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Women Protagonists in the Hebrew Morality Composition *Tzemach Tzadiq* by Leon Modena

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Abstract: This article proposes a reading of three stories from the Hebrew morality book *Tzemach Tzadiq* [The Righteous Shoot], composed by Leon Modena (1571-1648) and based upon the 13th century Italian treatise *Fiore di Virtu* [The Flowers of the Virtues]. These stories, which present plots with female protagonists, demonstrate women's mystique in this early Modern Hebrew compilation and reveal the attitude of Modena and his readership towards women who deviated from the norm. Although *Tzemach Tzadiq* is a hegemonic patriarchal text, it reveals an intra-gender relationship where these female protagonists protest against their social inferiority by means of self-violence.

I. The literary context

This article deals with the question of the ability of Early Modern Hebrew literature to serve as an expressive medium for hidden subversive feminine voices.

The question of female literary representation is, first of all, a result of the fact that these works signify the male viewpoint of the author and of the direct readership. As such, literary figures of women usually cause the male reader distress, great admiration, or both. As Simone de Beauvoir claimed,[1] "the feminine mystique" is the manner in which western male authors represented female characters in their writings. Those literary works shaped and established the myth of the woman as the man's "other": the woman represents the natural, the feral, the unexpected, and the uncontrollable. The woman was both delicate and at the same time threatening, the object of desire but also a source of fear due to the mystery surrounding her. Woman was the unexplored extreme within the man-woman relationship, but throughout Western history, and with the help of control systems created by the major monotheistic religions, she was perceived as the weak and weakened side of the equation. Consequently, claims de Beauvoir, these writers fixed the conceptual gap between men and women in an extra-literary reality, and in fact, literature and reality create and represent one another in a manner that is inseparable and immutable.

[1] de Beauvoir 1952.

Women's mystique in early modern Hebrew literature will be demonstrated below by means of the Hebrew morality book *Tzemach Tzadiq* [The Righteous Shoot], first printed in Venice by the printer Daniel Zanetti in 1600. It was composed by the rabbi, poet and preacher Judah Aryeh (Leon) Modena (1571-1648)[2] and is based upon a 13th century Italian treatise named *Fiore di Virtu* [The Flowers of the Virtues].[3]

According to Modena's own introduction, *Tzemach Tzadiq* is a translation of a popular Italian moral essay called *Fiori di Virtu* (hereinafter: FDV), whose authorship is the subject of differences of opinion but which was apparently written by a Franciscan monk. The essay became very popular in manuscript and was first printed in Venice in 1487. Later, it was also translated into other European languages and printed in many editions.[4] As has been shown in previous articles, Modena translated FDV neither fully nor accurately, introducing numerous changes, rewriting the text, omitting passages, and adding entire chapters of his own.[5]

The very act of the translation-adaptation of *Tzemach Tzadiq* is indicative of the openness of Modena and his Jewish readership to the Christian world, their thirst for new content, and curiosity about the world around them. The author and his audience, and probably the owner of the printing house that published the book, were therefore deeply embedded in the distinctive Renaissance experience that took shape under the influence of Greek and Roman culture, together with the humanist culture of the Renaissance.[6] This open-minded attitude towards Christian culture not only characterized Hebrew essays, but was also a common feature of contemporaneous and subsequent Yiddish essays, all over Europe.[7]

Tzemach Tzadiq is comprised of 40 chapters, each of which discusses a positive or negative quality, as evinced by behavior or nature, with the author, in the role of society's representative, praising or condemning.[8] This is exemplified, among other things, by a story—the accepted practice in many morality books. About a third of the Italian stories in FDV were replaced in *Tzemach Tzadiq* by stories from rabbinical literature: the Talmud, the classic Midrash and later Midrash. A feature that gives *Tzemach Tzadiq* its unique nature is the proportion devoted to stories relative to the book as a whole. *Tzemach Tzadiq* includes 35 narratively distinct stories presented in their full text, representing about half of the total text.

Although the Hebrew adaptation is very different from the Italian source, one cannot ignore the fact that Jewish men and women were probably exposed to the Italian version of the compilation, as well as to its modification to other European languages. But one should take into consideration that Jews were more familiar with foreign oral traditions

[2] See: Weinberg 2003: 137-157. For more on Modena and his cultural endeavors, see: Adelman 2012: 125-137; Bland 2009: 59-66; Dan 1976: 197-198; Malkiel 1987: 435-445; Safran 1987: 381-398; Shmueli 1942.

[3] On the connections between the Italian and Hebrew versions see: Weinberg 2003; Zabar 2003.

[4] The first Italian edition in print: *Fiori di Virtu*, Venice 1487.

