

The Fists of My Perfect Teacher: A Queer Analysis of Male *Siddha* Violence

The narrative literature of male tantric virtuosos (*siddha* in Sanskrit; *grub thob* in Tibetan) contains a long history of provocative, fascinating, and enigmatic characters. These tantric adepts infamously engaged in a range of antinomian behavior, from heavy drinking to sexual (mis)adventures, and—notably for this paper—physical violence, with the purpose of provoking disciples’ insight into the true nature of reality, unmediated by conceptual categories and social conventions, free of dualistic distinctions between good and bad, pure and impure, correct and incorrect. As David DiValerio has persuasively pointed out, the *siddha* as a narrative trope began to crystalize in Tibetan Buddhist literature through socio-political turmoil in the fifteenth and sixteenth Centuries, in which competing visions of an ideal Buddhist practitioner as either a monastic scholar *geshé* or renouncing *yogin* dueled for ideological (and political) ascendancy.¹ This adversarial relationship, argues DiValerio, was a reflection of the larger, centuries-long battle in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism between competing “regimes of truth” regarding the proper way to attain enlightenment: is the formalized study of cleric-scholars the best path to liberation, or the solitary meditation of wild yogins?² Through repetition and adaptation, this duel between scholar and yogin became emblematic of the “enduring trope of holy madness” in Tibetan Buddhist literature, one that grants the path of yogic renunciation a privileged epistemological and soteriological status as the most expedient means to attaining enlightenment.³

In making sense of these complex figures, DiValerio foregrounds the human dimensions of these men as socially embedded and historically contingent individuals

¹ David DiValerio, *The Holy Madmen of Tibet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 78-114.

² *Ibid.*, 110.

³ *Ibid.*, 220.

whose devotees (and hagiographers) drew upon a narrative tradition of Indian *siddhas* as precursors to their eccentric and often shocking behavior. For DiValerio, this is best understood as an attempt to legitimate their behavior by rendering it legible within a literary trope that justified their antinomianism as an expression of their high degree of spiritual realization and attendant liberation from the orderly structures of communal life. Hagiographic accounts of these men were thus meant to “inspire readers or listeners to gain faith in the spiritual accomplishments of their respective subjects,”⁴ and to justify the ethical ambiguity of their antinomian tendencies—their high degree of spiritual realization absolves them of adherence to traditional ethics, which are taken to be grounded in conceptuality and social order.

DiValerio charges us not to think of *siddha* behavior as the spontaneous manifestation of enlightened activity because this “actually divests them of genuine [human] agency.”⁵ Rather, we should read their eccentricity as a part of their wider project, the “ritual enactment of enlightenment”⁶ through literalistic interpretations of key tantric texts. That literalism produced a particularly provocative orientation to *tülzhuk* (*brtul zhugs*) practice: adopting the demeanor, countenance, and behavior of the wrathful, confrontational Heruka deity not as a visualization exercise in meditation, but a literal one. Thus, drinking alcohol, wearing human skin, smearing human remains on one’s body, and confronting others with violence all become hallmark activities in the *siddha*’s repertoire of antinomian legibility.

⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁶ Ibid., 81.

Given the detail, nuance, and sophistication of DiValerio's analysis, it's curious that he does not thematize gender as a key component in the development of *siddha* as literary trope, as gender is an inextricable component in any person's configuration within social-historical context. As influential gender and sexuality theorist Amy T. Schalet notes, gender is a fundamental organizing force in any cultural system: it shapes how people describe facts and interpret meaning, controls behavior by defining, both explicitly and implicitly, the contours of what is acceptable and healthy, and internalizes multifarious cultural systems within peoples' psyches, such that they appear natural and innate.⁷ Following the lead of watershed masculinities theorist Raewyn Connell, I posit that any interaction between men involves a negotiation of masculinities according to the varying degrees of power those masculine positions command. I agree with Connell's suggestion that patriarchal masculinities are best understood as hegemonic, meaning they are marked by power antagonisms and the struggle for dominance within the social order, not only against and above one another, but also women and non-normative others.⁸

Adopting a hermeneutic that reintroduces gender as an object of inquiry illuminates an added dimension to the project of instantiating *siddha* masculinity as a narrative trope, one that appreciates the potency of harnessing gendered expectations in the establishment of competing "regimes of truth."⁹ If the wild yogin can be convincingly depicted as attaining the height of masculine power, it grants him an epistemologically privileged and socially superior status, resolving the centuries-long truth-debate

⁷ Amy T. Schalet, *Not Under My Roof: Parents, Teens, and the Culture of Sex* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011).

