



# Ideologies of Male Beauty and the Hebrew Bible

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## Abstract

It might be expected that expressions of male beauty in the Hebrew Bible symbolise power, prestige and divine favour, in contrast to those of female beauty, which operates as the object of male desire and often expresses vulnerability. In this queer theoretical study of the use of the word **יָפֵה** when applied to men, it is argued that, contrary to the assumptions of successive (male) readers and commentators, such a binary distinction is subverted within the text itself. Of the three main examples of **יָפֵה** applied to named men in the Hebrew Bible, Joseph's beauty denotes vulnerability as much as divine favour, David's undercuts a conventional notion that male beauty=muscle and Absalom's is used to underscore his rôle as a tragic figure, who pays the price of David's failings.

## Keywords

men, beauty, Hebrew Bible

## Mapping Beauty

Male beauty makes few appearances in academic literature.<sup>1</sup> As Whitehead puts it, 'for the most part it seems that the profeminist literature on men and masculinities has been unable or unwilling to grapple with the male body' (2002:181). Moore's grappling with the beauty of Jesus (2001:90-130) is a rare exception in biblical studies.<sup>2</sup> This is odd, given both the considerable attention paid to female beauty over a wide range

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<sup>1</sup>A version of this paper was presented at the University of Exeter in May 2007. I am grateful to participants for observations and comments.

<sup>2</sup>Other relevant work on male beauty in the Hebrew Bible includes: Sternberg 1985:355-364, on the relationship between good looks and good character in Samuel; Clines 1989:221-223, on the part beauty plays in the construction of David's mascu-

of academic disciplines, and the situation outside the academic world, where, to quote Whitehead again, 'the media now endlessly pore over and scrutinize men's bodies' (2002:182). The aim of this paper is to offer a literary analysis of allusions to male beauty in the Hebrew Bible; its approach is based on feminist work on female beauty and some recent studies on masculinities, usefully reviewed by Whitehead (2002), together with a queer theoretical stance, derived, in my case at least, from Butler's gender performativity. How performativity works is expressed in her well-known description of gender as 'the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (1999:43-44) and it is the queer theorist's task, as I see it, to expose this system of regulation as *unnatural*, and to seek every opportunity to subvert it.

It was second-wave feminism that characterized female beauty as objectified by the male gaze, as a signifier of male power and commodification. The feminist view of female beauty as something oppressive to women was continued and developed by writers such as Chapkis (1988) and Wolf (1990) and postmodern critics such as Foucault have theorised the gaze as contributory to the regulatory and, indeed, self-regulatory mechanisms of gender and sexuality. Female beauty, then, exists in a world where women learn to view their bodies as, in Young's words, 'looked at and acted upon' (1990:150). But what about male beauty? What is its function in the daily enactment of gender and sexuality? In the past, overt interest in it has been ambiguous; until recently it has generally been portrayed not so much as directly sexually attractive but as the embodiment of masculine power (Dutton 1995). There is, of course, a chain of Western artistic tradition in which the male body has played an important part; it originated in ancient Greek sculpture and vase painting, was inherited and developed by Hellenistic and Roman sculpture and rediscovered in the Italian Renaissance. In his study of the muscular male body as an aesthetic ideal, Dutton outlines the history of this tradition (1995:24-95). It is worth noting the contributions made by photography in the 19th century and mass

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linity; Brenner 1997, chapter 3, on the terminology and gender functions of male and female beauty; and Hubbard 1997.

culture in the 20th in 'democratizing', as Dutton puts it, the (developed) male body (1995:14). He singles out two aspects of this process: first, a semi-covert homosexual market for erotic photography, which began in the 19th century, and secondly, what he characterizes as 'profound shifts in women's consciousness and the legitimization of women as observers of male bodies' (1995:14). While Dutton is largely concerned with the male body in terms of muscularity, his remarks can be applied to male beauty in general: over the last hundred years or so there has been a more public acknowledgement of its existence; since male beauty has now been outed, it is a good time to reflect on its appearances in texts that predate these recent changes.

One of the common words for expressing physical beauty in the Hebrew Bible is *יפה* and its related forms. While not confined to a human application,<sup>3</sup> *יפה* often refers to human beauty that excites sexual desire in the onlooker; or, as Ringgren rather optimistically expresses it, 'we are told with surprising frequency how beauty awakens love in the opposite sex' (Botterweck & Ringgren 1974/1999). Although *יפה* is not the only way of describing physical attractiveness,<sup>4</sup> it provides a convenient means of exploring the varying significations of beauty in the Hebrew Bible.

Given the male authorship of the biblical texts, and their assumption of a male audience,<sup>5</sup> one might expect a clear distinction to be made between what male and female beauty signify respectively. This indeed is what is found in the royal epithalamium of Psalm 45. In v. 3 (v. 2 in English versions), *יפה*, in its verbal form, describes the royal bridegroom; at v. 11, as a noun, the bride. We might expect the admiring gaze of the psalmist at this point not to linger upon the physical desirability of the king's body. Indeed, Craigie argues that 'it is not primarily any physical kind of beauty with which [the poet]...is concerned' (1983:339). Kraus, on the other hand, seems to take a contrasting position:

<sup>3</sup>) *יפה* is used, for instance, of cows (Gen. 41:2 and elsewhere), trees (Jer. 11:16) and places (Zion in Psalm 48:3 [48.2 in English versions]; Tyre in Ezek. 27:3-4).

