

Lori Hope Lefkowitz



Passing As a Man: Narratives of Jewish Gender Performance¹

Give a man a mask and he will tell you the truth.

—Oscar Wilde

All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women merely players.

—William Shakespeare (*As You Like It*)

Playing with a definition of identity that goes something like “you are who you aren’t,” in this essay I read the biblical episode of Jacob masquerading as Esau as one origin story of Jewish gender ambiguity and performative masculinity. Jacob, the son who is allied with his mother, dresses in animal skins to pass as Esau, and so, to pass as the kind of man who can inherit the patriarchy. Reading backwards from our own cultural moment—by which time the categories of “Jew” and “woman” have an overlapping history—the deception that earns Jacob the patriarchy reads as a story of his ability to fool his old blind father into believing that he possesses the requisite virility, signified by a metaphoric assumption of animality, to be a patriarch.

My focus here is on the example of Genesis 27, after which I discuss more broadly the trope of identity masquerade in the biblical stories of Joseph, Moses, and Esther, concluding with some speculation about how this biblical legacy has been reinscribed in modern conceptions of Jewish masculinities since the nineteenth century. Identity performance, it turns out, is central to the myths of the Hebrew patriarchy and matriarchy, both in biblical narrative and in the narrative traditions that elaborate on Hebrew Scriptures. Situating this story in its context among other biblical tales of masquerade and also at the beginning of cultural myths of Jewish gender

Lori Hope Lefkowitz is Sadie Gottesman and Arlene Gottesman Reff Kolot Professor of Gender and Judaism and Academic Director of Kolot: The Center for Jewish Women’s and Gender Studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Her most recent book, coedited with Julia Epstein, is *Shaping Losses: Cultural Memory and the Holocaust*.

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identity, I read this small episode as an instance of Jacob acquiring the narrative future by successfully passing as a man. The donning of animality (an artificial assumption of virility), the particular pretense of hunting an animal for fresh meat, Jacob's distinctive voice (which has also become susceptible to the interpretation of compromised masculinity), and patriarchal blindness (a Freudian figure for castration or male impotence) become gender-marked features by the middle of the nineteenth century. Similarly, other politically motivated Hebrews in biblical narrative assume roles of power using strategies that suggest both passing and mimicry (Joseph and Moses passing, for example, as Egyptians).² The term "man," without positive content of its own (in Judith Butler's words, an "ontologically consolidated phantasm" [313]), acquires in these contexts a set of related negative definitions: man means "not woman," "not Queer," and "not Jew."

This essay thus represents a response to the question with which Judith Butler closes *Gender Trouble*. She asks, "What other local strategies for engaging the 'unnatural' might lead to the denaturalization of gender as such?" (149). Behind that question is the explanation that immediately precedes it:

The deconstruction of identity . . . establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated. . . . The internal paradox of this foundationalism is that it presumes, fixes, and constrains the very 'subjects' that it hopes to represent and liberate. The task here is not to celebrate each and every new possibility *qua* possibility, but to redescribe those possibilities that *already* exist, but which exist within cultural domains designated as culturally unintelligible and impossible. . . . Cultural configurations of sex and gender might then proliferate or, rather, their present proliferation might then become articulable within the discourses that establish intelligible cultural life, confounding the very binarism of sex, and exposing its fundamental unnaturalness. (148–49)

I attempt such a redescription here based on biblical passing narratives, narratives which at once depend on and confound sets of alternating oppositions among the identity categories "man," "Jew," "woman," and "queer."

What exactly is going on when Jacob puts on hairy animal skins and pretends to be Esau? In Genesis 27, Jacob, who will become the last of the three patriarchs, receives his father Isaac's best blessing by successfully passing himself off as his older twin Esau. It is a campy sort of masquerade: Jacob covers his neck and arms in animal skins so that when touched by his old, blind father, he may feel like his hirsute brother. Their mother Rebecca, who has been eavesdropping on her husband and elder son, knows that Isaac has sent Esau to hunt and prepare fresh game so that he may bless Esau sated from this meal, and it is Rebecca who then dresses Jacob in Esau's finest clothing so that Jacob will carry Esau's scent. Jacob himself expresses some reluctance to go through with this plan, afraid that his father may detect the truth. But Rebecca, acting with a conviction that suggests divine sanction, urges Jacob on. She seems ambitious on Jacob's behalf and her response would, in later generations, sound stereotypical of the Jewish mother whose controlling behavior at once promotes her sons and compromises their masculinity: she says, in effect, "don't worry, I'll take the blame."