[5] Weinberg 2003.

[6] As shown by Reines 2003: 39-54.

[7] See for example the *Bove Bukh* which was translated from Italian to Yiddish in the 16th century. Rosenzweig 2015; Shmeruk 1981.

[8] These are the themes of the chapters in order: general love, love of God, respect for parents, love of friends, love of women, jealousy, joy, worry, peace, anger, kindness, cruelty, generosity, stinginess, admonition, flattery, diligence, stupidity, justice, injustice, loyalty, deceit, truth, lies, courage, cowardice, greatness, boasting, consistency, fickleness, restraint, lust, humility, pride, celibacy, gluttony, chastity, adultery, honesty.

than with written ones. We have only limited evidence of Jews who were dedicated enough to own and read non-Jewish texts.

Despite this, the stories included in the Hebrew *Tzemach Tzadiq* are extremely important because they combine new narrative traditions with the heritage of the sacral language. They bring into the heart of the Jewish culture a new branch of literary plots. *Tzemach Tzadiq* is the source and the origin of a new narrative tradition in Hebrew literature, and at the same time, the new stories reaffirm traditional male values in a new sociological context.

Even if *Tzemach Tzadiq*'s readership were familiar with those stories from local oral performance, bringing those familiar traditions into Hebrew imbued the tales with special significance. Firstly, not every tale is important enough to be printed in the holy language, and secondly, the stories come from Modena, an important figure in the community. Those circumstances gave these tales special authority.

The Hebrew print industry in this period was based in Italy, and its products were distributed all over Jewish communities in Europe, North Africa, and the Mediterranean. Polish print, for example, was strictly connected to Italian print by means of cultural influences but also by employment and trade. Jewish Polish print was actually imported from Italy.[9] When a book was published in Hebrew, it allowed Jews from all over the world to read it. Thus, Modena's book was universal in that it disseminated his ideas all over the Jewish world, but was also local in that it presented local narrative traditions.

The Hebrew compilation contains 35 stories interspersed with moralizing prose.[10] Similar to other morality books of its time, *Tzemach Tzadiq* aspires to inculcate collective values and encourage social conformity. Of its 35 stories, only three focus on women protagonists. Those three stories will be presented and discussed here, and we propose that they reveal implicit resistance to male authority and therefore unknowingly subvert the basic principles upon which the book stands.

As Tova Rosen has noted in regard to other genres that flourished in medieval Hebrew literature,[11] women in those texts are "fictionalized, fanaticized, poeticized, metaphorized, narrativized, dramatized," all modes used to textually manipulate women in male literature. Even if the woman is present in the text, she is nevertheless silenced, stereotyped, objectified, and dehumanized in it.[12] These texts were written as part of a male discourse from which women were excluded both as writers and readers.

Although she studied texts which were composed years before *Tzemach Tzadiq*, the same cultural phenomenon can be traced in both cases. Modena aspired first and foremost to satisfy his male readership, and his female characters address the accepted literary conventions of his time. Rosen explained what she was looking for: "In listening to the choir of female voices, I seek to read something other than the hegemonic discourse that they are designed to serve."[13] This attitude will guide the critical reading of *Tzemach Tzadiq* in this article, too.

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[9] See: Elbaum 1990; Wojakowski 2000: 97-105.

[10] For more on Hebrew morality literature, see: Dan 1975: 183-201; Gries 2010: 46-56; Rubin 2013: 9-28. See also: Hursthouse 2010; Swanton 2003.

[11] Rosen 2003.

[12] *Ibid.*: 27.

[13] *Ibid.*: 28.

Tova Cohen, who studied representations of women in the Haskalah [Jewish Enlightenment] literature of the 19th century, arrived at similar, perhaps even more radical conclusions in light of the fact that although the period involved is hundreds of years later, the stereotypical image of women remained unchanged.

Cohen proved that the Hebrew Haskalah literature is androcentric to the extreme, because it is "the only example in Western literature in recent centuries of belletristic prose that is purely male literature: Not only was this literature written virtually only by men, the vast majority of its readership was also male." That is why, she explains, women are always perceived as the "other" in the Hebrew male consciousness.[14]

These findings by Cohen are consistent with the findings of Iris Parush, who also studied the period of the Haskalah in Hebrew literature and demonstrated the exclusion of women from the circle of readership and writers, along with the social, cultural, and poetic implications of this exclusion.[15]

The present article will not deal with the historical situation of women in Europe or specifically in Italy, nor with the situation of women in pre-modern Italian Jewish society. I will focus only on the literary representation of women as a sociological group in a specific Hebrew compilation. I do assume that this well-known book is a reflection of a world of ideas which the male author and his readers share.