<sup>4</sup>) *טוב* is an alternative, especially when it is linked with the words *תאר* or *מתאר*; *טוב* is used in Esth. 1:11 to explain or expand *יפה*, and both words are translated as *καλός* in LXX; *καλός* is elsewhere regularly used to translate *יפה*.

<sup>5</sup>) Macwilliam 2006, ch.4.

The king is celebrated as the most beautiful person among human beings. The reference is to his beaming [!] appearance, the extraordinary majestic bearing (Kraus 1988:454).

Both commentators have a point: in the context of male-to-male gaze, it is indeed the physical beauty of the king that strikes the psalmist, but given the demands of gender performativity male beauty is there not to be desired but to evoke respect for the manly virtues that it symbolizes—virtues centring around power (military prowess, regal authority). The queen's beauty, on the other hand, signifies a very different gender performativity. She is defined entirely in terms of her physical beauty and the desire that it evokes in the male gaze. Her rôle as a woman is to be beautiful, subservient and a clothes-horse. About her character, feelings and even the details of her physical charms the author is silent—it is clearly enough that her beauty has excited the king's desire. Here we have at the simplest level beauty, indeed woman herself, as commodity. In Psalm 45, then, beauty signifies a clear gender division: female beauty operates as the object of male desire, whereas male beauty operates in terms of power and prestige.<sup>6</sup>

But can the commodification of female beauty noted in Psalm 45 be recognized elsewhere in the biblical texts? The use of *יפה* in Song of Songs certainly seems to contradict this interpretation; its presence in, for instance, 1:15 and 4:7 helps to offer us a picture of beauty desired, without explicit assumptions of male ownership. But this is exceptional. Elsewhere the more typical situation, not unlike that of the royal bride of Psalm 45, is exemplified by Queen Vashti, whose beauty is required by the king to promote his prestige before his courtiers and people (Esth. 1:11).<sup>7</sup> And Abishag, twice and emphatically described as *יפה* in 1 Kgs 1:3-4, is there simply to act as a bedfellow for David.<sup>8</sup>

Since women's voices are rarely heard on the matter, we cannot be sure how they felt about this aspect of their lives; indeed the process of

<sup>6</sup> Brenner characterises the difference between female and male beauty as that between the private and public spheres (Brenner 1997:50).

<sup>7</sup> It is philologically interesting that *טוב*, coupled with *מראה*, is used to explain or enlarge upon *יפה*, and that both expressions are translated in the LXX as *καλή*; compare n. 3 above.

<sup>8</sup> Her beauty also functions to emphasise David's sexual failure.

naturalization, articulated by Judith Butler, may well have promoted acceptance of the seemingly inevitable. What is more, beauty, if indeed a commodity, might appear a handy advantage to the aspiring bride; Rachel's beauty, after all, gave her a clear lead in the marriage contest, if marriage is what she wanted (Gen. 29:17).<sup>9</sup> Yet, in Queen Vashti's case at least, her refusal to come to the king clearly signifies *some* discontent; and does the narrator of Psalm 45, in emphasising the need for the queen to obey her husband, fear lest she too may have some rebellious tendencies?

But there are occasions when female beauty signifies not just commodification but also vulnerability, not to say outright danger. A simple case of male brutality is casually described at Deut. 21:11: a man on the winners' side in a battle can have his pick of the defeated enemy's women.<sup>10</sup> Yet this may not be as clear a case as it looks at first, if, that is, the alternative for the woman is death, something indicated, for example, at Josh. 6:17-21, by the fate of the women of the conquered Jericho; a hard-boiled view of beauty at Deut. 21:11 may be that it signifies rape as rescue (of a sort). For an unequivocal example of beauty as danger, we can look to Tamar: in 2 Sam. 13:1, her beauty is linked causally to Amnon's so-called love—beauty is the trigger for rape. Sarai's beauty, as related in Genesis 12, can also be seen as a sign of danger, but in her case, danger for whom? Obviously for her, if marriage to Abram is considered preferable to concubinage with a foreign king. But as feminist commentators have pointed out, the writer and his male audience may well have recognized the danger as facing not her but Abram. As Van Dijk-Hemmes, for instance, argues:

Abram knows his male fellow-creatures well. They will consider him a rival, the proprietor of a desirable object: a woman whom they...will wish to possess as well (Van Dijk-Hemmes 1993:227-228).

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<sup>9</sup>) It is not relevant to discuss here the exact contrast intended by the author between Rachel's appearance and that of her sister, Leah. For an indication of the debate, see Speiser 1964:225; Hubbard 1997:59 and 70, n. 4.

<sup>10</sup>) The verse, of course, is part of the description of the ban (חרם).

Abram's 'ruse', then, is enacted because 'Sarai's beauty endangers *his* life and not *hers*' (Van Dijk-Hemmes 1993:228; emphasis original). The reader today may consider that it is the beautiful woman who is vulnerable, but it is a common theme in the Hebrew Bible that the one at risk is the gazing male. Similarly, Bathsheba's beauty (2 Sam. 11:2) signals danger to her reputation as a respectable wife, but it signals mortal danger to her husband and unborn child. Beauty as a snare for the unwary gazer lies behind the warning of Prov. 6:25 and 31:30. In Ezekiel 16, the beauty of Jerusalem, personified as the errant bride, is characterized as a gift generously bestowed by Yhwh, but corrupted by the vanity of its possessor into harlotry (Ezek. 16:14-15, 25).

