted as a sign of suppressed deviance. This hatred apparently does not stem primarily from Reb Shlomo’s superior social and economic status, and it is least comprehensible to Moshe Pinchas, as a conversation with his mother reveals: “‘The man whom I hate [Reb Shlomo] wants to help me.’ His mother replied: ‘If so, why do you hate him?’ Rabbi Moshe Pinchas said: ‘I hate him as he brings out this contemptible quality of hatred in me.’ The old woman said, ‘I don’t understand what you’re talking about.’ He replied, ‘I don’t understand it either.’” [6:23].) The madness implicit in the doctor’s identification with his wife’s former lover is grotesquely underscored at the end of the story. The doctor reveals with chilling casualness that he chose to remain childless for fear that his children would look like the former lover. The evident fear of women and sex, and the childlike dependence brought home most forcibly in the final sentence—the doctor sits up in bed and calls to his former wife as a child to its mother—are part of a matrix of perversity, including latent homosexuality. A lesser, though comparably pathological, jealousy of and identification with the former lover, or lovers, appears in *Shirah*. When Shirah tells Herbst of her violent, tragic life, he is unresponsive except to think: which men did she know? (p. 25).

The doctor’s obsession in “Ha-Rofe u-Grushato” is foreshadowed in *Oreah Natah la-Lun* (1939), in which Samuel the writer travels from Palestine to his hometown of Shibbush, where he develops an obsession with the lover of the girl to whom he is attracted. Kurzweil writes of his “demonic affection” for Yerucham Chofshi and observes that “no one in the novel arouses the Guest’s envy more than Yerucham.”⁹ Yerucham appears to be everything that Samuel would like to be: he is tough and manly, he does hard physical work, he has his woman, and he lives for the present. Samuel, in contrast, cannot break away from the past, his onetime ambition to work the land in Palestine has come to nothing, and he lives alone, infatuated with Rachel from a distance. Physically, he is drawn to Yerucham, to his body, his eyes and hair, and his earthy fragrance (4:84, 421).

After “Ha-Rofe u-Grushato,” the obsession with the lover, or former lover, continues in *Temol Shilshom*, when Yitzhak Kummer finds himself drawn to Rabinowitz, Sonia’s former lover. Again, as in Samuel’s relationship with Yerucham in *Oreah Natah la-Lun*, Rabinowitz is implicitly contrasted

9. Kurzweil, *Masot al Sippure S. Y. Agnon*, pp. 61, 62.

with Kummer as a model of success, in business and with women, as he is unhampered by the psychological inhibitions which plague Kummer. He confides in Kummer that his secret is the constant striving to create new desires and satisfy them: "A man should get used to unnecessary things. If he has no great desire for them, he should create desire. If you have superfluous lusts, you lust to satisfy them. This way you strengthen your willpower and you can't sit idly, as lusts require money and money demands action. By forcing yourself to act and overcoming laziness, you build yourself up and the land grows with you" (5:454).

In the context of Kummer's problems with women, this talk of lust and action is suggestive. Kummer's lust for women is apparently stifled, as is Hirshl's in *Sippur Pashut*, by unresolved family conflicts and imbalances which have made him vulnerable to deviant impulses. These, as we have seen, emerge strikingly in his delirious fantasies after being bitten by the rabid dog, Balak. The dog might itself symbolize deviance, which, as Baruch Hochman suggests, is implicit also in the juxtaposition of Kummer's marriage with the fatal bite: "When Balak leaps at him from under Geronam's gaberdine, Yitzhak is presumably succumbing to his own rage and terror [toward women] and also to his wish that the violent old puritan take him as a man takes a woman. We feel it is no accident that Balak's assault comes so soon after Yitzhak's marriage."¹⁰

Another sign of perversion, including latent homosexuality, is the Agnon hero's attraction not to female peers as much as to older men who, again in contrast with himself, have succeeded in some masculine form of self-assertion, especially in business or public affairs. The most extraordinary relationship of this sort is that of the narrator and Mr. Gressler in "Pat Shlema" (1933): "This Mr. Gressler was my acquaintance, one of my special acquaintances. Since when had I known him? Possibly since the days when I reached a maturity of knowledge. Nor do I exaggerate if I say that from the day I met him we had never ceased to have a liking for one another [lit: our love did not cease]. Now, although all and sundry like him, I can say that he prefers me to all of them, since he has taken the trouble to show me all kinds of pleasures."¹¹

10. B. Hochman, *The Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 141.

11. Trans. I. M. Lask, in *Twenty-One Stories by S. Y. Agnon*, ed. N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 86.