Although the disguised Jacob identifies himself as his brother, Isaac does register some suspicion. When Jacob presents a maternal stew made from a domesticated beast as if it were the hunted game, Isaac says he is surprised by how quickly Esau has returned from his hunt. Jacob then implicates God in the deception, saying that God gave him luck in the fields. Before giving Jacob the best blessing, Isaac once more signals his own suspicion by remarking that his son feels and smells like Esau but has the voice of Jacob.

Jacob's victory belongs at least in part to his mother, on whose behalf he performs, with her pulling all of the strings. Although both Isaac and Rebecca are said to disapprove of Esau's marriage to local Hittite women, Isaac apparently remains eager to confer the better blessing on Esau, his first-born son. Indeed, the whole of the myth may serve to explain Jacob's running away to marry not one but two of Rebecca's nieces. Jacob is so identified with the maternal that these marriages keep him as close to her as is legally possible without violating incest laws.

Considered from a psychodynamic point of view, this story is, in Erich Auerbach's memorable phrase, "fraught with background" (12) about family dynamics and alliances, and family secrets. Not only do we see the father and mother divided from each other, each apparently favoring a different son, but also the mother here may be understood to painfully betray both her husband and her elder son. The text's relative silence about the divisions and betrayals in this family of four, and the reader's acceptance of them, direct us to read for psychological rather than social realism. The text's realism is further compromised by the deception itself. Some suspension of disbelief is required for us to accept a parent's mistaking animal skins for the arms of his best-loved child. But again, since these parodic details are not experienced as parody, the reader adjusts expectations to read for the psychological insights characteristic of myth.

I am convinced that this foundation myth of patriarchy contributes to what later became a stereotype of compromised Jewish masculinity. It is easily read as that version of the Freudian family romance that has become both a caricature of the Jewish family and a formula for the production of homosexual men: a manipulative mother, a blind (read castrated) father, and the son whose confused identity emerges out of this family dynamic. And one can read this story, like other stories of the Hebrew patriarchy, as a victory of the more feminine domestic son over his more masculine rival brethren.³ The son who inherits the narrative future is younger, and this relative youth in their families (Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David) is represented through greater attachment to or dependence on the mother, greater vulnerability, and comparative smallness; the younger son is also less hairy and less wild and therefore has features that would in later generations—the nineteenth century in particular—be identified as feminine, contributing to the anti-Semitic characterization of the Jews as a feminized people.

An alternative psychological reading suggests itself: the sons of the patriarchs, the competing brothers, represent a split self-projection of a father anxious about his masculine identity. The older boy who is supposed to inherit according to the rules of primogeniture is represented as unbridled masculinity and the younger, whose role it is to reverse the rule of primogeniture, represents the threat of the more maternally-allied aspects of the patriarch himself.

If the brothers divide gendered traits between them, then Jacob's putting on of animal skins is a kind of cross-dressing. Allied with the maternal and in the feminized position in the family romance, Jacob goes to his father in drag. But since he presumably is a man, Jacob—and in so performing, he acts like his father Isaac before him and like his son Joseph after him—is a man in drag enacting masculinity. The patriarchy itself is thus built on the foundation of radically destabilized identity categories.

By this point in the biblical text Rebecca's subversive eavesdropping has already been established as characteristic of the matriarchy, prefigured in her mother-in-law Sarah's eavesdropping on the angels and Abraham in Genesis 18.⁴ And the victory of the smaller, younger, and gentler boy is similarly prefigured in Isaac's himself having inherited before his older half brother Ishmael. The matriarchs, working conspiratorially with the divine, manipulate the patriarchs and acquire power through the more domestic son whom the mother prefers. The relationship between God and mother disempowers the human patriarch as the biblical patriarchal narratives represent God as the ultimate father of history in a way that compromises the sexual potency and domestic authority of human fathers. The instability of patriarchal identity is underscored by another contrast between the Divine and human father. God—Yahweh—carries the name "I am that I am"; Y-H-V-H derives from the verb "to be." God is what He is, while Jacob has to be who he is not in order to inherit the patriarchy.⁵ Although patriarchy has since come to signify the grounding origin of masculinity, the stories that establish the binary terms "matriarchy" and "patriarchy" themselves represent an always already feminized, insecure, and undermined patriarchy.