If beauty signifies commodification and vulnerability in the case of women, what would we expect of male beauty? I want to consider both how male beauty fits into the process of gender performativity within the texts of the Hebrew Bible, and what we can perceive from readers' reactions to the passages involved. Not that, it has to be said, there is an abundance of examples. Apart from the king of Psalm 45, another king's beauty is remarked on at Isa. 33:17. It is difficult to say much about the gender performativity of יפה here, especially when the identity of מלך is disputed by commentators, some of whom associate him with Yhwh,<sup>11</sup> others with a human (messianic) figure.<sup>12</sup> In either case, the male beauty envisaged here seems, like that of Psalm 45, to convey royal power rather than sexual attraction. Such is certainly not the case with the male lover in Song of Songs, who is described as יפה at 1:16 (by association, one should take into account here the other allusions to his physicality, especially the catalogue at 5:10-16). But its portrayal of gender relations makes the Song of Songs a remarkable exception in the Hebrew Bible, and the examples of the use of יפה I wish to focus on are the three named men whose beauty seems to be merely an incidental addition to the narrative. This dearth of examples is in itself significant.<sup>13</sup> I suggest that male beauty is uncomfortable for male writers

<sup>11</sup>) Brueggemann 1998:265 and Thompson 2002:327, among others.

<sup>12</sup>) Stacey 1993:203-204 and Herbert 1973:190.

<sup>13</sup>) In addition there are some examples where טוב is used of a man in a sense that is comparable to יפה: for instance, Adonijah is described as טוב־תאר מאד at 1 Kgs 1:6; the LXX version has ὡραῖος τῇ ὕψει σφόδρα. Perhaps surprisingly, although Dav-

and readers, because it runs counter to a proper performative function.<sup>14</sup> Appreciation of it by other males is problematic, because on the one hand it places the object of the male gaze in a female, passive position, and on the other it puts the male gazer under suspicion of illicit desire. And, of course, there is no direct<sup>15</sup> female gaze in the Hebrew Bible; there is no female voice<sup>16</sup> and no articulated female sexual desire, except where it is pathologised as perverse—again the female lover in Song of Songs, like her lover, appears to be the exception. Male beauty, then, might be expected to be absent in the Hebrew Bible, and the dearth I have noted is in line with this expectation. In the rare cases where male beauty does show itself, it is my contention that we should view with suspicion the analysis of its function offered by generations of (male) commentators. My suspicion is that their various attempts to explain away the sexual desirability of the male body are (unconsciously) driven by an ideologically masculinist agenda, which leads them to overlook some plausible alternative exegetical insights.<sup>17</sup> With these introductory comments in mind, I should like now to focus on the three beautiful men: Joseph, David and Absalom.

## Joseph

One way for a reader to cope with the discomfort of male beauty is to see its function as a mechanism in the framework of a particular literary

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id's lament for Jonathan has been a starting point for a number of homoerotic speculations (for a balanced discussion, see Stone 2006:205-208), David does not seem to praise Jonathan's physical charms; the verb **עָיַן** (2 Sam. 1:26), which is the nearest he gets to such a tribute, does not seem to be used elsewhere in with a physical reference, although the choice of *ὁραῖομαι* would seem to indicate that the translators of LXX understood it as such.

<sup>14</sup>) Compare Clines's remark with reference to 1 Sam. 16:6: 'The word "beauty" is not there, but the word "sees" is; what the male gaze sees attracts it, though its super-ego may feel uncomfortable about feeling attracted' (Clines 1989:222).

<sup>15</sup>) Direct, that is, in contrast to a female gaze reported by the male author; this is the situation in the case of Joseph, which will be discussed shortly.

<sup>16</sup>) Unless, that is, we accept passages such as Exod. 15:21 as of female authorship; Bach discusses the difficulties of such an approach (1999:423).

<sup>17</sup>) My suspicion seems to be shared by Clines (1997:239-240).

form. The argument seems to be that because it is ossified within an ancient Near Eastern genre, no further explanation is needed as to what it is doing in a particular example of that genre. Thus to turn back for a moment to Psalm 45, Kraus argues that the admiration heaped upon the king is on a par with 'praises...found in many reports of ancient Near Eastern glorification of kings' (1988:454). We may see a similar process of ossification at work in the approach taken by Williams (1980 and 1982). He examines the beauty 'type-scenes' in Gen. 12:10-20, 26:6-11 and 29:1-20, and contrasts them with the barren wife theme of Gen. 16:1-6. He concludes:

The beauty configuration is central in the potential of fertility and blessedness. Beauty is a code that the mother is blessed and a cue that her progress will be favored. It is probably a truism that in mythic and epic literature, the beauty of a main character is a sure sign of divinity or of providential guidance. This seems to work out without exception for biblical personages (Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Joseph, David, Bathsheba, Judith, Esther). The words *yapeh* (fair, beautiful) and *yopi* (beauty) are never used to describe someone who is not favored by the God of Israel, no matter how desirable he or she may seem to be otherwise (Williams 1980:115-116).