II. The stories

While dealing with Modena's Hebrew text, one should bear in mind that it actually has at least five levels: The oral folk-tales which served as a basis for later literary works, the classical literature in the writing of the tales, the FDV Italian versions of the tales, the Hebrew adaptation of the tales originally made by Modena, and the afterlife of the tales.

Based on the Venice 1600 edition of *Tzemach Tzadiq*, here are translations of the three stories which have a woman protagonist, in order of their appearance in the book. Each story is included in a different chapter, and in accordance with the genre's conventions, each chapter is dedicated to a different human quality. I am aware that other parts of *Tzemach Tzadiq* also might relate to gender issues, but in this article I chose to make a close examination of the only three stories with women protagonists as a start, and progress into other gender issues in future research.

These three stories also appear in the Italian FDV with very few and slight changes, and all three of them represent a new Hebrew literary tradition, since they have no written versions before this. It is also important to note that although Modena changed the Italian text, added stories, and dismissed others, he translated these three tales without any critical changes.

The first story concludes the chapter on "Cruelty":[16]

> The ancients wrote that a woman named Medea lusted after a certain man. She pursued him and took her younger brother with her. She then killed her brother and cut him up in pieces,

[14] Cohen 2002: 13, 36.

[15] Parush 2004.

[16] The Hebrew version: 1600 edition: 15. Italian Parallel: FDV 1491 edition: 37.

which she then cast all about as she walked, and she did all this in order that when her father would chase after her he would find evidence of this extreme cruelty and would be too shocked to continue. In this way, she would escape him. And after was united with the man she lusted after, she lived with him for a time and gave him two sons. Her husband then left her and fell in love with another woman. Medea then murdered her two sons and drank their blood to spite her husband. She then wandered here and there around the world and her end is unknown.

The second story appears in the chapter on "Intemperance":[17]

Once there was a certain woman who was most chaste and pious, more than all other women. She was already of age but did not want to marry anyone. Finally, after a number of women spoke to her day after day about the pleasure and enjoyment of coitus, she decided to try it. She called a lover who had been asking for her hand for some days and slept with him a few times. Afterwards, she began to feel disgusted at the abomination of what she had done and because of the virginity she had lost for no reason without receiving anything in return. She went up to the roof, jumped, and died.

The third story is included in the chapter on "Chastity":[18]

Once, in a certain city, there lived a chaste and pious maiden who did not wish to partake vanities in vain worldly pleasures. The ruler of the city saw her and desired her and sent secret emissaries to talk to her, but was unable to persuade her to comply with his wishes until he finally decided to take her by force. He went to her house accompanied by a large contingent and took her to his home. When she saw that her screams and cries went unheeded, she asked him what it was about her that caused him to desire her more than all the other women and maidens. He responded: Your lovely eyes have spellbound me. She then said to him: Now that I have seen that you love my eyes so fiercely, I will comply with your wishes, but let me prepare myself for a while in a room in private, and afterwards I will do as you wish. The ruler then ordered that she be brought to a room. She then closed the door and took a knife and gouged out both her eyes—and then opened the door and said to him: Since you love my eyes so much, here they are in your hands. You may do with them as you wish. Shocked and surprised, the ruler sent her away. She went home and lived out her days chaste and modest.

These three tales have several common features. All of them are concerned with extreme behavior of unique women. These women meet terrible fates; they punish themselves and the men around them with great, dramatic acts. They perpetrate actions that require self-mutilation and fearlessness.

The next section will present some comparative and folkloric notes regarding each plot. I will not provide a comprehensive diachronic philological developmental description of every one of the stories, because that is not my aim here. I will focus on Jewish literature, especially on medieval Jewish myths, which support the atmosphere of women being the "other" of male society. I will show that Modena's state of mind was the common line of thought in his time, as far as traditional tales are concerned.

[17] The Hebrew version: 1600 edition: 32. Italian Parallel: FDV 1491 edition: 91.
[18] The Hebrew version: 1600 edition: 35. Italian Parallel: FDV 1491 edition: 103.

III. Interpretation

The three stories above deal with themes such as chastity, desire, and control. Most of all, they are stories of revenge by means of self-violence by women. I will show that these ideas are not new, since they already appear in other Jewish tales. However, a main idea of traditional tale research is that every new plot, even those that deal with familiar ideas, is a core of attraction. Beautiful plots that capture the human spirit can capture attention more effectively than any other form of prose. This is the power of the story, and that is why the gendered ideas embedded in those stories have so much power.