Each of the first two biblical patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac, fantasizes a masculine patriarchy in the person of the first-born son who is beloved precisely because he is different from the father. In Abraham's case, he is commanded by Yahweh, the Father God, however, to "listen to Sarah" when she wants to banish Ishmael. Later, Ishmael is further relegated to the place of psychic fantasy when Abraham is commanded by God to take his son, his "only son" to be sacrificed (Genesis 22:2). This "only" son is, of course, Isaac, and Abraham is famous for his act of surrender. Because of the divine alliance with the matriarchs, the surrender is also articulated along a gendered binary, and the human father is twice the loser in adulterous and Oedipal triangles: first, to God and wife, and second, to wife and the younger son who is Oedipal victor. The fantasy of independent masculinity is then self-incorporated in the younger son who becomes a patriarch as his brother/double/twin fades out of the narrative future. For both Isaac and Jacob, life defeats the boy's effort to grow to independent manhood (independence from women must remain a wish), as it is the domesticated child who succeeds only through what may be experienced as the shameful, and even shaming, ruses of his mother.

Abraham and Isaac lose Ishmael when Sarah insists on banishing her bondswoman and son because she sees Ishmael "playing with Isaac" (Genesis 21:9). I want to pause over the ambiguity of Ishmael's crime of "playing with" Isaac. Some interpreters add simply that this was wild, ungentle play. But because Isaac's name in Hebrew (Yitzchak—literally "he will laugh") derives from the verb that means

“laugh, play, or mock,” if we preserve the Hebrew word play, Ishmael can be said to “isaac Isaac.” Among the alternative rabbinic, midrashic interpretations of this activity are that Ishmael’s play is homoerotic, and Sarah is therefore justified in protecting her young son; another reading is that in isaacing Isaac, Ishmael is pretending to be Isaac, dramatically enacting Isaac’s role as future patriarch. The rabbis who offer this interpretation, reading retrospectively from Jacob’s successful identity masquerade vis à vis his brother, find strong support for their point that Sarah has good reason for concern that the rehearsal that she catches might ultimately lead to a performance which could threaten her son’s position as inheritor. On the other hand, if we see the brothers as representing the split self-projection of an internally divided and anxious father, then the competing readings of Ishmael’s “playing with” and “playing at being” Isaac are reconcilable as a representation of mirror-stage narcissism, autoeroticism, and homoeroticism. Sarah is controlling her son(s)’ self-playing to exercise maternal authority over the kind of man who will be inheritor.

In the case of the twins of the next generation, the mother’s choosing one over the other has historically commanded more explicit interpretation (both being equally hers), and these interpretations do indeed waver between uniting and splitting the brothers’ identity. Some medieval readings of Jacob’s masquerade as Esau offer the suggestion that Jacob does actually become Esau when he tries on the role. This interpretation is consistent with the medieval belief that clothes literally make the man. A woman who dares dress as a knight and strap a sword around her middle might awaken to find herself literally transformed.⁶

The ambiguity of Jacob’s identity with respect to Esau is also reflected in the history of interpretation of their twinship. Some commentators, such as Philo, read these twins as complete opposites (Philo says they are opposite in all ways except their arms, which explains Isaac’s mistake in remarking that “these are the arms of Esau”); others, such as the medieval commentator Rashi, read them as closely similar twins. According to the latter view, they began life identical, including their voices; thus, the distinctiveness of Jacob’s voice is so subtle that it is not surprising that Isaac doubts his hearing. And Avivah Zornberg brilliantly reads Jacob as literally acquiring and assimilating the Esau persona of wild complexity (and sexuality) into his own smooth identity as a step in earning the blessing and making himself fit for the patriarchy.