The suggestiveness of this passage—it could almost be mistaken for the admission of a young woman flattered by the attentions of an older man—is enhanced by the hunger and heat which pervade the story and suggest the sexual cravings of a man who is living apart from his wife. Also, at the start of the story, Agnon describes him first as moving with the crowd, then breaking away on his own path. This breach with society has implications of deviance which the rest of the story appears to bear out symbolically. In a remarkable scene which combines elements of perversion and slapstick, the narrator rides in a carriage driven by Gressler (whose name might itself suggest forbidden appetites), who goes the wrong way: “I stood up, took the reins out of his hands, and turned the horses off in a different direction. Since I am not an expert in steering horses, the carriage turned over on me and Mr. Gressler, and we both rolled into the street. I yelled and shouted, ‘Take the reins and get me out of this!’ But he pretended not to hear and rolled with me, laughing as though it amused him to roll about with me in the muck.”¹²

While caution should be exercised in applying recent theories of sexual deviation to literary works written several decades ago, the comments of the psychiatrist Anthony Storr on an aspect of homosexuality might have some relevance to a story whose central images revolve around wholeness and unwholeness: “Heterosexual lovers habitually report that the partner with whom they are in love seems to fulfill their lives, to complete them, to make them whole. Homosexual lovers less often repeat such phrases because, inevitably, their lives lack this quality of wholeness.”¹³

Indeed, by the end of “Pat Shlema,” the narrator appears to give up on ever obtaining a “whole loaf.” In a restaurant, where he waits futilely for his supper—the story is clearly more than a comment on the standard of service in the restaurants of mandatory Palestine—he spies a boy munching bread similar to that which his mother baked when he was a boy. He would give everything, he thinks, for a mouthful. Confronted, if only symbolically, with his inner hunger and his latent deviances, he yearns to return to a state of sexual innocence—it is uncanny how frequently in Agnon children appear in situations of inner tension such as this.¹⁴ When the narrator hears Gressler riding past in his carriage, he cannot refrain from calling to him. The image

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 88–89.

13. Storr, *Sexual Deviation*, p. 89.

14. See D. Aberbach, *At the Handles of the Lock: Themes in the Fiction of S. J. Agnon* (Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 66–69.

from the Song of Songs of the unanswered lover at the handles of the lock appears here, as if to suggest the narrator's unremitting state of unwholeness (and perhaps also his feminine position).

Similarly strange states and encounters, dreams and fantasies appear in other stories, and they, too, have undertones of latent deviance. The story "Yedidut" (1932) takes place immediately after the narrator's wife has returned to their new home after a long absence. On his way to see her, he forgets where they live. He meets an acquaintance, Dr. Rischel: "'Get into a streetcar and come with me,' said Rischel. I wondered why he was giving me such unsuitable advice. He took me by the arm and got in with me. I rode on against my will, wondering why Rischel had seen fit to drag me into this tramcar. Not only was it not bringing me home, but it was taking me further away from my own street. I remembered that I had seen Rischel in a dream wrestling with me. I jumped off the tramcar and left him."¹⁵

On the one scrap of paper which had his address and which he had torn up, the narrator had written that in the Book of Job the real trial was God's: "He had a perfect and upright man, and He placed him in the power of Satan."¹⁶ Impulses of deviance—the satanic nature of which again brings *Susati* to mind—may be implied in the narrator's behavior as well as his dreams. He spends no time alone with his wife after her return, he forgets where they live, denies hysterically any contact with women in her absence, rides perversely away from home with Rischel, who, wrestling partner that he is in dream, might also be desired unconsciously as a sexual partner.¹⁷

Another fantasy with possible homoerotic implications appears in *Shvu'at Emunim* (1943). On the day after Susan reminds Jacob Rechnitz of their childhood oath to marry, he recalls a fantasy of his in which he, like the narrator of "Yedidut," is riding a tram: "Two young fellows got in and one sat on the other's knees. He heard them talking about Otto Weininger and his *Sex and Character*. The journey continued for an hour. And then, oddly enough, Jacob had found himself again sitting with Susan; and it was not yet eleven o'clock, although he had left Susan's house at ten, and she had accompanied

15. Trans. M. Louvish, in *Twenty-One Stories* by S. Y. Agnon, p. 76.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

17. The wrestling match between Gerald and Birkin in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* is clearly intended by Lawrence as symbolic of a desired sexual encounter. See Meyers, *Homosexuality and Literature*, pp. 146–147.

him halfway, and he had even travelled for an hour on the streetcar, and spent an hour at home.”¹⁸

While it is true that macho images of masculinity—the opposite of what is generally found in Agnon—may sometimes point to homoerotic tendencies, Rechnitz’s immaturity and his being something of a “womanly man,” a theme of Weininger’s book (as of *Susati*), might involve homosexual leanings, symbolized by the one boy sitting on the other’s knees. His inability to differentiate Susan from the image of her dead mother, whom he regards virtually as his own mother, supports this interpretation.¹⁹ The motif of retarded time suggests regression or fixation on his part, and difficulty in taking Susan as a man takes a woman.