The "Cruelty" tale

The first story is one of revenge. The text here is a prosaic summary of the long and convoluted mythological plot, which in the days of ancient Greece was dramatized as a tragedy by Euripides (in the fifth century BCE), and recorded in writing by Ovid (first century CE). Medea aids Jason, escapes together with him from her father, and in doing so murders her brother. She and Jason have two sons. Then, Jason decides to leave her for Princess Glauce, and Medea, in a fit of insanity, murders their sons, drinks their blood, and kills Jason's bride. She then flees in a flying chariot and finds asylum with King Aegeus. Most of these details are of course absent from Modena's version, which is a very abbreviated and prosaic synopsis of the tragedy and the ancient Roman epos. The details that remain as a brief summary are the flight from her father, the murder of her brother, the husband's betrayal, the murder of the boys and drinking their blood.

Medea is portrayed in the ancient tragedy as a notoriously wicked monster driven by pure evil. Her brutal acts of murder and cannibalism towards her own children—in revenge for her husband Jason leaving her for Princess Glauce, a younger and more beautiful woman—have become a symbol of maternal cruelty. In the tragedy, she is portrayed as a diabolical woman who harms innocents and shows no mercy or compassion towards any of her victims, not only towards her own children.

Although Medea became legendary in the ancient world and the Renaissance as a symbol of cruelty and evil, and the story is indeed cited in *Tzemach Tzadiq* in the context of "cruelty," commentators today tend to read the myth from a gender perspective and analyze it differently. According to this reading, Medea is a strong woman who rebels against her predestined role as a mother and challenges her role as the one who must provide the next generation of her husband's male dynasty. Medea protests against the arbitrary manner in which her husband moves from one woman to another to satisfy his whims. Based on this reading, the myth of Medea is the story of an aging, exploited, and betrayed woman, who finds herself helpless in the face of the powerful male mechanism, and her terrible actions are the result of a feminist protest.[19] If not for her husband's betrayal, she would never have carried out her horrific acts of murder and cannibalism, and in fact, her savage behavior is an act of loss of sanity in light of the behavior of her husband, Jason. Because she was unable to directly confront her husband, she projects her hatred and rage on their sons, who are a representation of their father. The act of murdering the

[19] See, for example: Collins 2000: 3-24.

children and drinking their blood becomes a symbolic murder, or perhaps castration, of their father. The murder of his intended bride is a desperate act of helplessness and jealousy because, as noted, when one is unable to turn one's rage directly at the man, it is directed at the female competitor. After all, the accepted feminist claim is that to divert the protest from its real target, which is male hegemony, a well-known tactic is to turn the oppressed classes against each other.

In the popular Jewish story-telling tradition of the Middle Ages, there is a related story about Lilith, the first wife of Adam, who was created together with him (Genesis 1:27). He abandoned Lilith and replaced her with Eve, the second woman, who was created from his rib (Genesis 2:21-22). In revenge, Lilith has since lain in wait for his male descendants, seeking, to this day, to kill them. This is the basis for the plethora of cultural material and customs aimed at protecting male infants during the first eight days of their life, from the time of their birth until their circumcision.[20] Lilith herself is a metamorphosis of Lamia, the woman who eats children as an act of vengeance against Zeus and Hera.[21] The image of Lamia is a dauntless connection between women and wild animals, exemplifying the bestial side of womanhood.

The Greek myth and Jewish legends represent the same character on a spectrum of situations and behaviors, and thus highlight Medea's behavior in *Tzemach Tzadiq* when reading it from a gender perspective: A woman has been wronged by a man she loved, with the tacit complicity of the surrounding society, and in revenge she tries to kill her love's alternative partner or his children. This is a story of revenge carried out by a woman who has no legal or legitimate ways to respond effectively to the injustice done to her, and the solution that she comes up with is an eruption of murder and madness. The attempted murder is in fact the transfer of the rage of the scorned woman to another object instead of to the husband himself.

The "Intemperance" tale

The second story is one of disillusionment and revelation. The pious woman is convinced to engage in sexual relations with her suitor, but regrets her actions and kills herself by jumping from the roof. Her curiosity about sexual relations and the pleasure they provide exact the terrible price to be exacted from every woman for sexual permissiveness. The culmination of this behavior is suicide, that is, the loss of the very body that experienced temporary, earthly pleasures, upon realizing the pointlessness of the pleasures of the body in the present moment.

What exactly troubles the woman and drives her to suicide? According to the story itself, the woman does not appear to experience any societal rejection or condemnation as a result of having surrendered herself to her lover. Apparently, the dissonance that she experiences between moral injunction and physical pleasure leads her first to celibacy and then to suicide. This means that marriage—the legal regulation of sexual relations—would not have resolved her problems of conscience, and that only complete abstinence could do so. Moreover, it is difficult to ignore the fact that although the story is presented

[20] Abarbanel 1994.