I am adding to Zornberg’s analysis the suggestion that the masquerade integrates sons who are split halves of the father: independent (masculine) ego-ideal and mother-dependent (feminine) child. Retrojecting the twinning of (opposite) sons into the story of Ishmael and Isaac, and reading that twinning as opposing forces within the father (the patriarchy), leads me to the suggestion that the game of “isaacing Isaac” is autoerotic and narcissistic. The episode of Sarah banishing the older boy to protect the younger reflects a maternal impulse to keep her son a child as she polices his (self-)play. In the story of Isaac and Ishmael, the free, undisciplined (masculine) boy is banished, leaving the domesticated man who is fit for company and women. This man is thereby made feminine—or better, brought under maternal control—to become marriageable. Paradoxically, masculinity is compromised by the very gesture that takes the son from what Freud would codify as a stage of narcissistic ho-

moeroticism to the presumption of heterosexuality. Once blind and old himself, Isaac has his own fantasy of masculine authority in his thwarted wish to prefer Esau. It is in Jacob's effort to fulfill that fantasy that the patriarchy's femininity takes on the political character of gender masquerade or drag. The next generation—which twins the brothers and adds the masquerade—duplicates this process in a way that deepens the confusion of gender categories: Jacob, under total maternal control, first plays at being a man like Esau, then is forced to separate from home, marry two women, father twelve sons, and become the ultimate patriarch.

Discussions of gay camp challenge precisely the Freudian idea that homosexuality is narcissistic sexuality by interrogating the idea that gender identity is based on essential or meaningful differences. Gregory W. Bredbeck, who confers on Oscar Wilde “almost mythical status as the origin of modern gay Camp” (Meyer 51), analyzes Oscar Wilde's “Narcissus” and campiness as a critique of the Freudian equivalence of homosexuality and narcissism. Bredbeck explains: “Narcissus in the Wilde, then, seems to display the idea of identity as difference—as subject *to* difference(s) *and* the subject *of* difference(s)—and, in the process, to display the cultural narratives that seek to legislate what this difference should or should not be” (69). Moe Meyer explains, in his introduction to *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, that “[c]amp, or queer parody, has become an activist strategy” (1). Read as allegory, Jacob's success works like queerness in Meyer's sense that: “What ‘queer’ signals is an ontological challenge that displaces bourgeois notions of the Self as unique, abiding, and continuous while substituting instead a concept of the Self as performative, improvisational, discontinuous, and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts” (2–3).

Meyer's celebratory description of queer parody is strikingly similar to Otto Weininger's disparaging description of Jewish men in his best-selling treatise *Sex and Character* (1903): “The congruity between Jews and women further reveals itself in the extreme adaptability of the Jews. . . . in fact the mode in which, like women, because they are nothing, they can become everything” (qtd. in Pellegrini 50). Ann Pellegrini, pointing to the work of Daniel Boyarin, Jay Geller, and Sander L. Gilman (and I would add Howard Eilberg-Schwartz to this list) notices the contemporary interest in tracing “the persistence and impact of a certain homology: ‘Jew-as-woman’” (50), and Pellegrini directs our attention to Weininger's significance in joining the “Jewish question” and “the woman question.” Pellegrini concludes that because Weininger represents the “eternal Jew” through the “eternal feminine,” he “articulates the ‘racial’ difference of ‘the’ Jews through the ‘sexual’ difference ‘man/woman.’ In this interarticulation, Jewishness becomes as much a category of gender as of race” (50). This homology has the disquieting effect of queer parody. Jewish men—at once as “adaptable as women” and positioned as women (Isaac, Jacob)—expose gender itself as an effect, as imitation, and as performance, and align with a developing concept of “queer” in the cultural imagination after Freud.