It would be foolish to deny the value of identifying the presence of common literary forms or themes in ancient Near Eastern texts, but Williams's assertion about the significance of beauty in such cases seems over-generalized. One may be happy to associate Sarai's beauty with her *eventual* good fortune, but in the *short* term it signifies danger to her, her marriage and, as has been already argued, her husband. The same might be said of other names on Williams's list—Bathsheba is an obvious case. And what about the absent Absalom? Or perhaps he is not 'main' enough to count?

The ideological signification of beauty in the case of Joseph in Genesis 39 is both more ambiguous and more interesting than Williams's type-scene formulation would suggest. There are of course common tropes present in the narrative: that of the attempted seduction of a hero; that, again, of the *אשה זרה*, the strange, or foreign, woman—here is female sexuality as deviance, masculinity as heroic innocence. But the signification of beauty (Gen. 39:6) operates on a number of levels. First, in narrative terms, in Bach's words, 'the young hero's beauty is what



connects him to the woman in the story' (1997:46). But that it may mean more seems to be indicated by the descriptive elaborations of his beauty in later versions.<sup>18</sup> This emphasis suggests a view of beauty as a sign of 'providential guidance', in line with the view of Williams. Midrashic commentary offers another interpretation. One strand interprets the whole episode as a test of Joseph's self-control: Joseph has asked for the test on the grounds that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had undergone similar experiences (T.B. Sotah 36B). Underlying this interpretation is an assumption of temptation—one can compare Bach's comment that '[in] spite of his beauty and his youth, *elements that contribute to temptation*, Joseph ultimately exercises self-control' (1997:43; emphasis added). Beauty then signifies danger—the danger of temptation. Yet the text does not expressly say that Joseph is tempted; that interpretation is added by the reader, perhaps in line with what is 'naturally' expected in performativity. Nor indeed does the text easily support another Rabbinic interpretation: that is that Joseph's suffering is a punishment for his vanity. This is an idea that is expressed in Berishit Rabbah (87:3-4) in a manner so entertaining to today's Western reader that it is worth quoting in full:

Free from anxieties, he turned his attention to his external appearance. He painted his eyes, dressed his hair, and aimed to be elegant in his walk. But God spoke to him, 'Your father is mourning in sackcloth and ashes, while you eat, drink and dress your hair. Therefore I will stir up your mistress against you.'

It is this comment, along with other elements in the Joseph narratives, that tempts Carden, writing on Genesis in the recently published *Queer Bible Commentary*, to conclude that:

Twirling, mincing, in rainbow garb and with painted eyes, Joseph is a flaming young queen. No wonder his brothers, particularly the sons of Leah, hate him. In the previous parasha, they have even resorted to genocide to salve their wounded male honour. It is no wonder, then, that they will resent and hate this prettified affront to normative manhood (Carden 2006:53).

<sup>18</sup>) Bach cites the early Greek romance *Joseph and Asenath* (1997:108-109); Sura XII of the *Qur'an* (1997:123-124); *Midrash Tanhuma* (1997:123).

This is good fun, but I should prefer to avoid outing Joseph—to impose upon him, that is, one essentialist (and arguably anachronistic) identity in place of another. I should argue that there is more nuance if we view the passage in terms of camp, of an outrageous performance of compromised masculinity, rather than of sexual orientation.<sup>19</sup> But it is more important, perhaps, to grasp the sense of Rabbinic unease at the idea of masculine beauty, expressed in the passage from *Berishit Rabbah* just quoted: the ascription of beauty to a man makes the commentator feel so uncomfortable that he immediately turns it into a moral failing on the part of the unfortunate Joseph.<sup>20</sup> Male beauty for him carries a huge hazard sign: Beware of Conceit!

And this is all the more interesting since commentators have for a long time noticed a striking coincidence: except for the gender of the adjectives, the description of Joseph, (יִפְה־תֹּאֵר וִיפָה מֵרֹאֶה) at Gen. 39:6, is word for word the same as that of his mother Rachel at Gen. 29:17 (יִפְה־תֹּאֵר וִיפָה מֵרֹאֶה). In a footnote Bach comments that ‘some contemporary interpreters have understood the association of mother and son as a textual feminizing of Joseph’ (1997:47, n.13). Her unnamed source may well be Ostriker, who sees in Joseph a ‘young Hebrew Narcissus’ (1994:111).<sup>21</sup> We may be justified in simply complying with convention by viewing the repetition of the beauty formula as a sign that Joseph inherits, as it were, the divine favour bestowed upon his mother. Divine favour, it is true, is heavily emphasized at the beginning and end of ch. 39, framing the narrative of injustice and misfortune that is triggered by Joseph’s beauty. But the recalling of Rachel’s beauty recalls also the immediate difficulties that her beauty caused her (just as Sarai and Bathsheba, two other favourites of Yhwh, were faced with

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<sup>19</sup>) For a discussion of camp as a methodological tool and for an application of such a methodology, see Macwilliam (2006:215-271).

<sup>20</sup>) In his exploration of the complex of Midrashic commentary on Gen. 39:6, Kugel comments on this judgmental strand of the tradition: ‘... if Joseph did indeed “bedaub”, “smooth”, etc. when he was in Potiphar’s house, then it appears that he himself was at least in part responsible for the catastrophe that overtook him there... Joseph’s guilt was a theme dear to the hearts of the rabbis, who held it as an article of faith that punishment comes about as a result of sin...’ (1990:79).