[21] See: Motif no. B 29.1 "Face of woman, body of serpent" in Thompson 1966.

in a Jewish morality book, the spirit of the book is remote from the Jewish approach, which does not condemn sexual relations in context of marriage.

In rabbinic literature, we find several legends with a similar motif connected to issues of forced or problematic intimacy between men and women: The suicide of Miriam the Hasmonean (*Babylonian Talmud*, *Baba-Batra* 3:2) and the suicide of Beruriah the wife of Rabbi Meir (Rashi on *Babylonian Talmud*, *Avoda Zara* 18:2). See also the Rabbinic story below:

> Once there was a young woman whose father had a good friend who was a gentile, and they would eat and drink together, and enjoy themselves. The gentile said to her father: Give your daughter to my son in marriage. She kept silent about the matter until the wedding ceremony, and when the time of the ceremony came, she climbed up to the roof, jumped, and died (*Elijah Rabbah*, M. Ish-Shalom edition, XIX).

The story from the Midrash presents the girl as righteous because she was unable to sin against her religion by marrying a non-Jew. Since she was powerless to resist the decision made by her father and the father-in-law-to-be, the only alternative left to her was to throw herself off the roof. The marriage arrangement was made while the principals were drunk, which further underscores the girl's helplessness and explains why she was unable to resist the marriage in any other way.

The "Chastity" tale

The third story also culminates in an act of vengeance. A chaste maiden is courted by the ruler, a strong man who is not used to getting no for an answer. When she realizes that her fate is sealed, she gouges out her own eyes and hands them to him as a "gift." The ruler, stunned at her act, sends her back home, where she lives out her days in chastity. Here we see the maiden, when faced with having to choose between marrying a repugnant suitor and mutilating herself, prefers to disfigure herself and live out her life in isolation. The act of gouging out her eyes is her revenge on the tenacious suitor who would not accept her rejection of him any other way.

In fact, this is an especially intense rejection of the sexual act that comes with marriage. The connection between gouging out one's eyes and forbidden sexual desire is an ancient one in Western culture. As Freud noted, gouging out one's eyes symbolizes self-castration, from which it follows that looking at the object of sexual desire is symbolic of carrying out the sexual act itself.

In the tradition of the Greek tragedy, we have the story of Oedipus, who gouges out his own eyes after discovering that the woman he is married to is in fact his mother. In the tradition of the Jewish story, rabbinic literature tells us the legend of Rabbi Matya Ben Harash, who drove nails into his eyes in order not to be tempted by the image of a woman that revealed itself to him and prevented him from studying Torah:

> This is the story of Rabbi Matya Ben Harash, who was rich, God fearing, and virtuous and was a seeker of virtue and charity, enriched scholars from his wisdom, always had orphans and widows seated at his table and behaved honestly in every way. All his days, he studied Torah like Rabbi Meir his teacher, and his light radiated like the glow of the sun. It was said of him that he never gazed at any woman. Once he was sitting and studying Torah, and Satan passed by and envied him. Said Satan: Can there be in the world a righteous man who has

never sinned? He immediately ascended to the heavens and appeared before the Almighty and said: Who is Rabbi Matya Ben Harash to You? God answered: He is a perfectly righteous man. Satan said: Let me test him; and God let him. Satan then went and found Rabbi Matya Ben Harash studying Torah. Satan took on the appearance of a woman more beautiful than any other. When Matya Ben Harash saw her, he turned away, and Satan went to the other side and faced him. Again he turned his face away to the other side, and again Satan faced him. When he saw that she was turning on all sides, Rabbi Matya Ben Harash said to himself: I am afraid that the evil inclination will vanquish me. What did the righteous man do? He called to one of his students who served him and said: My son, bring me fire and nails. When the student brought them, he heated the nails in the fire and drove them into his eyes. When Satan saw this, he became frightened and fell back. He ascended to the heavens and told the Almighty what had happened.

God then called the angel Raphael who heals and told him: Go heal the eyes of Matya Ben Harash. The angel Raphael went down and stood before him. Matya Ben Harash asked him: Who are you? He told him: I am Raphael the angel; the Almighty sent me to heal your eyes. He answered: I do not want it. What's done is done. The angel Raphael returned to the Almighty and told Him: This is what Matya Ben Harash said to me. The Almighty said: Go to him and say: From this day forward, fear not. I promise you that the evil inclination will not vanquish you in this matter all the days of your life. When he heard that from the angel, he allowed himself to be healed, and was healed (Midrash Tanhuma [Buber], Hukat – Appendix to Paragraph 1).