The “eternal feminine” of the Jew is of course a historically limited “feminine” with a corresponding masculinity that belongs peculiarly to the period from Charles Darwin through the 1970s. In placing the Jew in the position of the feminine,

Eilberg-Schwartz's *God's Phallus* and Boyarin's *Unheroic Conduct* both invite us to imagine a post-Romantic Western femininity. For Eilberg-Schwartz, the Jew-as-woman (in particular as soulmate to the masculine Divine) implies an unconscious and anxious homoeroticism; for Boyarin, the Jew-as-woman means having values that go against the grain, a Jewish alternative value system that, as in the work of Carol Gilligan, privileges qualities which we have come to associate with the female values of Jane Austen's drawing rooms. Even these theories occasionally assume a continuous definition of what makes a man and of what defines masculinity, suppressing the variability of ideal masculinity among cultures and over time. Eighteenth-century high culture in Europe defined masculinity as heightened feelings (the cult of sensibility), in a culture in which the well turned out male aristocrat wore powdered wig, high heels, frilly blouse, and spoke and carried himself in ways that were later characterized as feminine. It was only when the nineteenth century began to redefine man as animal rather than angel that idealized masculinity became increasingly beastly, took on the appearance of the hairy Esau. The famous anti-Semitic categorization of Jewish men as being as smooth and manipulative as Jacob, "like women," flourishes in this period of redefinition of masculinity. (At the same time, a competing stereotype of the Jewish man as bent, old, and bearded—in the style of Shylock and Fagin—also flourished.)

When social Darwinism redefined "man" as an "animal," it became increasingly desirable to be beastly: hairy, strong, wild, naturally selected for victory in the new marketplace. And it is against this background that Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and ultimately Woody Allen become suspect men, that "Jewish man" becomes a phrase that—in the words of a detractor—is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. Christian culture complemented the all-powerful patriarchal God with the more feminine male divine son, Jesus, and when the nineteenth-century Darwinian revolution challenged biblical authority, Christian secular culture identified masculinity as animal and identified itself as Esau. Jews and women were left behind in an old paradigm of aristocratic gentility, and the "man as beast" replaced the ideal masculine figure of eighteenth-century Europe.

Queerness as oppositional stance presents itself as a political threat that has implications for how we might understand nineteenth-century anxiety about (male) Jewishness as a variant on womanliness. Citing Thomas A. King's contribution to his volume, Meyer writes that "the history of queer practices . . . has valuable implications for marginal social identities in general. . . . Queer sexualities become, then, a series of improvised performances whose threat lies in the denial of any social identity derived from participation in those performances" (3). The threat of the Jew in modern European culture may also derive in part from the perception that Jewish men too enact a "series of improvised performances" (Weininger's characterization of their feminine "extreme adaptability") and are without a stable self. Jacob's donning of animality is in this regard a kind of carnival practice of upside-down identity. Camp performance in general conforms to Mikhail Bakhtin's description of carnival practices that have both conservative and subversive functions: such gender disruptions reinforce what are considered to be meaningful gender differences even as such reversals subversively undermine the inevitability of these identity categories.

That masquerade or mimicry has a political effect with a psychological overlay has been well described by Homi K. Bhabha in his discussions of colonial “mimicry” of a colonizing culture. Bhabha’s analysis of colonial mimicry applies to Jacob’s mimicry of Esau in ways that further clarify the disturbing effects of enactments of Jewish masculinity. Bhabha writes that mimicry is “almost but not quite” (the scent and feel, perhaps, but not the voice); mimicry is a “double articulation”: “a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which . . . poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers” (86). Jacob mimics masculinity as other Hebrews (his son Joseph, later Moses) will mimic political power. In these Jewish stories, drag and passing are overlapping strategies of miming power that leave a gap within the self, the very space that enables self-deception. Bhabha’s insight that mimicry is like a presumed original but with a telling—and annoying—difference clarifies how the perception of such difference inspires disgust (and self-disgust). In this way, the construction of the Jewish man imitating “gentile” masculinity signifies a particular kind of homelessness. The mimicry and identity masquerade in stories about the Jewish patriarchy stand at the beginning of a tradition in which the Jewish man is conceived of as alienated: not at home either in the world or in his own body.