<sup>21</sup>) It is Ostriker’s comments that have inspired Carden to go one stage further, and, as we have seen, to crown Joseph as queen.

danger in the short term); so, we are being told, Joseph's eventual fate may be divinely favoured, but he, like his mother, is facing danger in the short term—not exactly, then, incontrovertible evidence for the notion that beauty signifies divine favour. And is it a discomfort with the idea that male beauty can be expressed in the same terms as female that leads some English versions to disguise the coincidence altogether? I leave it to the reader to guess which of the two in the JPS version is described as 'shapely and beautiful' and which 'well-built and handsome' and the same guessing game can be played with the NRSV's 'graceful and beautiful' versus its 'handsome and good-looking'.<sup>22</sup>

Joseph's beauty, then, is ambiguous. On the one hand, the narrator may well intend us to understand by it a sign of divine favour; on the other, both by its narrative consequences and by its identification with Rachel's female beauty, it also signifies vulnerability and danger, just as female beauty often does. It is in this second signification, shared with female beauty, that Joseph's beauty runs counter to the norms that dictate how masculinity is to be performed. I argue that this second signification undercuts the first. To illustrate this I can turn to a remark made by Jeansonne. She too proposes dual signification, but in her argument in support of the first, that of divine favour, she claims that 'the phrase [i.e., the description of Joseph's beauty] hints of the future rise in stature that Joseph will gain after his false imprisonment'—and she offers the following indication of this 'future rise':

While in prison...Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dream of the robust and emaciated cows that signify the forthcoming years of plenty and famine. The cows, which signify prosperity, are also described as 'beautiful to look at' (11141:2,4) and 'beautiful in form' (11141.18) (Jeansonne 1990:110).

When we recall, however, that the beautiful cows are eaten up by the ugly ones, we may wonder how safe this divine favour is.

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<sup>22</sup>) Compare the JPS version of Song 1:15-16, where when *יפה* is used of the female it is translated 'fair' and when used of the male 'handsome' (in this case NRSV translates both as 'beautiful').

## David

The selection of David as king (1 Samuel 16) is allegedly the biblical *locus classicus* of the idea that male beauty denotes divine favour. The narrative describes how Samuel reluctantly sets out on Yhwh's orders to find and anoint someone to replace Saul as king. Starting with Eliab, all the sons of Jesse are paraded before the prophet, but none meets with divine approval. At last the youngest son, David, who has been excluded from the parade until Samuel's request for him to attend, is presented. Verse 12 continues: 'Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one."' The immediate juxtaposition of David's beauty and Yhwh's instruction seems to justify Gordon's comment that 'David was handsome—doubtless to be interpreted as a sign of divine favour' (1986:150), and McCarter's verdict that 'divine favor usually has physical symptoms' (1980:276).

But there are complications about the narrative. It is not so much the curious wording of v. 12, although nobody seems too sure of the exact force of אֲדָמוּנִי ('ruddy'), and Hebraists scratch their heads over the construction of עֵינָיו יָפָה.<sup>23</sup> But the general sense of youthful beauty seems clear enough, and its inclusion at this point in the narrative does seem to indicate that David's beauty is a key factor in his selection as king.

But more important than this linguistic puzzle, there is a real tension in the text. The problem of seeing a link between David's beauty and his selection as king lies in the reaction to Eliab's brief candidature at vv. 6-7: 'When they came, he [i.e. Samuel] looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed is now before the LORD." But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."' (NRSV)

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<sup>23</sup>) Driver comments '[T]he expression is very remarkable and anomalous;...if the text be sound יָפָה must be a neuter adj... "together with beauty of eyes"' (Driver 1890:104); the difficulty over David's eyes recalls that over Leah's (Gen. 29:17)—are they weak, delicate or soft? See n. 6 above.

We seem to have a situation in which Yhwh's rejection of good looks as a basis for assessing human worth conflicts with the notion that David's good looks are a sign of divine favour. Attempts by commentators to square this particular circle are unconvincing. Consider, for instance, Hertzberg's comment:

[T]he establishment of David's suitability is not, with Eliab's, a result of his appearance and of Samuel's judgment, but is based on the command of the Lord immediately given to Samuel. LXX has even inserted the words 'pleasing to the Lord', presumably to smooth out the supposed contradiction with vv.6f. (Hertzberg 1964:139).

But 'pleasing to the Lord' at v. 12 disguises the fact that the MT's phrase 'good to the sight' (וטוב ראי) is altered in LXX to 'good to the sight for the Lord' (κα ἀγαθὸς ὁράσει κυρίῳ); as such there is a case for arguing the LXX *accentuates* the contrast between vv. 6-7 and v. 12, since Yhwh is presented as being attracted to David's appearance. And there is no getting round the emphatic juxtaposition of David's beauty and Yhwh's selection of him in v. 12, in apparently blatant contradiction to Yhwh's previous dismissal of good looks as a sign of qualification. Perhaps some clue can be found in 17:42, where most of the description of David's beauty found in 16:12 is repeated as an explanation of Goliath's contempt for David's military potential. Some commentators question the textual reliability of the repeated phrase at 17:42; according to McCarter, for instance, it 'is surely an expansion inspired by [16:12]' (1980:275). Yet it seems to fit the context well: Goliath sees in the pretty boy David no serious challenge to his own military power and the description of David is in marked contrast to that of Goliath himself at 17:4-7, which emphasises the Philistine champion's height, size and military might. This contrast in masculine looks may offer a clue to solving the problem of 1 Samuel 16. The same contrast can be explored in the description of David's predecessor, Saul. The connexion between David's good looks and his regal suitability both recalls and questions 1 Samuel 9, where Saul's elevation to kingship is recounted. As Hertzberg comments:

As in the case of Saul, so here the writer speaks particularly lovingly [!] of the figure of the young king (Hertzberg 1964:138).