In the Jewish legend, the act of blinding oneself is carried out as a way of contending with erotic temptation, and thus Matya Ben Harash is portrayed as a model and paragon of self-restraint.[22] In our story about the maiden, underlying the act of gouging out the eyes is a rebellion against the male. Further to Sartre's claim in "The Look," the self-awareness of the maiden regarding her beauty comes about because the suitor gazes at her; in other words, the very gaze of the other creates the subject's awareness of itself. In the words of Sartre: She becomes "seen by the other." The gaze of the ruler courting her is what shaped her awareness of being a woman—as well as the awareness of the fear that accompanies female existence.[23]

Control over the gaze is thus perceived as control over the symbolic expanse of love. The man's gaze and the woman's gaze are two elements within the gender field. The man may look, and his gaze is often intrusive and violent. The woman often cannot gaze directly, because her direct gaze may portray her as a bold temptress. Thus, in the absence of words, temptation is actualized by the gaze, as is acquiescence to temptation.

Myths and legends focus on the taboo of gazing because it is akin to trespassing, and culture ascribes considerable importance to what a person may or may not see. In the book of Genesis, Lot's wife disobeys the injunction not to look back when Lot and his family flee from Sodom. The reckless and childish Psyche ignores her lover Eros's order to never look at him, thus losing him and his love forever. Orpheus, who was ordered not to look back during his escape with Eurydice from Hades, is unable to obey and loses Eurydice forever. The cunning Perseus forces the Gorgon Medusa, whose gaze turns anyone who looks at her to stone, to gaze at herself, thus defeating her.

[22] See a comprehensive review of the story, its different forms and sources in: Lipsker 2009: 275-290.
[23] Sartre 1992.

In the third story, the abstract concept of sight is transferred to the eyes themselves as the concrete organs of sight. It is not the gaze as a concept, but rather the eyes themselves, which the maiden gives to the man. Just as in the beginning of the story, the suitor was in the position of "active gazer," at the end he becomes the "owner" of the gaze of the woman he desired. The emblematization of the gaze is the literal eye. The reader's attention is suddenly and shockingly diverted from the man's gaze to the woman's eyes—thereby emphasizing the immorality of his demand that she marry him against her will. He finally receives her gaze, through which she ultimately defeats him. Thus, like Medea, the protagonist of this story, too, castrates her man, with her instrument being the phallic knife. In doing so, they shape the femininity of their men, who then become emasculated, weak, and helpless.

IV. Discussion

All three stories can be read as the revenge of a rebellious woman who uses violence to fight the violence wielded against her: The rebellion against the man is carried out by turning the act of cruelty against her own body. Consequently, the asymmetry between the male and female is the key to morally assessing the behavior of the characters in the story. The man seemingly demands that which the social order allows him to demand and performs ritual behaviors embedded in the social order, whereas the woman is the one whose behavior departs from this order.[24] In Gilbert and Gubar's terms, the women in Modena's book, through their extreme actions, are women who perform a "significant act" in the world. They create their own "story" and work actively to alter the destiny predetermined by men: father, suitor, and husband.[25]

The centrality of the man in culture is also reflected in the centrality of the man in the plot, even though, in narratological terms, the protagonists of these stories are women. The centrality of the man is expressed in the fact that the social organization that the stories present is the result of an approach that creates a complete separation between the sexes and assumes that there is a natural, accepted, and non-negotiable hierarchy between them that is part of a natural social behavioral order. The similarity between the stories is also due to the fact that in all three, the women are represented only in their relations with a man, i.e. all are stories about a relationship between a man and a woman. In fact, there are no stories in *Tzemach Tzadiq* in which a woman or group of women appears alone: In all the stories, the woman is defined by characteristics and behavior ("cruel" or "modest") in accordance with her attitude to a man. In other words, she is always defined and presented by means of her behavior towards a man.

The female protagonists of these stories embody diametric opposites: holiness and licentiousness, an object of adoration and a dark force, an object of desire and the object of anxiety. They are unexpected and intuitive, emotional and impulsive, vengeful, frightening, diabolical, feral. They do not shy away from pain, loss, or the destruction of the

[24] In this context, see similar examples of the shaping of female characters in non-Hebrew medieval literature: Acker 2006: 702-716; Ferrante 1975; Morgan 2002: 265-278.