In the unconscious of post-Romantic Western culture, the Jew works as a fun-house mirror always revealing the instability of both gender and sexual identity. The Jew is a frightening reminder that the categories by which culture confidently asserts the knowability and naturalness of gender and sexuality have no reliable boundaries. And it is the potential hiddenness, the potential the Jew has to pass into privilege (a potential of the light-skinned black) that exaggerates the anxiety. Sander Gilman reminds us that the identifying sign of circumcision is a site of castration (disempowering; woman-making) and needs to be hidden because it inspires both anti-Semitism and Jewish self-hatred. Moreover the language of the Jews, which can serve both as mask of the successfully hidden Jew and reveal, by its difference, Jewishness (Jews are thought have private languages and to speak differently—for Weininger, they speak like women), is a similar sign of ambivalence. Thus, those whose speech is “too Jewish” (Jackie Mason is Gilman’s example) and those who efface their Jewishness (hidden Jews) are a source of distress to Jews and non-Jews alike.

In “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” Judith Butler writes that “[d]rag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation” (313). If we go further with Butler that “compulsory heterosexual identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasms of ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real” (313), then both Jacob’s passing as Esau and heroines of the Hebrew Bible who pass as harlots (whose masquerades result in masculine-style political and military victories) participate in a legacy of gender confusions. Femininity as drag is amply attested in biblical stories: Tamar (Genesis 38), Yael (Judges 4), Delilah (Judges 16), Judith, Esther and perhaps even Ruth (in the biblical books that carry these heroines’

names) all acquire political power—in some cases deadly political power—by enacting a heightened, and false, femininity that conforms to Joan Riviere’s turn-of-the-century description of femininity as masquerade or drag. Based on this paradigm, the Jewish woman in popular twentieth-century stereotypes is also imagined to masquerade, enacting a false and heightened femininity or harlotry; “passing as a woman,” she too acquires subversive political power analogous to the patriarchal power that Isaac, Jacob, Joseph (and later Moses) acquire when they “pass as men.” The consolidated figures of the Jewish man and woman in particular underscore uncertainty: this apparent man may be Jew or queer; this apparently inconsequential woman may be a deadly political enemy. In so passing, Jews remind us of the falseness and fragility of political power. In the presence of the Jew and the queer, we feel the anxiety of the Hegelian master.

Jacob’s passing as a man, like Isaac’s textual defeat over Ishmael, leave textual traces of anxiety and guilt. The anxiety is contained and the guilt is assuaged through misogynistic textual gestures in the repetitive representations of mothers and wives. From the beginning of biblical narrative and Eve’s sin through the controlling matriarchy and a string of female bedroom deceivers, the blame for disruption of usual power and gender hierarchy in the family is displaced onto women. Jacob’s acquisition of two wives, and Leah masquerading as Rachel, is then another compensatory textual gesture that serves to console Jacob about his own masculinity. The doubling of wives in sisters and the consequent deprivation of intimacy between the women works to give the appearance of restabilized gender roles, covering the unstable gendering of men at the foundation of the patriarchy.

Interestingly, in one rabbinic midrash Leah succeeds in deceiving Jacob as to her identity in bed because her sister Rachel is under the bed throwing her voice and thus throwing off Jacob (among other places, the story appears in Buber 28). The kinky incestuousness of this midrash—three in the bedroom—follows naturally from other moments of passing in the Genesis narratives. Both Abraham and Isaac, for political reasons and in what seem to be lifesaving lies, pass their wives off as their sisters. Again these episodes carry ambiguous import with respect to passing because in both cases the patriarchs are caught by those in power and chided for their deception. In Isaac’s case, he is caught because he is seen “playing with” (isaacing) Rebecca (the same formulation as Ishmael playing with Isaac), and the Pharaoh thereby understands that this is no sister.