The parallel is by no means exact. There is indeed as distinctive a description of the young Saul as that of David, but it comes, at v. 2, within the introduction to the narrative; the reader is not told of Saul's regal destiny until vv. 15-16, and Saul himself learns the news only at the start of the next chapter (10:1). His looks, then, unlike David's, are not at the heart of the episode, not directly connected to the moment of selection. The terms in which they are described are different too: the key word is טוב, the meaning of which is rather more vague than יפה. It can mean good in the sense of good-looking, but rarely does so on its own.<sup>24</sup> The reference to Saul's great height suggests that טוב does refer to his appearance, but it may be that NIV's choice of 'impressive' is more convincing than the more sexually charged 'handsome' (e.g. NRSV, JPS). If his looks are not central to his selection, nevertheless they do seem to have a considerable bearing on it: Saul seems every inch a king, just the man to fulfil the people's wish that he should 'govern us and go out before us and fight our battles' (1 Sam. 8:20). But the important point about Saul *vis à vis* David is that not only are his conventionally masculine looks in contrast to David's boyish beauty, but that also, like Goliath (a sort of maxi-version of Saul), Saul fails, while David succeeds, his success attested before Saul himself near the end of ch. 16, and of course further confirmed by the defeat of Goliath. It is the hyper-masculinity of Saul (and Eliab) that seems to be subverted in v. 12, a subversion underlined by Goliath's downfall. As a queer theorist, I should hope to be participating in the project of undermining the idealisation of masculinity as power and authoritarianism: muscles if present at all should be merely ornamental. What more effective way can there be of forwarding this project than by making a pretty boy the victor?<sup>25</sup> The odd, or perhaps I should say the queer, thing is that in 1

<sup>24</sup>) The description of David, for instance, includes the phrase וטוב ראי. Compare also nn. 3 and 5, above; טוב possibly refers to good looks at Judg. 15:2, when it is used of Samson's sister-in-law. But it is relevant to note that there and at 1 Sam. 9:2 LXX uses the adjective ἀγαθός to translate טוב, rather than words more associated with good looks, καλός, say, or ὡραῖος. I can find no clear example of ἀγαθός used to describe human appearance. Contrast this with Esth. 1:11, also mentioned in n. 3, above.

<sup>25</sup>) The queer project seems to have been anticipated by Donatello, of whose bronze statue *David* Bennett and Wilkins comment, '...although the figure is obviously male, Donatello seems to have suggested female characteristics in the softness of the flesh, the

Samuel 16 it is Yhwh himself who chooses this strategy of pushing the queer project on. It may come as a surprise to learn that queer theory has such a divine seal of approval.

One final point to make about David's beauty is that it seems to be a family trademark. To mention this now is to anticipate something of what I want to develop in discussing David's son Absalom, but it is worth pointing to his beauty as perhaps a substantial element of that charisma that won the hearts of many, both men and women, who encountered him. But this is a good time to turn to the third beautiful man, Absalom.

## **Absalom**

At 2 Sam. 14:25-26, male beauty is described in details without parallel in the Hebrew Bible:

Now in all Israel there was no one to be praised so much for his beauty as Absalom; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. When he cut the hair of his head (for at the end of every year he used to cut it; when it was heavy on him, he cut it), he weighed the hair of his head, two hundred shekels by the king's weight (NRSV).

The next verse, with its mention of his four children (including his beautiful daughter, Tamar), makes it clear that this is the beauty of a mature and virile male. The narrative that follows traces a career that ends in his attempted coup against his father, and his defeat and death.

Conroy sees the description of Absalom's beauty as exemplifying the 'technique of submerged form: by this is meant the occurrence of narrative elements whose function or meaning in the story is the opposite of what one normally finds in other occurrences of those elements'

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slight swell of the stomach, and the choice of a stance that produces a feminine fullness in the line of the right hip and thigh. The androgynous nature of adolescence seems accentuated, while its awkwardness and insecurity are ignored' (1984:218). Pretty boy indeed, and one who stands in insouciant triumph over the severed head of Goliath. (I am grateful to Timothy Gorringer for drawing my attention to Donatello.)

(1978:101). So the 'heroic description' of Absalom recalls those of Saul and David:

[T]hese were success-stories, initially at least in Saul's case, but matters are quite different for Absalom who goes steadily downhill after this description and eventually loses his life with his handsome head fixed in a tree (Conroy 1978:101).