[25] Gilbert, Gubar 1979: 136-170.

body. Nor do they shy away from a life of loneliness. Their behavior borders on chaos, making it impossible to continue the routine traditional social behavior. In Bourdieu's terms, the three stories present a situation in which the basic male desire is the desire to possess. To the men's dismay, in these three cases, that desire remains unfulfilled.[26]

In fact, these are stories that portray attempts to control the bestial female body. The struggle is being waged over the body, and the question is who controls it. The social order gave man control, along with the demand and authority to subdue the female body and its needs. At the same time, the women in these stories try to rebel against this convention and reclaim control. The result is that all of them are punished. They are punished in the story itself, but are also punished by the public opinion of the readers of the book. They are presented as deviant objects that depart from the rules of society and disrupt the agreed order. And all this is presented, as noted, as part of the genre of a morality book that seeks to reaffirm moral virtues and condemn vices.

The women's stories in the collection express something about Modena's artistic choices. These three stories about women already appeared in FDV in Italian, and they are presented in *Tzemach Tzadiq* to exemplify good and bad human qualities. Just as Modena chose not to translate certain stories found in the original because he was convinced that those untranslated stories contained subjects problematic for his Hebrew readership, similarly his decision to translate other stories indicates that he believed that their reception by his Hebrew readership would not pose a problem. The three stories presented here belong to that group. They are stories that were not familiar to the Hebrew readership, and their presentation in a Hebrew morality book, despite the violent episodes they contain, appears not to have raised any eyebrows.[27]

Simone de Beauvoir describes the field of literature as a cultural expanse in which the male author gives expression to his experiences and existence through writing. The writing enables the writer to establish himself as a sovereign subject and situate the woman as a distant, subjugated object, an "other." This relationship, which is maintained in actual practice in the manner in which the patriarchal society is organized, is perpetuated and reconstituted by literature. There is literature that derides women, alongside literature that glorifies women; according to de Beauvoir, both types create, preserve, and fix the gender differences, and in fact deepen the gap between men and women. In this sense, *Tzemach Tzadiq* mirrors the gender perceptions of its time, and it is interesting to see how a morality book that is supposed to focus on positive and negative human qualities also expresses the voice of Modena and his readers as a man who situates himself as a subject facing the female object. Reading *Tzemach Tzadiq* provides a historical

[26] Bourdieu 2001: 48.

[27] This is attested to by Jacob Druckman, the production editor of the New York 1899 edition. In his introduction to the edition he admits that it was the stories that drew him and other readers of his generation to the book, and that pressure was exerted on him to publish a new edition of the book. "It would be no exaggeration if I say that rarely has so fine a fragrance been found in Hebrew literature, because *Tzemach Tzadiq* is unlike other morality books. I admit that I have tried to read other morality books, but could read no more than two or three pages and I withdrew and was unable to finish what I had begun. Just the opposite was the case with this book: After reading just a few pages, I could not put it down until I had read the whole thing, because it drew me in with its wise words and wonderful parables in each and every chapter, and especially because of its parables about the nature of animals and historical events and philosophical sayings. This book has had a powerful impact on other people who have read and learned it a great deal, and they entreated me to publish it and enable many others to benefit as well."

perspective regarding the poetic norms practiced in Modena's day: What was considered worthy of reading? What was considered worthy of sale? What was considered right? What was considered normative?

On the declarative level, based on the context of where the stories were embedded within their chapters, two of the stories represent reprehensible behavior and are presented as examples of a "bad" quality. The story of Medea is presented in a chapter that discusses cruelty, and the story of the "maiden who was tempted" is part of a chapter that focuses on the "inability to vanquish one's desire." The third story, "The maiden who gouged out her own eyes," is set within a chapter on "vanquishing desire," and it is actually presented as an example of the good quality that the protagonist of the story has been graced with. But whether the woman is fundamentally evil or chaste and pious, the solution she adopts to express her protest against the man is one of revenge by means of self-abuse, one that ultimately voids the male exploitation which is the structured product of the patriarchal social order that threatens her.

Indeed, the male identity as it emerges from these stories is a privileged one that is blind to the needs of the other. It is a male identity that enjoys the patriarchal myth, which it preserves and bolsters. These stories, however, subvert it. Moreover, they not only subvert the game of identities, but also the declared genre of the book. Instead of exemplifying good and bad qualities in human beings, in accordance with the original purpose of the book, they bring to the surface the patriarchal social order and those who oppose it. Instead of talking about people in general, these stories emphasize the gender differences between men and women and the status of women as a weakened "other" in society, creating a consciousness of clandestine mutiny against this situation. Modena inadvertently reflected the injustices of the existing patriarchal social order against women as the weakened link in society, expressing a deconstructive social agenda. In other words, he allows what Judith Fetterley terms the resistant female voices to be heard.[28] This could imply that Modena unconsciously challenged the patriarchal model. Each of his stories, in its own way, creates exactly the opposite effect of what was intended, as it directs the reader's empathy towards the weak, sinning, and sinned against party.