Many biblical passing narratives are explicitly political, and in these the political and sexual often overlap. In the concluding chapters of Genesis, Joseph, also a younger favored son, is a boastful dreamer who flaunts the garment of favoritism. Once sold into slavery, he declines to be seduced by his master’s wife, and these details lead some medieval commentators to characterize Joseph as queer: a drag Queen, a cross dresser (*Genesis Rabbah* 174). He also becomes an Egyptian (encoded as feminine in Greek and much Western literature) and rises to a position something like secretary of state. When his brothers come to plead for food, he is so changed as to be unrecognizable to them. It is a threshold moment: they appear and request food. Had they never appeared Joseph could presumably have lived out his years without ever recovering the identity of his youth. As it is, Joseph could have

given them food and sent them away. Alternatively, he could have punished them for their cruelty and turned them away empty-handed. Theoretically, he could have chosen not to out himself as a Hebrew. But the comfort of the text lies in the clear implication that he has no choice. The story takes for granted that Joseph is destined to someday reclaim his place as a leader among his brothers, and the narrative trajectory requires his eventual unmasking. In psychoanalytic terms, we have no choice but to repeatedly enact our stories; identity is repetition compulsion.

The requirement to unmask one's Hebrew identity recurs in Hebrew Scriptures. Queen Esther is queen of the realm when her people of origin come under a death sentence. She is told that she can reveal her Jewish identity to King Ahasuerus as part of the plan to save her people or someone else will have to save the Jews. *Performing* as sex object, she chooses in this guise to out herself as a Jew, though again the text implies that she has no choice. There too there is a threshold moment when Esther can (and yet clearly cannot) choose to keep her identity closeted. Moses, raised in Pharaoh's court, is the most reluctant spokesman for the Hebrews, but he is also compelled to "be himself," that is to be true to some birth identity that demands that he lead the people out of Egypt. Joseph and Moses, who both spend part of their lives passing as Egyptians, bracket the Egypt story.

If this secretary has a secret, is passing, then any secretary could be passing, could be Jewish or Queer, or (to extend the range of biblical examples) get you in trouble by being somebody's wife (though she claims to be a sister). In the film *Europa, Europa*, the hero's passing as non-Jew (first German, then Russian) is threatened always by the circumcised penis which never leaves the viewer's consciousness because it could, at any moment, betray his identity, and in the filmic narrative, the homosexual interest he attracts is thereby represented as doubly life-threatening. The holocaust story is full of episodes of passing, leaving open the question of how many born Jews passed permanently into non-Jewishness. Those who spoke German and who possessed the language skills to be effective mimics stood a better chance of successful passing.

That never coming back out of non-Jewishness threatens the classification system in ways that leave us anxious is suggested by the strength of public reaction to the revelation that former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright is the daughter of born Jews who lost their own parents because of the deadly Jewish identity. The Albright narrative rewrites the biblical stories of sexual and power politics and passing as exemplified by Joseph and Queen Esther, both of whom are compelled by the plots in which they figure to pass back and thereby reassure us of the clarity of identity; and finally, her story suggests that some family secrets (perhaps even your own) are never exposed and may pass on out of the world. The Albright family's having not passed back and Albright herself having not bothered to carefully read and interpret her family history as yet another identity story of lifesaving Jewish passing seems so transgressive because this secretary's secrets, like Isaac standing before his son, invite a terrifying question: how can one know the identity of even one's most intimate relations? You might not be who you are.

In these stories the principal location of self-defining difference is ultimately *within* the self. Although it has been oft remarked that Jacob comes to the patriarchal

position through trickery, it is rarely commented on that the ruse is so odd as to be parodic. This returns me to an earlier question: how could even an old, blind patriarch mistake animal hair for the human arms of his child? We can read this episode as a gender performance in which no one is really fooled. There is, of course, ample evidence that Isaac is not entirely fooled. He twice questions the identity of his son, and before giving Jacob Esau's blessing, Isaac observes that his son feels and smells like Esau but has the voice of Jacob.⁷ Our attention is directed to the sensual basis of all efforts to know someone else. If the favorite son can be smelled, touched, and listened to and still be misrecognized, indeed how can we know even our most intimate relations? This moment, like the Albright family story, raises the fundamental epistemological question: What does it mean to know? Alternatively, how does the self split for purposes of self-deception?

Passing is about thresholds, and thresholds are places marked by anxiety. In the Exodus narrative the threshold is marked by blood so that the angel of death will know the unknowable, that here is a Jew who should therefore escape death. In Judges 19, the dead body of a rape victim lies draped over the threshold. Passing is the opposite of failing; a rite of passage is a success, the crossing of a boundary. "To pass" is to get away with pretending to be who you are not.