⁸ R. W. Connell & James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 19 (2005): 832-34.

⁹ DiValerio, 111.

decidedly in his favor; he can then stand as a kind of masculinity litmus test against which other masculine ideals are assessed.

If we then add a queer inflection to a gendered hermeneutic, we begin to unearth the complex machinations of ethics in these texts, as queer theory importantly directs our attention to the ways that gendered structures emerge, stabilize, become normative, and then adapt (or discard) non-normative gendered expressions into the prevailing social order over time. A queer perspective can thus help us understand how a literary trope such as the *siddha* can be antinomian, but not totally transgressive; disturbing, but not very shocking; unconventional, but not really queer.

A close reading of an encounter between two renowned nineteenth-century Tibetan masters, Do Khyentse (1800-1866) and Patrul Rinpoche (1808-1887), will illuminate the possibilities of the gendered framework I'm advancing here. The episode, first appearing in Patrul Rinpoche's *namthar* (*O rgan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po 'i rnam thar*) lives on in a vibrant storied tradition and is found in Lama Surya Das's anthology of stories *The Snow Lion's Turquoise Mane*. While the plot in both accounts is substantially the same, there are important differences that, when highlighted, reveal the ongoing historical evolution of the *siddha* figure and the masculinities written onto him.

When Do Khyentse appears on the scene of Patrul Rinpoche's *namthar*, the narrator immediately identifies him as a Heruka incarnation practicing *tülzhuk*. This brief identification produces tremendous information for the reader, as it situates Do Khyentse within the literary trope of the wild yogin, points to his mercurial and unpredictable qualities, foreshadows his combative, confrontational, and violent disposition, and grants him a high degree of spiritual realization. Says DiValerio, a Heruka appellation suggests

that the figure is not to respect “other lamas, or to wielders of worldly power, who are likely to be filled with misguided self-regard. With the divine pride that one generates during [one’s tantric practices], one is to act like a mighty lion among deer.”¹⁰ Thus, this one-word epithet already establishes the nearly superhuman supremacy of Khyentse’s masculinity, neatly foreshadowing his unquestioned victory in the confrontation that his masculinity will inevitably demand.

In the next sentence, we learn that Patrul happens upon Khyentse one day while he’s practicing, and Khyentse calls out to him: “Hey you, if you’re wholesome and brave, come here!” Khyentse thus initiates the encounter with a heckle, one that clues the reader into Patrul’s status as the antagonistic cleric-scholar trope outlined above, and gestures to an impending masculine duel, the resolution of which will undoubtedly favor Do Khyentse.

Patrul, without a word, approaches Khyentse, who promptly grabs him by the hair,¹¹ throws him to the ground, and beats him. Patrul, noticing that Khyentse’s breath smells of beer, remembers the Buddha’s teachings on the drawbacks of drinking, and thinks to himself: “Even great siddhas like this one drink beer, engaging in this crazy behavior (*chol spyod*).”¹² This enrages Khyentse, indicating his omniscient and psychic capacities, so he further berates Patrul: “You so-called intellectual types give rise to these kinds of bad thoughts, you old dog! *Phu!*”¹³ With that, Khyentse spits in Patrul’s face, flips him off, and departs.

¹⁰ Ibid., 52.

¹¹ The fact that Patrul has hair to grab cues the reader that Patrul is not abiding by traditional monastic vows.

¹² bKra shis padma tshul khrim, *Dpal sprul o rgyan ‘jigs med chos kyi dbang po’i gsung ‘bum bzhugs*, (Khreng tu’u: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2003): 193.