We could interpret 14:25-26, then, as a deliberate ploy by the narrator, who, taking the theme of male beauty as signifying hero, deliberately undercuts the reader's expectations by gradually revealing Absalom as villain. This is not only a neat interpretation in itself, but it also encapsulates proper masculine suspicion and unease at the confrontation with male beauty. Perhaps such a discomfort underlies the commonly expressed suspicion of the text itself at this point.<sup>26</sup> I should argue that it is masculine suspicion also, not to say jealousy, that links Absalom's luxuriant hair (14:26) with the manner of his death. McCarter's note is apposite:

In addition to supporting the description of Abishalom's good looks,...this notice may be intended to prepare the audience for the strange manner of his demise. He will die after being caught by his head in a tree (18.9ff.), and commentators since Josephus (Ant.7.239) have often concluded that his hair was entangled in the branches (McCarter 1984:349).<sup>27</sup>

Suspicion and unease have fuelled other hostile views of Absalom's beauty. Like Joseph's it could be seen to have a mechanical part to play in the narrative: it explains how his campaign to win support among the Israelites is so successful—how he 'stole the hearts of the men of Israel' (15:6). On this view, then, the function of male beauty at 14:25-26 is to signify danger, obviously to Absalom, but also, like the case of the

<sup>26</sup> Conroy lists the commentators in question and defends the text as it stands; their ostensible reason for questioning the soundness of 14:25-27 is that, among other things, the verses interrupt the flow of the narrative.

<sup>27</sup> It is interesting that JPS, unlike most other English versions, translates ראשו at 18:9 as 'his hair', rather than 'his head'.



woman of Prov. 6:25, his beauty is a snare for the unwary onlooker; the object of the gaze manipulates the subject.

Related to this is that suspicion of male beauty that we noted with readers of Genesis 39—the suspicion that accuses the possessor of male beauty of vanity. Gordon makes the accusation with some caution:

Verses 25f., in speaking of Absalom's physical attractiveness, also hint at the conceit that went with it (Gordon 1986:269).

Fokkelman prefers a full-frontal attack, the entertaining rhetoric of which deserves a lengthier quotation:

We develop a picture of a prince constantly engaged with himself and his beauty. He flaunts with his gorgeous, full hair and he is so clever that even the moment when he must let his hair be cut he manages to transform from a defeat into a triumph...His vanity seems unassailable until the moment, many years after the Amnon affair, when he gets his hair entangled in a tree. Powerless from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head, he is stabbed and goes to an inglorious grave. Thus his rise and fall are shown through one concrete detail, his hair and his infatuated occupation therewith (Fokkelman 1981:148).

Fokkelman's scorn, however, is difficult to match in the text. The individual elements of 14:25-26 are not unparalleled. The claim for Absalom's superiority in looks over the rest of Israelite males recalls the description of Saul at 1 Sam. 9:2. The suggestion that he was without blemish may remind us of Levitical quality control over priests and sacrificial animals (e.g. Lev. 21:17-23, 22:20-25), but it also has an echo in Dan. 1:4, where the first requirements of the young Israelites chosen for Nebuchadnezzar's service was to be 'without any blemish and good-looking' (אִין־בְּהֶם כְּלִימוֹם וְטָבִי מְרָאָה). As for the matter of Absalom's hair, nobody has accused Samson of vanity (Judg. 16:17); more seriously McCarter asks us to 'compare the description of the beloved young man in Song 5:11 with his piled up locks' (1984:349).<sup>28</sup> The mention of

<sup>28</sup>) כְּעוֹרֵם תְּלַחֲלִים שְׁחָרוֹת כְּעוֹרֵם; indeed the mention of blemish and the connexion between Absalom's hair and the manner of his death, in conjunction with the pillar of 2 Sam. 18:18, has led to speculation that there are within this story echoes of mortuary cult practices (Stavrakopoulou: forthcoming).

Song of Songs in its turn recalls the *wasf*, the genre of Near-Eastern love poetry or marriage song, which details the individual charms of the beloved. If the description of Absalom does not exactly fit this model of love song, it may nevertheless retain something of the flavour of folk sayings centred round a charismatic celebrity. It is not inevitable that obsessive vanity should be read into it.

Rather than accept these interpretations of Absalom's beauty as symbols of his villainy or vanity, I should like to suggest an alternative view, more sympathetic to him, perhaps, but certainly less compliant with the world view of his narrator and successive commentators. Not for the first time for me, it is a feminist argument that has proved suggestive.

Bach argues that 2 Samuel 12 'acts as a moral bridge between the David and Bathsheba episode and the Amnon and Tamar story and secures the unified narratorial vision' (1997:151). She takes the prophecy of Nathan to be the kernel of 'the divine position':

Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the LORD: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbour, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun (2 Sam. 12:10-12, NRSV).

Bach relates this prophecy to the rape of Tamar, but it is just as feasible, if not more so, to relate it to the whole narrative that begins with the rape and ends with Absalom's death; indeed one can see a literal fulfilment of the prophecy in Absalom's visit to David's ten concubines (2 Sam. 16:20-22). Bach argues that 'male politics are inscribed upon women's bodies' (1997:153), but it is also true to say that the punishment and rehabilitation of David are inscribed upon his children, not only by the rape of Tamar, but also by the deaths of Amnon and Absalom. Now it will be argued that Tamar is wholly innocent, while Amnon certainly, and Absalom, perhaps to an extent, bring about their own downfall; yet it can also be argued that all three are portrayed as paying the price of David's sin.