But we are who we are not. Was Esther not herself when she was seducing the king? Were Moses and Joseph not themselves as court Jews? Harry Brod makes this important point in his analysis of the Superman narrative as a Jewish story. Invented by two Jewish boys during the depression, Superman and Clark Kent (Esau and Jacob?) are one man. Actually, Superman, the resident alien, is the real person; Clark Kent the disguise. Lois Lane loves Superman. Clark Kent loves Lois Lane. But there is a gap in the narrative logic: If Superman is Clark Kent then Lois Lane and Clark Kent love each other. But they don't. And why does Superman (presumably the real self) require Lois to love the Clark Kent (the Jacob or the Jewish) persona?

To pull the thematic thread of deception and lifesaving lies from biblical narrative through contemporary stereotypes of Jews in popular culture is to discover stories of sexual and political passing or masquerade running continuously throughout the fabric of the myth of Jewishness in both the textual tradition and the representation of Jewish history. Bringing Butler's discussion of drag and theories of camp to the subject of Jewish ethnicity suggests that Jewishness is always already sexualized and without positive content, a projective anxiety of heterosexual gentility about psychic reality, identity, and the meaningful content of subjectivity. And Butler reminds us that passing is a kind of failing. So it is that another definition of passing is death, and this passing away—the ultimate failure of identity boundaries—may be the source of the anxieties about which I have been writing. Insisting on the stability of categories of sex/gender and race/ethnicity may be an elaborate Victorian defense against death and death's easy and absolute erasure of identity boundaries. The enactments and hiddenness of both queerness and Jewishness, like Jacob's inheritance of the patriarchy by pretending to be who he wasn't, situate us on the razor's edge that is life itself, reminding us that however high the stakes for which games of identity performance are played, the final role—the final identity—knows no distinctions and no boundaries.

ENDNOTES

1. I am grateful to David Sachs, M.D. for fruitful conversations and to the Institute of the Philadelphia Association for Psychoanalysis for the fellowship that provided me with the gift of Dr. Sachs's mentorship. My thanks also to Ma'yan's (New York) and AJCongress' (Los Angeles) feminist research groups, and especially to Ilana Blumberg, Catherine Keller, Aryeh Cohen, and Robin Goldberg for their attention to a draft of this work.
2. Although passing has generally been associated with transgressing racial boundaries, master plots of the Queer Story and the Jewish Story also express anxieties about passing. In stories and in theory, the figure of the Jew, the Black, and the Queer is sometimes described as "closeted," as "passing" in dominant culture in ways that leave textual traces of anxiety. That anxiety, in its turn, requires containment. I see in these plots shared pathologies and shared resistances. I do also want to acknowledge here the limits to this kind of comparison. When Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick sees in the story of Queen Esther an example of coming out of the closet, her main objective is to underline not the similarities but rather the differences between the gay and the Jewish experience of coming out (67–90). Although my use of this vocabulary presumes similarity, I do not mean to press the analogy or elide the complexities within identities or of overlapping identities or crossed histories.
3. I have discussed this pattern in "Coats and Tales: Joseph Stories and Myths of Jewish Masculinity."
4. See my essay "Eavesdropping on Angels and Laughing At God: Theorizing a Subversive Matriarchy."
5. I am grateful to David Richter for this point.
6. See, for example, Roberta Davidson's essay on medieval romance and elaborations on the work of historians of the body, Michel Foucault and Thomas Laqueur, in Epstein and Straub.
7. I recently had a personal insight into this identity game. Wakening my five-year-old child for school, I playfully tickled her and asked, "Who is this little girl in bed?" She laughed sleepily and answered—mischievously—"Ronya," which is her elder sister's name. I found myself playing along: "Good morning, Ronya! Did you shrink in your sleep?" I later reflected: the game was played for no stakes. Perhaps Isaac too was simply indulging an envious little brother. The younger has an ongoing fantasy easily expressed close to sleep, when defenses are low. And finally, I thought that my younger child, Samara, was saying: "your question is silly; my answer has to be silly." More specifically, "If you will pretend not to know me, I will pretend to be someone else." It is a game of I-know-that-you-know-that-I-know.

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