Yet another fantasy with similar undertones occurs in *Ad Henna* (1952). The narrator, who, like most of Agnon’s protagonists, lives alone, separated from his family, has a nightmare which alludes to the midrash on Exodus 2:24, with sinister insinuations: “One night when I lay in bed, Pharaoh’s executioners came and fixed me in the walls of a brick house. I cried out from the walls, and the Holy One, blessed be He, took me out and put me to bed. And still the executioners choked me. In my struggle, they all fell down except for the official in the tax office who lived in the room opposite mine. . . . He had mistakenly entered my room, got on my bed, and lay on top of me” (7:68).

While Agnon’s treatment of deviance includes occasional humor, it is largely depicted as pathological, whereas Mendele is more inclined to a semicomical, satiric approach. It is interesting that Agnon’s picaresque novel, *Hakhmasat Kallah* (1930), which more than any of his other works shows the direct influence of Mendele,²⁰ particularly *Mas’ot Binyamin ha-Shlishi*, avoids defining the relationship between Reb Yudel and Nuta as a mock marriage. Agnon, in addition, gives no complete biographical account which would help explain the persistence of deviance in his writings, though biographical

18. Trans. W. Lever, *Two Tales of S. Y. Agnon* (London: Gollancz, 1967), p. 69.

19. On the dead mother in Agnon, see Aberbach, *At the Handles of the Lock*, pp. 81–99.

20. “No one writing in Hebrew in the 1920s concerning Eastern European Jewry of the early-nineteenth century and using various plot features of *Hakhmasat Kallah* could possibly do so without confronting Mendele psychologically and ideologically.” A. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 130.

parallels in fictional disguise may be detected throughout his works, central to which is *Sippur Pashut*.²¹

Mendele, however, in *Ba-Yamim ha-Hem* (1894, 1903–10, 1917H; 1899, 1912–13, 1917Y), gives a fairly clear biographical picture of the origins of problems which he addresses in his other works: his father's death when he was in his early teens, his mother's inability to support him and her remarriage, his consequent departure from home for the yeshiva of Slutsk, a prelude to his later life among beggars in the Pale of Settlement.²² He describes his indiscriminate hunger for friendship and love at the yeshiva, which may be taken to presage the male bonds which he portrays elsewhere: "The essence of Shloymele's soul was a mixture of love, eternal longing, affection and friendship. Like a flame to the wick, he reached out to catch hold, indiscriminately, to everyone, and to live with him in love and friendship as with his own soul" (p. 304).

Something, however, was wrong, for Mendele soon came to regard the yeshiva as a moral swamp in which he was sinking and becoming fouled. Not long after, he joined a band of beggars, an experience which permeated his life and writings. The identification with beggars, which Mendele's characters share with some of Agnon's (e.g. Hemdat, Menashe Chaim, Hirshl Horowitz, and Herbst),²³ may have to do with the fact that beggars, being out of society's pale, can in theory live freely and, if they wish, in accordance with their deviances. Their economic condition might also be regarded as an externalization of emotional poverty leading to possible deviance.

To sum up. Certain obscure features in Mendele and Agnon become clearer if the possibility of latent deviance, homosexuality in particular, is taken into account. The patterns of early family relationships in their works, while different in many ways, are recognized frequently to produce sons with homoerotic leanings. These patterns are particularly evident in Mendele's *Susati* and Agnon's *Sippur Pashut*, and it is suggested that they have caused, in part at least, the hero's emotional immaturity, his feelings of sexual inferiority and emasculation, and his fear of women, all symbolized most strikingly in the nightmares of being a slaughtered cock; and that all this is

21. See Aberbach, *At The Handles of the Lock*, p. 217, index s.v. "biographical basis of writings," "life and career of," "personality."

22. For a fuller account of the relationship between Mendele's early life experiences and his writings, see D. Aberbach, *Realism, Caricature and Bias: The Fiction of Mendele Mocher Sefarim* (Littman Library, 1993).

23. On the beggar motif in Agnon, see Aberbach, *At the Handles of the Lock*, pp. 72–73.

linked with their postadolescent identification with various types of models of ideal masculinity (though never of the Charles Atlas variety), whether successful *hommes d'affaires* or men who succeed with women where they themselves fail, or, in madness, with exaggerated or distorted images of masculinity; and with their strange dreams and fantasies of sex change or of men on top of one another: all these, obscure individually, suggest the possibility of latent deviance, particularly homosexuality, when viewed as a Gestalt. It is remarkable how much Agnon appears to have learned from Mendele, not just in imitation of the naive and pious narrator who is, in fact, a sophisticated artist, but also in the psychological depiction of characters and their inner life, their dreams and fantasies, as well as in the use of images of sexual immaturity and distortion as oblique counterparts to sickness and breakdown in the societies which they describe.

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