¹³ Ibid., 194.

With Khyentse gone, Patrul immediately thinks he made a mistake, and that Do Khyentse's violent beating was in fact not a drunken fit, but a pointing-out instruction. Holding that conviction in his mind, he assumes the seven-pointed meditation posture and attains realization. The text notes that even though Patrul had already received pointing-out instructions from his previous teacher Jigme Gyalway Nyugu, this experience was even more profound. At the end of the episode, we find Patrul has taken "old dog" as his secret initiation name and began studying *chod* (*gcod*) under Khyentse, rapidly mastering the teachings, wandering through the haunted places (*gnyan sa*), and cutting the four demons (*bdud bzhi*) in a single sitting.

The dueling masculinities at play here are palpable, as is the inevitability of the text's resolution as soon as we hear Khyentse is a *tülzhuk*-practicing Heruka. Patrul's scholarly masculinity is moderate, nonviolent, measured, and quietly arrogant; in the entire episode, we hear only his thoughts, never his words, and he self-righteously reflects on the drawbacks of drinking for even great *siddhas* while his drunken *siddha* antagonist beats him. Patrul's masculinity stands for traditional ethics, and is cast in weak, defenseless terms. In contrast, we hear quite a bit from Do Khyentse, the intoxicated *siddha* figure whose appellation readily primed us for a combative, violent, inebriated encounter, as well as his inevitable victory as the mighty lion to Patrul's defenseless deer.

Khyentse *acts*; Patrul is acted *upon*. Khyentse's *siddha* masculinity is agentic, it propels the story forward and determines the outcome as a foregone conclusion, while Patrul's masculinity is pliable, weak, and easily overcome. The problem with Patrul's masculinity, to state it rather bluntly, is that it's woman-like. But the fact that Patrul is not

a woman is crucial—one cannot ignore the maleness of the two figures, noting that a female character (on either side of the fight) would entirely reshape the plot, rendering the violent encounter illegible in gendered terms. Thus, while Patrul’s masculinity is physically weak and nonresistant, it is still a *masculine* configuration, and thus vulnerable to Khyentse.¹⁴ The supremacy of Khyentse’s masculine prowess easily overcomes and subdues the arrogant softness of Patrul’s inferior masculine position.

Violently confronted with its wild, unbridled antagonist, the measured, socially upstanding masculinity of the scholar witnesses its inevitable destruction. And yet, it is within that destruction that Patrul attains realization, the ultimate freedom. Furthermore, this awakening is on the heels of Patrul’s previous pointing-out instruction from a not-*siddha*, suggesting that only (violent) yogic masculinity has the potential to reveal the sky-like translucent awareness obscured by the dense conceptuality of the arrogant scholar.¹⁵

Importantly, rather than reinscribing and reinforcing normatively violent yogic masculinity, we find Patrul at the end of the story in decidedly different gendered terms, continuing his studies, yet wandering through the haunted places and quelling impediments to wisdom. This suggests on one level that the text resolves the confrontation between two binary masculine positions with the dissolution of distinction, the ultimate opening of the mind, the violence that removes the need for violence. Loosed of the conceptual fetters of his inferior masculine position, Patrul is free to wander in the

¹⁴ And, one reflects, also capable of being readily transmuted into the enlightened state.

¹⁵ This harkens us all the way back to the prototypical encounter against which this story must be read: that between wild yogin Tilopa and arrogant scholar Nāropa.

haunted places, mastering Dharma, free of the oppositional masculinities enacted earlier, as an old dog might wander through a graveyard, at home without a master.

And yet, a queer hermeneutic reveals another level of meaning embedded in the text. Queer seeing directs our attention to the fact that Khyentse's masculinity has to conform to the (gendered) genre conventions of the "enduring trope of holy madness" in order for his character to be legible as a *siddha*, conventions that have had multiple centuries to gain momentum and shape the Tibetan literary imagination by the middle of the nineteenth Century. As DiValerio notes, violent confrontation and intoxication have become standard components of the *siddha* trop, and thus, the emergence and solidification of these gendered conventions offer Do Khyentse a rather thin repertoire of antinomian behaviors from which to fashion his masculinity. In queer terms, we see the beginning of a normative tantric masculinity, one whose domination is ensured and reinstated by the ongoing saga of male violence in the negotiation of hegemony.