Apart from being a useful means of recruiting supporters, what is the point of Absalom's beauty? It could of course have no 'point' at all,

being just an incidental detail in the narrative. But its emphasis and elaboration do suggest that it has some significance. I have already suggested that David's beauty is something of a family trademark, and it is noticeable that Absalom is surrounded by beauty—not only his father, but also his sister, his daughter, as well as he himself, are all described as יפה.<sup>29</sup> The house of David is the Kennedy clan of its time. In Absalom's case, this emphasis on his beauty not only marks him out as a member of the golden clan, but also indicates that it is that very membership that brings about his downfall. It as though his blemish-free body marks him out as a suitable sacrifice to expiate David's sin. Beauty, then, in the case of Absalom signifies tragedy. In his lectures on Oedipus Tyrannus, Denys Page used to say<sup>30</sup> that the message of Sophoclean tragedy was: 'what has been done, cannot be undone; it can only be paid for.' Absalom's beauty reminds us that he is doing the paying. Once the payment is complete, the story can proceed to Solomon, the last king of the house of David. And it seems to me significant that Solomon is the son of Bathsheba, whose first husband's death is brought about by David, a crime which in the long run Absalom pays for. And Solomon is nowhere called יפה!

## Conclusions

If this exploration of the beauty of Joseph, David and Absalom reveals a situation more nuanced than the simple formula of *male beauty=power*, can it be concluded that the apparent binary difference between male and female beauty has been successfully undermined? One objection might focus on narrative stance. It has been suggested that in the Hebrew Bible female beauty is usually observed by a male bystander; for example, Sarai's beauty is noted by Abram (Gen. 12:11), and that of Jerusalem by Yahweh (Ezek. 16:13-14); but that male beauty is described directly by the narrator (this certainly applies to the cases of Joseph, David and

<sup>29</sup>) Adonijah could be added to the list; although not described as יפה, his good looks are emphasised at 1 Kgs 1:6 (see n. 13, above), and of course he too dies young and violently (on suspicion of treason against his father).

<sup>30</sup>) As delivered in his public lectures at the University of Cambridge during the late 1960s.

Absalom).<sup>31</sup> A binary distinction between male and female beauty would certainly be strengthened if female beauty were found to be regularly presented through the eyes of a male bystander, since such a feature would serve to underline the objectification of its possessor. That this is the case in the two examples quoted is clear, but is this bystander-mode a regular occurrence? The description of Rachel's beauty does not fit into the pattern (Gen. 29:17)—it is described directly by the narrator; the same is true in the descriptions of Tamar (2 Sam. 13:1) and Abishag (1 Kgs 1:3-4). Other instances are more ambiguous: Bathsheba's beauty is indeed described directly by the narrator (2 Sam. 11:2), but the description is sandwiched in such a way between David's first sight of her in the same verse, and his immediate reaction (v. 3), that the *effect* is almost that of seeing her beauty through David's eyes. Another ambiguous instance is at Prov. 6:25, where one could argue that the caution against the beauty of the 'alien' woman, although directly described by the narrator (named as Solomon), is placed in the very male space of a father's advice to his son. On the other hand, the assertion that beauty is an unreliable indicator of uxorial worth (Prov. 31:30) is billed not just as 'the words of king Lemuel', but also as 'an oracle that his mother taught him' (31:1); v. 30 is best read, perhaps, as part of a prospective mother-in-law's checklist. Narrative stance, then, does not shed unambiguous light upon an analysis of the description of beauty in the Hebrew Bible. To sum up the confusion, we could turn to Psalm 45, which I used as a paradigm of binary difference. In apparent contradiction to the paradigm, the descriptions of not only the king's beauty but also that of the queen are presented directly by the narrator; yet one could argue that the queen's beauty is also described as something that will be *noticed by the king*. Binary difference is (partially) preserved. To add further to the confusion, it is indeed the case that David's beauty is emphasised directly by the narrator, but what of Eliab (1 Sam. 16:6-7)? If he is not described as beautiful, some physical impressiveness is strongly hinted, and the hint is made by another man (Samuel).

Differences in narrative stance, then, do not necessarily hinder the project of undermining the binary differences between male and female beauty; indeed it can be argued that they serve to enhance them. We

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<sup>31</sup> I am grateful to Tim Whitmarsh for this observation.

are left contemplating Joseph, David and Absalom: their beauty provides a store of opportunities to reflect on the operation of masculinity not only in the Hebrew Bible but also upon its readers. It does seem that men reading the Bible have jumped to one or other of two unjustified conclusions when encountering these rare descriptions. One strategy is to detach beauty from earthy physicality by describing it as a sign of divine favour—transfiguring sex into a halo. The other strategy might be called the gigolo manoeuvre: when you see an attractive man, beware, he's up to no good. When we turn to the texts themselves, however, the function of male beauty is more subtle than one might expect. The apparently rigid binary division operating in Psalm 45, where *male beauty*=*power*, and *female beauty*=*powerlessness* is not paralleled in our beautiful trio. Joseph's beauty signifies vulnerability as much as divine favour; David's undercuts the conventional picture of male beauty= muscle; while Absalom's marks him out as a tragic figure, paying the price of his father's failings.

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