Up to this point, our claims could be refuted by the argument that this is, after all, a book that is more than four hundred years old, that it is merely a mirror of its period, and that offers no new perspective from Hebrew and international medieval literature, which is replete with misogynic writings of different kinds. However, *Tzemach Tzadiq* is a book that was reprinted numerous times over the years, and in fact, is still printed and read up to the present among certain circles of ultra-Orthodox Jewry. This demonstrates how its gender attitudes continue to filter down up to the present day.[29]

The built-in power relations between the genders in the hegemonic, patriarchal Middle Ages are the habitat for the stories discussed here. They reflect and reinforce those

[28] Fetterley 1978.

[29] The complete list of the print editions of *Tzemach Tzadiq* is as follows: Venice 1600, Daniel Zanetti publishing, text with woodcuts; Vilna 1855, Yosef Ruben Romm publishing; based on Venice 1600 with the omission of the illustrations and with the addition of references for the Bible verses. Newark 1859, AH Rosenberg, text with illustrations, based on the Venice edition 1600, with an introduction by Jacob Ben Samuel Druckerman with references within the text. Tel Aviv 1949, Mahbarot Lesifrut publishing, vowelized edition with an epilogue by Israel Zamora. Jerusalem 1977, unknown publishing house, photo offset of Vilna 1855. Jerusalem 1992, Institute to Encourage Torah Study publishing.

relations within the overall system of the genre of morality literature that was so popular during that time in Jewish literature, not only in Hebrew but in all Jewish languages.

At the same time, a deconstructive reading of the women's story as a group points to two main findings: first, that the representation of women in *Tzemach Tzadiq* presences voices that are opposed to the patriarchal order; and second, that the representations of women in *Tzemach Tzadiq* go beyond the territory of gender.

These findings may open the door to further questions and shed new light on the world of Jewish texts in the early years of printing from a gender perspective.

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Appendix: The Hebrew Versions

(1)
כתבו הקדמונים כי אשה נקראת מידיאה חשקה באיש אחד והלכה אחריו והביאה בדרך עמה אחיה הקטן והרגה אותו ותנתחהו בנתחים ותשלך בדרך כה וכה בלכתה וכל זה עשתה למען ברדוף אביה אחריה ימצא בדרך האכזריות הזה הגדול ויתמהמה בלכתו ובין כך היא תברח מפניו. ואחרי אשר נזדוגה לאיש אשר חשקה בו ותהי עמו כמה זמן היו לה ממנו שני בנים ויהי כי עזב אותה בעלה ויאהב אישה אחרת הרגה שני בנים ותשתה את דמן להכעיס את אישה ואחר כן הלכה נעה ונדה בעולם ולא נודע קצה.

(2)
נמצא כתוב כי אישה אחת היתה צנועה וחסודה מכל הנשים ועברו עליה כמה שנים ולא רצתה להזדווג לאיש וסוף סוף כדברם אליה יום יום כמה נשים מענג והנאת המשגל נתנה לבה לנסות אותו. ותקרא לאוהבה אשר כמה ימים היה מבקש אותה ותישן עמו כמה פעמים. ויהי אחרי כן התחילה לחשוב מאוס ותו־עבת המעשה אשר עשתה ובתוליה אשר אבדה על לא כלום אשר לא נתנו לחשבון ועלתה לגג ונפלה ומתה.

(3)
ונמצא כתוב כי בעיר אחת היתה אישה בתולה צנועה וחסודה אשר לא היתה חפצה בהבלי העולם. ויראה שר העיר ויחשוק בה וישלח לדבר בה בסתר כמה פעמים ולא יכול להטותה לרצונו עד כי גמר בדעתו לקח אותה ביד חזקה. וילך לביתה בעם כבד ויקחה ויביאה אל ביתו. ויהי בראותה כי צעקתה וקולה לא ישמע בקשה ממנו לאמר לה מה ראה בה כי גדל אהבתו לה מכל הנשים והבתולות. השיב עיניך כיונים המה הרהיבוני. אז אמרה לו אחרי ראותי כי אהבה עזה אהבת את עיני הנני לעשות רצונך אך התרצה נא שאכין את עצמי שעה אחת חדר בחדר להחבא אחר כך אמלא בקשתך. אז צוה השר ויביאוה בחדר ותסגור הדלת בעדה והיא לקחה סכין ותנקר את שתי עיניה ואחר כך פתחה ותאמר לו אחרי כי אהבתך גדלה אל עיני הנם בידיך עשה מהם כטוב בעיניך. וישאר השר תמה ומשתאה מזה וישלחה מאתו ותלך לביתה ותהי כל ימיה צנועה וחסודה.