So when Do Khyentse antagonizes Patrul, beats him violently, and appears to be drinking, as readers we have already been primed to receive all of this as expressions of his *siddha* masculinity. Similarly, Patrul's position as an arrogant scholar, caught up in the ethical system of the relative world, is guilty of perpetuating the disappointingly weak, feminine scholar. The modifications we find in the contemporary story, passed via oral transmission, reinforce this development. What was hinted at, suggested, or subtly developed in the namthar becomes explicit and overt in the oral tradition: instead of one line introducing Khyentse, we receive two paragraphs, informing us that Khyentse is a "crazy yogi," a "mercurial master," and an "old vagabond" who carries a hunting rifle

“that he reputedly used to awaken others.”¹⁶ Khyentse’s psychic abilities are distinctly named, and his rebuke to Patrul is twice as long, adding a brief Dharma teaching on the innate purity and perfection of all things.

The rifle, arguably a contemporary updating of the *khaṭvāṅga*, overtly gestures to Do Khyentse’s violent masculinity well before the beating occurs. In the retelling, we also find Do Khyentse “deftly grabbing” Patrul Rinpoche by his “long, braided hair,” further glorifying the agentive, bodily superiority of Khyentse to the well-manicured, easily conquered Patrul. In the namthar, Patrul’s devotion and commitment to working with his own mind prompt him to sit in meditation to stabilize and expand the flash of insight from Khyentse’s beating into full awakening. In the oral account, it is the beating itself through which “everything became as clear as crystal to Patrul,” such that Patrul’s agency was unnecessary, he merely “instinctively sat down to meditate” only *after* he experienced “the infinite luminosity of intrinsic awareness.”¹⁷ Also in the oral account, Patrul claims the nickname Old Dog as his secret initiation name due to Khyentse’s “unique kindness.” He is then depicted as carefree and innocuous, simply “wander[ing] freely ‘round and ‘round,”¹⁸ rather than roaming through the haunted places expelling demons.

The overwrought masculinity and banally cheerful ending in the oral account stand at odds with the (slightly) more nuanced masculinities and complexly concluded narrative in the namthar. This suggests that over time, there is a tendency for normative gender configurations to consolidate around paradigms of masculinity that reinscribe—

¹⁶ Lama Surya Das, *The Snow Lion’s Turquoise Mane: Wisdom Tales from Tibet* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992): 20.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

even elevate—normative male violence as ethically permissible. While in the namthar we still find a Khyentse implicated in the ongoing historical construction of *siddhas* as violently masculine figures, the resolution relies on Patrul’s discipline in working with his mind and mental projections, suggesting that the ethical imperative is not to conventionally “good” or “moral” behavior, but to awakening, illumination, realization of the true nature of mind beyond distinction, beyond binary masculinities.

And yet, regardless of degree, in both stories we witness an uneven contest between competing masculinities, the resolution of which is never in doubt. The queer theorist in me wonders what it would look like to see exemplary *siddha* figures engaging in antinomian behavior that contravened the entrenched masculinity structures that justify—in any terms—the perpetuation of normative violence. Then again, I wonder if the arrogance of the cleric-scholar was so pervasive, so entrenched, that the Tibetan social imagination could only conceive of its taming through violent means. To borrow a final point from DiValerio, such questions illuminate less about the richly complex Tibetan tradition than they speak to larger concerns regarding the role of religion in people’s lives, or the mechanisms by which certain gender configurations command ascendancy while others are marginalized, dismissed, or erased. What is clear is that an analysis of political projects and historical trends is incomplete without considering the role of normative gender construction and the continued gender policing of the social order. It is my hope that over time, as we continue to duel with our own antagonists, we are able to dissolve that opposition through understanding, and begin to wander through our own haunted places.

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